GENRE AND HISTORY
IN THE WORK OF GEORG LUKÁCS

John Frow

The writings of Georg Lukács on literary theory, from Die Seele und die Formen to Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen, are knotted together by a small number of concepts and conceptual patterns which stretch continuously beneath the series of breaks marking off the different 'phases' of his production. The crucial pattern is that which crystallises around the notion of mediation between consciousness and totality,¹ and for a literary-theoretical study the best angle of approach to it is through Lukács' conception of genre.² This is for Lukács the essential unit of literary discourse, and he remained constantly indebted for his conception of it to idealist aesthetics: that is, "he remained faithful to the view that a small number of genres, each determined by a set of recognisable laws of its own, constitute the realm of literature",³ and that the development of these genres 'reflects' or 'expresses' successive stages in the self-realisation of the 'world-spirit' or of mankind. The Theory of the Novel takes as its starting point the coincidence of the structural categories of the novel with those of the modern world,⁴ the total analogy of literary genre and spirit, and as late as late as 1952 Lukács reaffirmed, in an approving summary of Hegel's theory of genre, his belief in the organic connection between the institution of genre and history:

The forms of the artistic genres are not arbitrary. On the contrary, they grow out of the concrete determinacy of the particular social and historical conditions. Their character, their peculiarity is determined by their capacity to give expression to the essential features of the given socio-historical phase. Hence the different genres arise at particular stages of historical development, they change their character radically (the epic is transformed into the novel), sometimes they disappear completely, and sometimes in the course of history they rise to the surface again with certain modifications.⁵

Two kinds of historical movement are implied in this account: a continuous development passing through a series of phases: and a movement of disappearance followed by re-emergence in a modified form. These two modalities are not exclusive: a form of cyclical repetition is being overlaid on a linear sequence, and what this means is that Lukács is thinking in terms of a spiralling historical movement. Thus each phase is at once progressive and yet runs parallel to a previous phase or series of phases. This translates, in practice, into the notion of rising and falling periods, corresponding to the organic development and decline (on successively higher stages) of a social class and of the literary form through which that class most appropriately expresses itself. This may go some way towards explaining what is apparently a failure of historical awareness in Lukács' work, his absolutisation of a particular form of the novel as an ahistorical model of
'realism'. The logic of his position lies in the necessary correspondence between two 'rising' periods (that of the bourgeoisie and that of the proletariat), and hence between the media chosen by the parallel ascending classes to express their situation. The absolute identification of the social and aesthetic levels means, furthermore, that the literary forms employed in a period of class decline are, a fortiori, to be seen as 'decadent', and that conversely a writer's choice of a 'decadent' form is an indication of his class position.

The literary genre thus stands in a privileged position to the historical period, but it also expresses the tension between the given historical 'form' (the structure of social life) and an ideal form laid down in the genre as an absolute possibility. The archetype of this realised ideal form is the epic, and the epistemological superiority of the epic to the other genres lies in its capacity for aesthetic realisation of totality; it is its absolute historical content which makes epic narrative the norm against which all narrative forms are to be measured. It discovered (copies) an immanent meaningfulness, whereas modern art can only construct a pseudo-totality which is a substitute for "the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres". The novel, then, is a necessarily degraded form of epic narrative; in it, the discontinuity between the subject and the social structure is interiorised, becoming (above all through irony) a formal component of the work, and "the immanence of meaning required by the form is attained precisely when the author goes all the way, ruthlessly, towards expressing its absence".

But if the novel is a degraded form of the epic, it is also a sign of this lost possibility of realisation of totality, and in the later Lukács the notion of historical recurrence seems increasingly to have led him to ignore the moment of negativity he had recognised in the novel. History itself loses its uncertainty and its foralness, and the notion of a historical theology, leading to a 'return' to a harmonious and hierarchised world, makes possible again (and retrospectively) an aesthetic of discovery, of imitation of the "immanence of meaning required by the form". An ethical-aesthetic valuation (realism/decadence) replaces the morally neutral categories of The Theory of the Novel, and the bourgeois historical novel becomes the type of a new manifestation of wholeness:

In the historical novel Lukács found an effective realisation of the historical dynamic invested in literature, the requirement that art refashion the world in the sense of the 'totality of objects' as Hegel wished the epic to do.

In a central passage of "Narrate or Describe" the content of genuinely epic art ("and of course the art of the novel") is described "as something that emerges and grows naturally, as something not invented, but simply discovered", and this opposition is then related to that of description and narration. The historical necessity for the decline of the bourgeois novel is adduced:

Description, as we have discussed it, becomes the dominant mode of composition in a period in which, for social reasons, the sense of what is primary in epic construction has been lost. Description is the writer's substitute for the epic significance that has been lost.
But - and here the moment of anti-historical wish-fulfilment in Lukacs' later thought, and the real contrast to The Theory of the Novel, becomes apparent - if the novelist can no longer discover meaning, this is nevertheless primarily a moral failing on his part, not the result of an objective social process: "The predominance of description is not only a result but also and simultaneously a cause, the cause of a further divorce of literature from epic significance ... The poetic level of life decays - and literature intensifies the decay".14

It is in this context that we can understand Lukacs' constant opposition to literary modernism and his celebration in Wider den missverstandenen Realismus of 'normality'. Already in Die Seele und die Formen Lukacs had demanded a new realisation of the great literary forms, and had failed to foresee the movement towards negation or destruction of form in modernism (the later Lukacs saw this process only to repress and condemn it). His response to modernism is a reactionary movement of defence. Recognising the crisis, he is unable to draw the consequences from it: in 1911

he stands on the threshold of the crisis and sees all the warning signs, but still he believes in the possibility of opposing to it a law and an attitude which by its very absoluteness could heal all the wounds and fissures of existence.15

And The Theory of the Novel begins that quest for reintegration which is taken as accomplished in the essays and books of the 1930's.16

The dichotomy of discovery/intervention is carried over into the epistemological theory of reflection, and it seems correct to say that:

Lukacs' undialectical reflection theory and the abstractness with which he is reproached is only understandable against the background of his rejection of new, 'decadent' art forms, especially forms of narrative.17

The two complementary poles of 'decadent' modern art - naturalism and symbolism - in fact correspond to the reflection-theories of mechanical materialism and idealism from which he attempts to demarcate his own (orthodox Leninist) theory. On the one hand Diderot, for example, takes reflection to mean a direct registration of matter on consciousness,18 just as Zola is concerned with surface detail in abstraction from essence or typicality; on the other hand Schiller (according to Lukacs' simplified reading) makes a radical separation between the truth reflected by art and the illusory surface (Schein) of the empirical world,19 just as symbolism separates essence from appearance. On the one hand the category of singularity ('Einzelheit') is overstressed, on the other hand that of generality ('Allgemeinheit'), whereas a dialectical theory will operate in terms of a movement backwards and forwards between three categories, with the dominant and mediating role played by the category of particularity ('Besonderheit').20 The goal of artistic reflection is a picture of reality in which there is a unity of essence and appearance, individual case and general principle, immediacy and concept.21 The "concrete artistic embodiment" of particularity is the typical; this involves the reproduction both of the typical features of men, feelings, thoughts, objects, institutions, situations, etc., and of the system of relations into which these typifications are inserted. Through this reproduction "in the whole of the work a typicality of a higher order arises: the aspect of a typical stage of
development of human life, of its essence, its destiny, its perspectives. But this "typicality of a higher order" is only ambivalently a product of the work, because the typical, "like all elements of artistic content, is a category of life". Thus the work possesses its own autonomy only insofar as it is a correct reflection of the structure of objective reality, only insofar as it establishes an exact correspondence with the immanent meaningfulness of historical life.

The implications of the conception of the literary text as a reflection or a reproduction of a pre-existent sense are conservative and non-revolutionary. That it became orthodoxy for Soviet Marxism is a fact which should be related to the historical conditions making for the failure of the October revolution. Lenin himself in fact, in the philosophical notebooks, thought through reflection theory to the point of abolishing it in all but name, but the public doctrine - that which Lukacs accepted and elaborated - is inescapably mechanistic, objectivistic and undialectical. To attempt, as Jameson does, to justify it as "simply a kind of conceptual shorthand designed to mask the presence of that type of mental operation we have elsewhere described as a historical trope, namely the setting in contact with each other of two distinct and incommensurable realities, one in the superstructure and the other in the base, the one cultural and the other socioeconomic", is to preserve intact precisely that rigidity of the dichotomy and that failure of mediation which mark the theory as pre-marxist. More to the point is Hawthorn's quotation from History and Class Consciousness:

...in all metaphysics the object remains untouched and unaltered so that thought remains contemplative and fails to become practical,

and his comment that

it is this 'untouched' nature of the perceived object that is implied in Lukacs' own, later insistence on the absolute objectivity of the external world, an objectivity which makes it independent of thought.

If history is inherently and objectively meaningful, and if the task of the writer is to reflect this structure of the historical process, then the writer performs no independent productive activity:

The requirement that realism reflect 'with objective correctness the total objective process of life' means in actuality the reconciliation of the artist with society; through his obligation towards 'reality' it directs him to a precisely determined function in this society and it subordinates the work of art to a purposeful design ('einem Planwillen') located outside of art.

This "purposeful design" is the autonomous historical Necessity working to bring about the inevitable progress of capitalism into communism. In the 1932 essay "Tendenz oder Parteilichkeit" Lukacs develops his idea of the objective movement of social development: the socialist writer has
no need to make 'tendentious' demands of reality, i.e., to intervene in the movement of history:

... no 'tendency' can and must be opposed to his objective reality as a 'demand', since the demands which the writer represents ('vertritt') are integral parts of the self-movement of this reality itself, at once consequences and preconditions of its self-movement.\(^{29}\)

The author is merely the medium through which the laws of history come to expression, and as Helga Gallas puts it, "the demand for 'realistic construction' and for closed forms is a demand for the mimetic representation of that 'self-movement of reality' which occurs independently of author and public".\(^{30}\) History moves towards a predetermined goal, and this goal is the realisation of an 'objective rationality': the process is rational and the writer must reflect this rationality in the harmonious nature of his form. The attack on modernism, then, can be seen as primarily an attack on formal 'distortions' which deny the rationality of the historical process. The organic and cyclical 'rise-and-decline' schema is subordinated to this concept, and indeed Lukács' refusal to consider the notion of modernist art as a 'reflection of bourgeois decadence' suggests that, except for polemical purposes, his concern is not, as Brecht implies in a paragraph of one of his workbooks,\(^{31}\) an apocalyptic vision of decline but rather a constant belief in the upward spiral of history through its rising and falling cycles.

The many references in Lukács' work to the 'spontaneity', the 'instinctual' or 'naïve' nature of artistic production must be linked to this notion that the author acts merely as a medium for the transmission of a shaped reality. Ultimately, as Jauss notes, this notion "ascribes to the hypostatised reality - as with the Hegelian 'Cunning of Reason' - the power of itself indirectly producing literature".\(^{32}\) That this charge is not an exaggeration can be extensively demonstrated. In the book on Thomas Mann, for example, Lukács writes at one point of the corrective which the process of reproducing reality, the passionate pursuit of this process to its very end, in \(\ddot{a}n\) ('Letzten Endes') which reality itself applies to the false thinking of the writer.\(^{33}\)

(one of the central ambiguities of his thought is concentrated in that "in \(\ddot{a}n\)"); and later:

The style of the novel ... is determined by the character of the relations between being and consciousness, between man and the environment. The more comprehensive and complete these relationships, the more realistic in scope and the more truthful in particulars ('Je umfassender ... dies Wechselbeziehungen geraten'), the more significant the novel.\(^{34}\)

Here he omits completely the transition from reality to its formal treatment by the novelist: the ambiguity of "geraten", which implies that reality organises itself in ways favourable or unfavourable to the novel form, that in effect, 'reality' writes the novel, is not accidental, but rather points to a failure or refusal to make the basic ontological distinction
between the order of fiction and the order of reality. This blurring means that the criteria we bring to bear upon the text are entirely external to it:

The work of art must ... reflect correctly and in proper proportion all important factors objectively determining the area of life it represents,

and

The objective character of the area of life represented determines the quantity, quality, proportion, etc., of the factors that emerge in interaction with the specific laws of the literary form appropriate for the representation of this portion of life.\(^{35}\)

If the "portion of life" is "represented" ("gestaltet" - 'given shape'), this is nevertheless not a process which modifies its non-aesthetic otherness: it goes into the work as a piece of life, and the mere fact that the laws of the genre which "interact" in the determination of its features are the laws "of the literary form appropriate for (its) representation" indicates that what is at issue here is simply an effaced presentation, the choice of a medium which will interfere as little as possible with the direct reproduction (duplication) of a purified piece of reality. This magical translation without change of substance occurs because of the absolute correspondence between the order of reality and the parallel system of aesthetic, and especially generic, canons.\(^{36}\) In the writings of Lukács' marxist period the genre which most fully permits the shining-through of an unmediated 'content' is the historical novel, which becomes virtually identical with the novel form itself.\(^{37}\) The chance it offers is for the critic to read through the text to an undisplaced reality which he can analyse in conventionally political terms. To this end the novel's world must appear as unbroken, as an object of immediate perception.\(^{38}\) The text must be closed, rounded, a totality in itself; the "organically developing work of art" must function as a piece of nature:

The more 'artless' a work of art, the more it gives the effect of life and nature (je mehr es bloss als Leben, als Natur wirkt), the more clearly it exemplifies an actual concentrated reflection of its times and the more clearly it demonstrates that the only function of its form is to express this objectivity, this reflection of life in the greatest concreteness and clarity and with all its motivating contradictions.\(^{39}\)

Since the function of form is to negate itself, to be totally transparent, any laying-bare of the form principle, any disjunction between world and fictional 'world', must destroy, along with the illusion of non-fictionality, the appearance of objective historical laws.\(^{40}\) Hence the "peculiar hankering after the idyllic"\(^{41}\) which Brecht saw in Lukács' 'formalist'\(^{42}\) hypostatisation of the categories of nineteenth century Realism: preteriteness ("The preterite character of the epic is ... a fundamental medium prescribed by reality for the achievement of artistic structuration"),\(^{43}\) the creation of 'typical' and 'living' characters,\(^{44}\) the use of identification and catharsis,\(^{45}\) etc. The genre and the historical form of this genre which
most fully embody the ideal of non-fictionality, of 'naturalness', become representative of the total function of literature. The central weakness in Lukacs' thought, then (a weakness embedded precisely in the 'mediating' category of genre), is a failure of mediation. Literature is not a conventional and systematic structure of signs, rather literary 'reality' is immediately identical with reality itself; or more precisely, literature is based on the iconic sign: it is natural, motivated, mirroring a sense which is independent of its interpretation. The continuity with the Lukacs of The Theory of the Novel comes out clearly in Derrida's concept of a "metaphysics of presence" in which

notions of truth and reality are based on a longing for an unfallen world in which there would be no need for the mediating systems of language and perception but everything would be itself, with no gap between form and meaning.

This is not of course simply a conceptual failure, and it can't be explained solely in terms of Lukacs' intellectual career. Several recent studies have stressed that, despite Lukacs' own later justification of his role in the 'Expressionism Debate' as having been directed against the worst features of socialist realism, a rescuing of 'tradition' in the face of a wrong tradition, in fact his attack on 'left-sectarian' and formally innovative writers was not directed against an official party line but was part of a right-wing offensive and was a formative influence in the elaboration of an official aesthetic theory. Mittenweid, Gallas and Cases have all followed Brecht in indicating the connection between Lukacs' conservative aesthetic views and his espousal of the Popular Front policy of the 1930's, and more generally his approval of the dismantling of revolutionary socialism under Stalin. In Lukacs' activity in defence of the German Communist Party's disastrous attempt to ally itself with the 'progressive' bourgeoisie "the connection between anti-facism and the cultural inheritance is immediately transmuted into an idealised struggle between Humanism and Barbarism", and, as Brecht noted several times, the notion of class struggle either vanishes completely or is universalised "in the long run everything is class struggle". But the important question is not only that of the tactical position within which Lukacs' thought is to be situated, but that of the relation between the contradictions in his thought and the increasingly contradictory development of communism in the USSR. Here I can do no better than follow Messaros' excellent sketch of this relationship. He isolates three central factors: (1) Lukacs' personal political ineffectiveness (culminating in the defeat of the "Blum Theses" in 1926); (2) his idealisation of the Party as an instrument of political mediation; (3) "the practical disintegration of all forms of effective political mediation, from the Workers' Councils to the Trade Unions ... In History and Class Consciousness the institution of the Workers' Councils still appeared as a necessary form of mediation and its effective instrumentality. Now, however, its place had to be left empty, as indeed all other forms of political mediation too had to leave a vacuum behind them". Because of this disjunction between "the limited immediacy of political perspectives and the university of a socialist programme", and because of the destruction of the "instrumental guarantee" of mediation, the role of mediation is assigned, in Lukacs' conception, to ethics; Lukacs "finds himself in this respect in the position of 'ethical utopianism', and this "abstractness of the political dimension in (his) conception of this dialectical system of mediations leaves its marks ... on the various complexes of problems, whether in Aesthetics or in Ontology, in Epistemology or indeed in Ethics itself to which that problematical role
of 'should-be mediation' is assigned. This utopianism, and this displacement of political into ethical activity, is surely to be related to similar utopian hope expressed in Die Seele und die Formen, of opposing to the crisis in the world of forms "a law and an attitude which by its very absoluteness could heal all the wounds and fissures of existence"; and to the advocacy of an absolute generic form which would 'realise' an integration between subject and totality which had not occurred in reality.

NOTES


2. "... in our time the most substantial corpus of Marxist literary analysis, that of Lukacs, has been genre-oriented from beginning to end (seeming, indeed, to recapitulate some ideal trajectory from a Hegelian interrogation of genre, in Sociology of Modern Drama, and The Theory of the Novel, to an Aristotelian emphasis in the late two-volume Ästhetik" - Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre", New Literary History, 7, No. 1 (1975), 160.


8. The Theory of the Novel, p. 46.

9. Ibid., p. 37.

10. Ibid., p. 72.


13. Ibid., p. 127.

14. Ibid.


19. Ibid., pp. 31-32.

20. Lukacs, "Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik", in Probleme der Ästhetik, p. 670.


23. Ibid., p. 755.

24. C. F. Ibid., p. 683: "The independent form of the work is therefore a reflection of essential connections and forms of appearance of reality itself".


31. "In the beginning he mumbles a couple of times 'period of bourgeois decadence', and then after that just 'period of decadence' - it's the whole lot that's decaying, not the bourgeoisie". Bertolt Brecht, Arbeitsjournal I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 13.


34. Ibid., p. 100.


38. Gallas, p. 164.
40. Gallas, p. 51.
42. Ibid., p. 291.
43. Lukacs, quoted in Posada, p. 30.
44. C.f. especially "The Intellectual Physiognomy in Characterisation", in Writer and Critic, p. 149 ff.
49. E.g. Cesare Cases, "Einleitung", to Lehrstück Lukacs.
53. Meszaros, pp. 80-81.
54. Ibid., p. 81.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 82.


19. Ibid., pp. 31-32.

20. Lukacs, "Uber die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Asthetik", in Probleme der Asthetik, p. 670.


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