

Rethinking Realism: A Critique of Georg Lukács

I. INTRODUCTION

The essays of Marxist critic Georg Lukács offer a difficult, often troublesome aesthetic reflection on a specific moment in the history of modern literature. In “The Ideology of Modernism,”¹ Lukács develops his position regarding the emergence of the so-called modernist school of literary experimentation. In framing his critique, he appends his own position with the following cautionary note: “What must be avoided at all costs is the approach generally adopted by bourgeois-modernist critics themselves: that exaggerated concern with formal criteria, with questions of style and literary technique.”² Although such a strategy resembles an aesthetic judgment, Lukács’s critique is structured as an intervention into the ideological mystifications that govern the formal criteria of modernist literature. According to Lukács, the aesthetic primacy of the various modalities of form and style that characterizes the modernist doxa is nothing more than ideological mystification; such an attempt to autonomize formal criteria is itself the product of ideology. As Lukács insists, “The distinctions that concern us are not those between stylistic ‘techniques’ in the formalistic sense. It is the view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung* underlying the writer’s work that counts.”³ In opposition to modernism, Lukács defends the realist tradition of literature, particularly that embodied by the nineteenth century novel. Realism, he argues, is a mode of literary engagement that is able to capture the true nature of the individual in relation to the development of the socio-historical totality. In short, realism succeeds as an aesthetic and a political strategy because it can penetrate the underlying essences that lie beneath the appearances of a particular historical situation. In this paper, I will argue that Lukács’s position is inadequate because he fails to recognize the way in which the modes of literary representation themselves are subject to aesthetic and historical transformation. As a consequence, Lukács’s defense of realism is only able to operate on the basis of a static and often transparently dogmatic absolutization of the literary subject.

II. THE LIMITS OF MODERNISM

Although Lukács’s critique of modernism is framed by the necessity of representing the truly dialectical movement of history, his position nevertheless fails because he at once mistakes the concretely historical forms of modernism for ahistorical abstractions and in the same operation he transforms the dynamic, immanently variegated forms of realism into static forms of transcendence. For Lukács, modern subjectivity is characterized by its condition as “alienated,” “fragmented,” and “solitary.” According to Lukács, the image of the modern subject dictated by the modernists is an image of primary isolation: “Man, for these [modernist] writers is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings.”⁴ The modern subject is fundamentally divorced from the recognition of his/her socio-historical context. Drawing on

Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit* ('thrownness-into-being'), Lukács suggests that such a condition "implies, not merely that man is constitutionally unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself; but also that it is impossible to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence."⁵ For Lukács, Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* is the dominant image of the modern subject—through his/her ahistorical appearance, "he is 'thrown-into-the-world': meaninglessly, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it."⁶ Such a view of the modern condition permeates the ideological forms which determine the formal experimentations of modernist literature. Yet such experiments never adequately represent the socio-historical character of humanity—the only development captured by modernism is the aesthetic reiteration of the modern condition.

In an effort to critique the modernist doxa, Lukács proposes the following antithesis: "Abstract potentiality belongs wholly to the realm of subjectivity; whereas concrete potentiality is concerned with the dialectic between the individual's subjectivity and objective reality."⁷ The necessity of such an opposition resides in the attempt to identify the emergence of modernism as a symptom of the impossibility to negotiate, aesthetically, the difference between essence and appearance. If the modern subject is to be represented as she truly is, then the dialectical movement between her subjective and objective reality must be preserved. Concrete potentiality maintains the literary subject in her actual socio-historical environment; it "implies a description of actual persons inhabiting a palpable, identifiable world."⁸ Abstract potentiality, by contrast, represents an isolated, solipsistic, reified consciousness which has been cut-off from real social conditions. The preservation of such a difference (between abstract and concrete potentiality), is the condition of possibility for any accurate representation of the social totality. As Lukács insists: "If the distinction between abstract and concrete potentiality vanishes, if man's inwardness is identified with an abstract subjectivity, human personality must necessarily disintegrate."⁹ The modernist doxa has eliminated the boundary between abstract and concrete potentiality—and the subjectivity that it depicts is that of an internal, monadological, ahistorical *condition humaine*.

The elevation of abstract potentiality, i.e., the hypostatization of the modern subject in terms of an ahistorical *condition humaine*, has reduced literary representation to a sequence of "unrelated experiential fragments."¹⁰ The formal experiments that characterize this elevation of abstract potentiality (e.g., the use of stream-of-consciousness, the interior monologue, as well as allegory) are that which define modernists such as Joyce, Musil, Beckett, Kafka, etc., as historically and aesthetically distinct from traditionally "realistic" forms of literature. For Lukács, the defining literary strategy of the modernists is the tendency to develop (and to overdevelop) techniques of form. As Lukács writes in "The Ideology of Modernism":

This state of affairs—which to my mind characterizes all modernist art of the past fifty years—is disguised by critics who systematically glorify the modernist movement. By concentrating on formal criteria, by isolating technique from content and exaggerating its importance, these critics refrain from judgment. . . . They are unable, in consequence, to make the aesthetic distinction between *realism* and *naturalism*. This distinction depends on the presence or absence in a work of art of a 'hierarchy of significance' in the situations and characters presented.¹¹

Contra realism, modernism has dropped its "selective principle." This is to say that modernism eliminates a sense of *perspective*, namely, the capacity to distinguish between the important and the superficial within the contextual unity of a narrative.¹² Through the elimination of perspective—and by extension, through the dissolution of concrete and abstract potentiality—the inner world of the narrative subject is reduced to the fetishization of interiority, an interiority that develops "paradoxically, as it may seem—a static character."¹³ Such distortions index a

distorted sense of perspective, a perspective that has stripped consciousness of the dynamism that constitutes the tension between subjective and objective reality.

The tendency of modernist literature to elevate abstract potentiality is not only an aesthetic failure insofar as it fails to capture the objectivity of real social conditions that situate the modern subject, but it also fails to capture the internal form of consciousness *qua* isolated subject. According to Lukács, the formal isolation of abstract potentiality implicitly accepts the reified, ideological forms of modern life as *real* forms. In other words, modernism accepts appearance *as* essence. As Lukács insists in “Realism in the Balance”:

The modern literary schools of the imperialist era, from Naturalism to Surrealism, which have followed each other in such swift succession, all have one feature in common. They all take reality exactly as it manifests itself to the writer and the characters he creates. The form of this immediate manifestation changes as society changes.¹⁴

The modulations of consciousness that structure the formal experimentations of the modernists are merely so many reflections of surface alterations within the development of society. This is to say that the innovations developed by Joyce, Musil, Beckett, Kafka, and many others are merely epiphenomenal representations of idealized appearances. Such representations fail to capture the underlying relations of the socio-historical totality that constitute the true nature of the modern subject in his/her real, conditioned development. As Lukács writes, the modernists “remain frozen in their own immediacy; they fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e., the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them.”¹⁵ The anti-realist deviations of modernism have isolated abstract potentiality, and as a consequence the monadological involutions of a fragmented consciousness are merely the discursive play, tending towards dissolution, of an individually isolated experience.

III. THE DIALECTICAL UNITY OF REALISM

Lukács’s attempt to jettison modernism is also coupled with the simultaneous attempt to defend and legitimate traditional modes of realism. Lukács tends to valorize the classic novels of Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, Stendhal, and Zola.¹⁶ Through the breadth of their aesthetic vision, such authors are said to unearth the underlying essences governing their world—the development of realism means the development of the capacity to adequately represent the essential unfolding of the socio-historical totality as an organic whole. According to Lukács’s account:

Every major realist fashions the material given in his own experience, and in so doing makes use of techniques of abstraction, among others. But his goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society.¹⁷

For Lukács, the leading defenders of modernism (Bloch, Brecht, Adorno, etc.), have failed in their implicit over-identification of the distortions of internal subjectivity with reality itself. Realism, by contrast, is able to recuperate the modern subject as a mediated subject—which is to say, a subject constituted by the mystifications of ideology. The realist tradition attends itself to the developing parts of society as they relate to the contradictory and often uneven development of the socio-historical whole. Moreover, realism captures not “an immediately obvious aspect of reality but one which is permanent and objectively more significant, namely man in the whole

range of his relations to the real world, above all those which outlast merest fashion.”¹⁸ As an aesthetic practice, literary realism endures because of its decidedly educative function insofar as it presents distortion as distortion—realism overcomes the contradictory nature of the modern subject not through the elevation of his/her alienated condition into a *condition humaine*, but rather through situating the modern subject within the greater unity of the socio-historical whole.

However, the preservation of realism is necessarily predicated on a specific determination of humanity. For Lukács, that determination is the Aristotelian hypostatization of humanity as “*zōon politikon*,”¹⁹ man is a social animal. In order to adequately represent the condition of the modern subject it is necessary to capture her in her sociality. As Lukács writes,

The literature of realism, based on the Aristotelian concept of man as *zōon politikon*, is entitled to develop a new typology for each new phase in the evolution of society. It displays the contradictions within society and within the individual in the context of a dialectical unity.²⁰

Temporally and historically situated, the literature of realism captures individual “types” (e.g., Antigone, Don Quixote, Anna Karenina, Julien Sorel, etc.),²¹ who express the underlying laws governing social life. In accordance with the logical progression of Hegelianism, the individual types of realist literature are never merely individuals—on the contrary, their individual being (i.e., their *Sein an sich* in the Hegelian formulation), cannot be isolated or distinguished from their social and historical environment. Realism captures the true depth of human individuality precisely because it represents human individuality as concrete potentiality, i.e., the subject in its dialectical relation to the unity of objective reality.

And yet, for all his dialectical pronouncements, Lukács’s defense of realism nevertheless effectuates an absolutization of concrete potentiality insofar as he reduces the literary subject to an essentialized form, namely, to *zōon politikon*. Such a metaphysical recuperation of the human essence eternalizes the immanently specific, conditioned forms of modern life. Lukács’s affirmation of universally enduring “types” which are said to populate the landscape of Western literature are themselves transcendental forms superimposed from an absolute sense of “perspective.” Moreover, Lukács’s castigation of “formalism,” and his insistence on the necessity of preserving the activity of concrete potentiality mistakes form for artifice. That is, Lukács’s denigration of “formalism” is belied precisely by the way in which he conflates the activity of concrete potentiality with the emergence of identifiably trans-historical types. The critique of formalism is a critique of aesthetic superimposition—i.e., the modernist attempt to impose formal elements on the organic unity of a work of literature is merely the result of the dissolution of abstract and concrete potentiality. And yet, Lukács’s own valorization of man as *zōon politikon* is upheld as a formal dictum of enduring presence, a presence which governs the transformations of literary content throughout the flow of time.

IV. MODERNISM RECONSIDERED

Given Lukács’s critique of the modernist turn to “form,” it is worth considering the meaning of form vis-à-vis the immanent position of literary production. According to Lukács, the illusion of modernism lies in the tendency to absolutize formal techniques over and above the specific content governing form. In his critique of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for instance, Lukács identifies this very strategy:

I refer to the fact that with Joyce the stream-of-consciousness technique is no mere stylistic device; it is itself the formative principle governing the narrative pattern and the presentation of character. Technique here is something absolute; it is part and parcel of the aesthetic ambition informing *Ulysses*.²²

Undoubtedly, Joyce's development of stream-of-consciousness is more than a stylistic flourish—it is immanent to the discursive structure of the work. But to say that technique is a governing principle and therefore “something absolute” is to conceal the precise methods and strategies Joyce develops in order to establish an immanent world. The Joycean techniques of stream-of-consciousness constitute the fabric of the literary world his characters inhabit—such techniques are that which form the very immanent narrative patterns that they structure.²³ Although Lukács has criticized the modernist focalization on formal technique, his critique coincides with the failure to address the ways in which modernist experimentation works immanently with the objective function of formal elements, and instead insists that such elements are reducible to symptoms of an “over-inflated subjectivism.”²⁴

But if the question of form is a problem for modernism, surely it is also a problem for realism. The strict relation of determination Lukács proposes—namely, that content determines form—illuminates nothing about the aesthetic production of realistic literature. Indeed, as Brecht insists, “Since the artist is constantly occupied with formal matters, since he constantly forms, one must define what one means by *formalism* carefully and practically, otherwise one conveys nothing to the artist.”²⁵ For Brecht, formal techniques are always at play in aesthetic production—he testifies to the fact that “a formalistic quality insinuates itself even into realistic types of construction on the classical model.”²⁶ The boundary between form and content is in truth rather porous—it is always a complex, dialectical play of co-implication. Moreover, in order for realism to adequately represent reality, it is first necessary to apprehend the ways in which the real itself transforms over time. As Brecht writes:

Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists. For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change.²⁷

And yet Lukács insists on the enduring significance of “universal types” as constituting the aesthetic conditions of possibility for any literary representation of reality. Through his refusal to accept alternative methods of aesthetic production (e.g. stream-of-consciousness, the interior monologue, etc.), Lukács has circumscribed the literary subject as an immutable absolute—he has rendered eternal what certain tendencies of realism have always understood to be temporal, namely, the form of representation itself. In so doing, Lukács's aesthetic strictures have transformed the immanent forms of literary production into static forms of transcendence. Lukács can rightly be said to have erected his own *condition humaine*.

The myopic imputation of modernism's ahistorical form fails to recognize the ways in which the modernists have appropriated specific principles from realism. What does it actually mean to say that Joyce's characters do not “develop through contact with the world” or that they are not “formed” by the world?²⁸ On the contrary, the aesthetic principles of an “immanent realism” are constantly present in Joyce's novels—the fictions he crafts are indeed formally experimental, but the density of history is never absent from the fabric of stream-of-consciousness that structures *Ulysses*. Adorno articulated this point well when he wrote:

Even in Joyce's case we do not find the timeless image of man which Lukács would like to foist on to him, but man as the product of history. For all his Irish folklore, Joyce does not invoke a mythology beyond the world he depicts, but instead strives to mythologize it, i.e., to create its essence, whether benign or

maleficent, by applying the technique of stylization so despised by the Lukács of today.²⁹

Joyce's *Ulysses* is in fact thoroughly in the dialogically rich and saturated images of historicized forms of modern alienation. On the one hand, the novel upholds the creative form of the interior monologue, and yet at the same time it nonetheless manages to capture the way in which such interior forms are mediated by the immanently present conditions of history. There is in *Ulysses* the recognition of the historical constitution of the modern, alienated condition—as Stephen Dedalus famously announces in *Ulysses*: history “is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”³⁰ This is why Joyce's modernism is not indicative of an anti-realist break *tout court*—the “voice of the age echoes through”³¹ his monologues—and it is a voice that recognizes and affirms the deep strata of its own historicity.³²

The attempt to jettison the modernist doxa in the name of defending the tradition of realism betrays an illegitimate circumscription of the modernist subject as a timeless form. Lukács's critique is therefore a double failure—on the one hand, he mistakes the concretely historical forms of modernism for ahistorical abstractions, and on the other hand he transforms the dynamic, immanently variegated forms of realism into static forms of transcendence. In failing to recognize the aesthetic production of the immanently constituted structure of literary realism, Lukács finally dissolves the boundaries of subjectivity he constantly strives to maintain. In the final analysis, his ideological intervention fails to penetrate the surface of his literary objects—his desire to preserve enduring types within literature, as well as the primacy of the Aristotelian determination of man as a *zoon politikon*, is grounded in the absolutization of concrete potentiality. Immanent realism, by contrast, preserves the dialectical movement between subjectivity and objective reality—a movement that is always temporally structured by the dynamic socio-historical conditions of a determinate life-world.

CHARLES PRUSIK
Villanova University

EMAIL: cprusik3@gmail.com

¹ Georg Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism,” in *Realism in Our Time: Literature and Class Struggle*, trans. John and Necke Mander (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971).

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21. It is worth noting that Lukács's use of Heidegger is disputable. While it is true in *Being and Time* that Dasein is “thrown,” such thrownness does not preclude the factual structures of “being-in” and “being-with” that constitute the existentiality of Dasein as always already “being-in-the-world.” See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, (New York: The State University of New York Press, 2010), 53–66.

⁷ Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism,” 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹² It is worth noting that Lukács's understanding of the “selective principle” is far from new. On the contrary, the necessity of such a principle has been evoked since the earliest periods of realism. See for

instance, Guy de Maupassant's preface to *The Novel* in *Pierre et Jean*: "The realist, if he is an artist, will not try to show us a banal photograph of life, but to provide us with a vision that is at once more complete, more startling, and more convincing than reality itself. To recount everything would be impossible, for it would require at least a volume a day to list the magnitude of insignificant incidents that fill our lives... This is why the artist, having chosen his theme, will select from such a life cluttered with random and trivial events only those characteristic details useful to his subject, and will reject all the rest as superfluous." See Guy de Maupassant, "The Novel" in *Pierre et Jean*, trans. Julie Mead (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7–8.

¹³ Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 39.

¹⁴ Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance" in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 2007), 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Within the twentieth century, Lukács primarily affirms authors such as Mann and Gorky, who are said to continue and develop the realist tradition. See "Realism in the Balance," 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁹ See Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ It is beyond the present scope of the essay to explicate Lukács's Hegelian presentation of the genesis of the modern novel as it has emerged dialectically from epic lyric poetry and its canon of heroes. For an extended articulation of this development, see Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bastock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 56–93.

²² Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 18.

²³ Adorno is quite right when he writes the following: "What looks like formalism to him, really means the structuring elements of a work in accordance with laws appropriate to them, and is relevant to that 'immanent meaning' for which Lukács yearns, as opposed to a meaning arbitrarily superimposed from outside, something he objectively defends while asserting its impossibility." See Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 2007), 168.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 2007), 74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁸ Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 21.

²⁹ Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," 174.

³⁰ See James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 34. Although Lukács at times suggests that the modern "nihilism" which constitutes the *weltanschauung* of modernists such as Joyce and Kafka, contributed to the ideological development of twentieth century Fascism and Nazism (see Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 63), Joyce's *Ulysses* reflects an acute awareness of the increasing symptoms of anti-Semitism in Europe. Take for instance, the conversation between Dedalus and Mr. Deasy in episode two of *Ulysses*: "—Mark my words, Mr Dedalus, he said. England is in the hands of the jews. In all the highest places: her finance, her press. And they are the signs of a nation's decay. Wherever they gather they eat up the nation's vital strength. I have seen it coming the years. As sure as we are standing here the jew merchants are already at their work of destruction. Old England is Dying," 33.

³¹ See Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," 174.

³² While it is more than likely that Lukács' reading of *Ulysses* is obstructed by a significant language barrier, the almost total absence of any linguistic analysis of the text is indefensible. One could, for instance, critique *Ulysses* on realist grounds insofar as Joyce's deployment of specific dialects is (at times), unrealistic. See for example, Anthony Burgess' erudite study of Joyce's language, *Joysprick*, in which he discusses questions of dialect, particularly with respect to Molly's monologue: "Joyce has established on her [Molly's] very first appearance that she has no education. 'It must have fell down,' she says, and 'Tell us in plain words.' But the implied lower-class Dublin speech does not fit with her declared background. Her father was a major in the Gibraltar garrison and her mother was Spanish... Molly would grow up speaking Andalusian Spanish (Joyce makes her approach it as though a Hugo grammar) and a kind of pseudo-patrician English imposed by her father's position in a closed and highly snobbish garrison society. Coming to Dublin as a young woman she would be unlikely to relinquish a sort of ruling class accent and idiom." See Anthony Burgess, *Joysprick: An Introduction to the Language of James Joyce*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 33.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor. "Reconciliation under Duress." In *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translated By Rodney Livingstone, 165-196. London: Verso Books, 2010.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986.
- *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "Against Georg Lukács." In *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translated by Stuart Hood, 70-90. London: Verso Books, 2010.
- Burgess, Anthony. *Joysprick: An Introduction to the Language of James Joyce*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.
- Döblin, Alfred. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. Translated by Eugene Jolas. New York: Continuum, 2005.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *A Sentimental Education*. Translated by Douglas Parmée. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York Press, 2010.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Knowlson, James and Elizabeth, eds. *Beckett Remembering Remembering Beckett*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006.
- Lukács, Georg. *Soul and Form*. Translated by Anna Bostock. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- *Realism in Our Time: Literature and Class Struggle*. Translated by John and Necke Mander. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971.
- *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971.
- Maupassant, Guy de. *Pierre et Jean*. Translated by Julie Mead. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Proust, Marcel. "Contre Sainte-Beuve." In *Marcel Proust on Art and Literature*. Translated by Sylvia Townsend Warner, 157-265. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers Incorporated, 1997.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*. Translated by James Swenson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Wood, James. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Picador, 2008.

———*The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*. New York: Picador, 2005.