

LUKÁCS AND LIMBO: THE LEGACY OF MARXIST LITERARY CRITICISM

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When I was on a sabbatical in Hungary last year, I noticed, and not without qualm, that the cigar-toting statue of György Lukács, the venerable Hungarian philosopher and literary critic, had been removed from the lobby of the University Library in Budapest. I really don't know where the statue is; perhaps it has been posited in the "Cold War" museum near Szentendre (there is such a museum there), or perhaps it has been temporarily relocated for the sake of repairs; at any rate, when I inquired about the famous Marxist's whereabouts, I was told by a graduate student that Lukács was in limbo. By that remark I understood that György Lukács has not only lost his halo in his native country, but may have been victim of the new regime's rather hasty purge of icons, however venerable, that were associated with the doctrinaire and now discredited Marxist tradition.

Because of the fall of Communism one may assume that the legacy of Marxist literary criticism is in a limbo of sorts in America as well. Yet, according to American critic Susan Sontag, while it was more difficult if not impossible to discuss Marxism seriously because of the "sterilities of the Cold War" (Sontag, 87), now, we can look at Marxist literary criticism without the uncomfortable stigma that is identified with political repression. In spite of the disintegration of Communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union or, as Susan Sontag suggests, precisely because of it, American interest in Lukács is enjoying what may ultimately be a renaissance. There are some very interesting statistics that bear this out. Today, American universities offer a variety of courses in Marxist literary criticism, or at least incorporate Marxist theory as part of general courses in practical literary criticism — alongside rival theories like structuralist, deconstructionist, psychological, historical, neo-historical, mythopoeic, Freudian, Jungian, archetypal, formalist, feminist, readers-response, post-colonial and sociological criticism. In some universities like Florida International University, where I have been teaching, in the guise of Freshman Composition we include writers such as Attila József and Antal Szerb (my own humble Hungarian contribution to American scholarship). We teach Marxist literary criticism as a sub-category of sociological criticism. At other schools, many of them distinguished institutions of higher learning, entire courses are offered in Lukács; and there is one

that I know of at Cornell University, where Professor Peter Hohendal offers a course as specific as "The Early Lukács." And when I was teaching undergraduate English at the University of Massachusetts in the late eighties, a surprising number of Ph.D. candidates were writing doctoral dissertations on or about Lukács and Marxist literary theory.

Since Lukács' death in Budapest in 1971, numerous important studies of Lukács have been published in the United States. In the interest of space I should like to mention no more than sixteen of these:

- Arato, Andrew and Paul Brienens. *The young Lukács and the origins of western marxism*. New York: Seabury Press, 1979.
- Bernstein, J.M. *The philosophy of the novel: Lukács, marxism, and the dialectics of form*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Congdon, Lee. *The young Lukács*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1983.
- Corredor, Eva L. *György Lukács and the literary pretext*. New York: Peter Lang, 1987.
- Demetz, Peter. *Marx, Engels and the poets*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Sammons. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
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- Marcus, Judith. *Georg Lukács and Thomas Mann*. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- Marcus, Judith and Zoltán Tarr, eds. *Georg Lukács: Theory, culture, and politics*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1989.
- Wellek, René. *Four critics: Croce, Valéry, Lukács, and Ingarden*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1981.

American interest in Lukács began in earnest in the 1970s when his monumental *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* and *Die Theorie des Romans* became available in English as *History and class consciousness* and *The theory of the novel*. The works were embraced almost immediately, suggesting, as they have, a new and exciting critical paradigm. Lukács' contribution of a Marxist criticism, espe-

cially when applied to the historical novel, has been profound. His half a century of work as a Marxist theorist has been regarded as seminal, and indeed many scholars are indebted to him, not only in America but throughout the world, as the father of Marxist literary criticism. Save for György Lukács, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe produced few global literary critics of lasting significance. The early Lukács, who was at the time writing in German, influenced the so-called Frankfurt School and the work of Walter Benjamin, a notable scholar of the Weimar period; in France, the Rumanian Lucian Goldmann drew heavily upon Lukács' earlier writings, especially Lukács' *History of class consciousness*; and in England, George Steiner had this to say about Lukács:

[He] is one of the great literary critics of the twentieth century. Heir to Lessing and Sainte-Beuve, no less than to Hegel and Marx, he has produced a body of theoretic and practical criticism which can be compared for tenacity of influence, with that of T.S. Eliot, and for breadth of compass with that of Edmund Wilson (Steiner, 92).

American Marxist scholars like Fredric Jameson and Andrew Feenberg readily concede their indebtedness to Lukács, with Feenberg crediting Lukács' *History and class consciousness* as playing, "a major role in the breakdown of the Stalinist interpretation of Marxism and the consequent revival of interest in Marxist thought among literary scholars, philosophers and sociologists" (Feenberg, vii). In the year of Lukács' death Fredric Jameson published *Marxism and form: Twentieth-century dealectical theories of literature* in which he acknowledges Lukács for

laying the foundation in a technical manner for a new Marxist theory of knowledge...[that] distinguishes itself from the outset from more familiar Western critique of ideology as it is practiced by such writers as Lucian Goldmann and Sartre (Jameson, 182).

English professor Stuart Sim, in his 1994 study *George Lukács*, says that Jameson has struggled to keep alive a Lukács-inspired Hegelian-Marxist tradition in American academic culture in the face of stiff competition from, successively, Althusserian structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism. Admitting the rampant pluralism of today's intellectual marketplace, Jameson sets out in his *Marxism and form* to argue the case for Marxism, conceiving of the theory as "that untranscendable horizon" that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations (Sim, 120). According to Sim, Jameson's is an unabashed defense of Marxism as meta-narrative, which meets the postmodernist challenge head on. The virtue of Lukács' *Theory of novel* is that it conceives of the novel as a modern attempt to reconcile matter and spirit, life and essence, which, because of the unfavorable conditions of the modern world, is inherently

problematical in its structure, a form requiring continual reinvention in response to events (Sim, 121). Although such reinvention, or the architectural restructuring of narrative, is one of the hallmarks of postmodernist fiction, critics of the Lukácsian method would accuse Lukács of being unfair and judgmental in his treatment of modernism and postmodernism altogether. Perhaps this point is not wide of the mark, and there is lively dialogue about just how relevant a paradigm can be in its insistence on realism unclear; it is true that Lukács culls most of his models from Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy and Gorky, since these works best demonstrate social reality. But what of the twentieth century? Lukács certainly had great admiration for Thomas Mann and even Sholzhenitsyn. But what did Lukács say about writers like Joyce, Kafka and Beckett, or Brecht for that matter? Lukács is rather severe in his near universal condemnation of Western avant-garde and its exulted psychological preoccupations; for by focusing on the individual, it ignores the narrative of socio-historical process as it relates to the Lukácsian process of "totality." In his *A case for Lukács* Jameson argues that Lukács' *Theory of the novel* is

the attempt in modern times to recapture something of the quality of the epic narration....As such, the novel is no longer a closed and established form with built-in conventions, like tragedy or epic, rather it is problematical in its very structure, a hybrid from which must be reinvented at every moment of its development. Each novel is a process in which the very possibility of narration must begin in a void, without any acquired momentum: its privileged subject matter will, therefore, be the search, in a world in which neither goals nor paths are established beforehand. It is a process in which we witness the very invention of those problems whose solution is its story. Where the epic hero represented collectively, forming part of a meaningful, organic world, the hero of the novel is always solitary: he is problematical; that is to say, he must always stand in opposition to his setting, to nature or society, inasmuch as it is precisely his relationship to them, his integration into them, which is the issue at hand. Any reconciliation between the hero and his environment which was given from the beginning of the book and not painfully won in the course of it would stand as a kind of illicit presupposition, a kind of cheating with the form, in which the whole novel as process would be invalidated [parenthetically, I may add that such cheating characterizes nearly all commercial genre fiction today]. The prototype of the true novel's hero, therefore may be the madman or the criminal; the work is his biography, the story is his setting forth to "prove his soul" in the emptiness of the world (Jameson, 172).

Jameson's argument, a refinement of the Lukács method, would certainly be sympathetic to such modern narratives as Joyce's *Portrait* and *Ulysses*. Conceding that Lukács had in general rejected modernism, Jameson offers the following on the subject of Kafka:

In Kafka's *Castle*, after one of the characters has shown K. that all of his actions can be interpreted in a quite different and far more unfavorable light, the hero replies: "It's not that what you say is false: it's just that it's hostile." Such might be the motto for Lukács' observations on modern art. It is both diagnosis and judgement: yet the whole dimension of judgement rests on ambiguity, for it presupposes that the modernist writer has some personal choice in the matter, and that his fate is not sealed for him by the logic of his moment in history. The same ambiguity is visible in Marxist revolutionary theory, as well, where the revolution cannot come into being until all the objective conditions are ripe for it, but where at the same time Lenin can apparently force this condition by sheer willpower, can create a proletarian revolution before the preceding middle-class revolution has had time to run its course (Jameson, 198).

Now, what did Lukács make of Sartre, Beckett and existential nihilism? In his *Marxism and human liberation*, Lukács savagely attacked existentialism by calling it "a myth of declining capitalism" (Lukács, 254). Rather strong words. Yet again, Jameson shows how the Marxist paradigm, by means of an adjustment, can accommodate even the works of Sartre and Beckett. According to Jameson, this new modernism differs from the older, classical one of the turn of the century in at least one very essential way: the older modernism was in its essence profoundly antisocial, and reckoned with the instinctive hostility of the middle-class public of which it stood as a negation and a refusal. What characterizes the new modernism is however precisely that it is *popular*: maybe not in small Mid-western towns, says Jameson, but in the dominant world of fashion and media. That can only mean that there has come to be something socially useful about such art from the point of view of the existing socio-economic structure; or something suspect about it (Jameson, 414).

Professor István Fehér goes as far as to suggest that Lukács may even be regarded as the precursor of twentieth century existentialism, rather than its staunch nemesis. The insistence on realism and historical necessity need not be regarded as contrary either to existentialism or to the new postmodernist tradition. In his 1994 study of Lukács Professor Stuart Sim says:

while the commitment to realism can make Lukács seem old-fashioned, the advent of postmodernism and its radical problematisation of modern aesthetics has led to a revival of interest in Lukács' work. Lukács has become a test case as to whether anything can be saved from Marxism as a political force (Sim, 150).

Perhaps this requires some elaboration. For Sim, and for a great many of us, I suppose, postmodernism is a term with inherent difficulties. Since it covers a multitude of theoretical perspectives, Sim calls the term "amorphous"; but at

least in some versions of it, a sense of dialogue with the past is demanded (Sim, 126).

Sim quotes from the architecture theorist Charles Jencks, who defines post-modernism

...as double coding – the combination of modern techniques with something else (usually tradition building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects....The point of this double coding was itself double. Modern architecture had failed to remain credible because it didn't communicate effectively with its ultimate users...and partly because it didn't make effective links with the city and history (Jencks, 4).

The past, be they events from human history, the history of ideas or myth itself, is not only manifest in postmodern work but alters the architecture of narrative, often infusing it with metafictional elements that add yet another perspective to the idea of historical context. "Postmodernism for Jencks is representational art, metaphorically oriented and historically conscious in its attempt to reintegrate the present with the past" (Sim 127) as, for instance, in the provocative works of Umberto Eco.

Although, as we have seen, we can account for Lukács' relevance insofar as modernist and postmodernist texts are concerned, does this mean that Marxist theory is useful in interpreting *all* manner of narrative texts? The answer is a categorical *no*. Applying the paradigm works best with the realistic novel, that which contains at least an undercurrent of social consciousness. But we can not force the template on every genre; and as my Florida colleague Professor Elkins points out, Marxist theory is *e pluribus unum* or one out of many tools at the disposal of the literary critic. The works of Steinbeck, for example, invite a Marxist interpretation, while Barth or Pynchon do not. Perhaps one of Lukács' weaknesses was his obstinacy about his method, that it was his way or no way, that there were not other viable critical perspectives, no other critical tools. Such dogmatism risks being reductive if not prescriptive. And prescribing what and how writers ought to be writing, echoes, and rather unpleasantly, the dictates of socialist realism, or, to be blunt, Stalinist propaganda.

In the main, Lukács' association with Stalinism presents for some a ready excuse to discount his theories. His personal involvement with the Hungarian Communist Party, his recantations, his political waffling, his chameleonism, his bewildering opportunism, his dogmatism, his technocratic language, have often elicited less-than-an-objective assessment of his work. To some of my Cuban-American students at my university, the very word "Marxism" carries with it a pejorative nuance. One student has told me, and I quote: "I'm sorry, Professor, but I just can't take a philosopher like Marx seriously because he let his kids

starve. Marx refused to get a job because he was too busy glorifying the worker.” Other students complain that Lukács seems to them a little snooty, a literary snob or pundit, part of the intellectual elite that was as accessible to the masses as so much gobbledygook. They accuse him of everything from Ash-Can oligarchy, to being a cult-leader of the aristocracy of the proletariat. True, some of these students have been force-fed materialistic dialectic, “a la Castro” before they escaped to the United States, to the land of opportunity, where the last thing they expected was more of the same. Perhaps this is the case in Hungary today. Perhaps that is why Lukács’ statue is missing from the University Library in Budapest. But these, I believe, are not more than simple knee-jerk reactions and certainly not serious thoughtful assessments. There are, of course, thoughtful critics of Lukács, who present rather persuasive arguments against his critical theory. The most articulate of these critics is René Wellek, and the most hostile (perhaps with the exception of Professor Victor Zitta) is George Lichtheim. Mr. Lichtheim, in his book *George Lukács*, takes great pains to show that Lukács’ work is derivative. In a chapter entitled “Heritage,” Lichtheim discovers in Lukács’ *History of class consciousness* a veritable honeycomb of notions borrowed from other philosophers:

When we come [says Lichtheim] to Lukács’ most controversial work, the 1923 essay entitled *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, we shall see that its strictly philosophical content was mediated by Lask’s interpretation of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Heidegger; its politics and economics were taken over bodily from Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg (the incompatibility of these two great Marxists was not yet plain to him); and its criticism of Engels’ “dialectical materialism” was subsequently abandoned in response to pressing demands for intellectual conformity. Nor can one overlook the circumstance that it was Dilthey who had originally opened Lukács’ eyes to the radical difference between natural science and history: In noting all this [says Lichtheim], one simply registers the fact that while Lukács distinguished himself at an early age by productions of considerable brilliance, one cannot say that he manifested the kind of originality which commonly marks even the immature productions of genius. *The theory of the novel* is no exception. It is an exquisitely talented piece of writing, and that is all (Lichtheim, 10).

Professor Sim disagrees. In his “Conclusion” to his 1994 study of Lukács, he argues that Lukács’

work deserves to survive the collapse of Marxism in the West: realism is back on the agenda, so, too, is dialogue with the past, as is generalized skepticism of doctrine-led political and social systems, and in each of these cases Lukács’ original writing have something important and thought-provoking to add to the debate. Marxism’s

great success as an aesthetic theory has been to make us aware of art's ideological role. The need for that awareness outlives Marxism's political decline — feminism alone would be enough to prove the point, as is the rise of the culturally philistine right — and we should not forget Lukács' critical role in bringing about that awareness. Perhaps what is needed now, Professor if the Lukács to be treated with the same kind of generosity that he extended toward the great realists of the nineteenth century: to acknowledge that, whatever ideological imperfections may exist in his work, he managed to put the right kind of questions to his society (Sim, 159).

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