Presentation II

The general literary canons of Georg Lukács are by now relatively well-known in the English-speaking world. Translations of his most important theoretical essays of the thirties have still, however, to be published. It was during this decade that Lukács, having abandoned political responsibilities in the Hungarian Communist Party, turned to aesthetic writings and gradually acquired a commanding position as a critic within the ranks of the German literary left. His debut in this role occurred in the Third Period phase of the Comintern, as a contributor to *Linkskurve*, the organ of the *Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (BPRS) or Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers, created by the KPD in late 1928. Lukács first distinguished himself in *Linkskurve* by mordant attacks on novels by Willi Bredel, a worker-writer who had been a turner in the engineering industry, and Ernst Ottwalt, a close associate and collaborator of Brecht, for what he alleged was the substitution of journalistic 'reportage' for classical 'creation of characters' in their fiction.[1] Brecht himself, together with the Soviet writer Tretyakov, was expressly linked to the negative trend exemplified by these writers, and his conception of an objectivist 'anti-aristotelian' theatre repudiated. After the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, and the switch of the Third International to Popular Front policies against fascism, Lukács's literary views became increasingly influential in the official organs of the German Communist emigration, where they could be used as an aesthetic counterpoint to political attacks on 'leftism' within the intelligentsia and the workers' movement.[2] In exile, Lukács's next

[1] See 'Willi Bredels Romane' in *Linkskurve*, November 1931, and 'Reportage oder Gestaltung? Kritische Bemerkungen anlässlich eines Romans von Ottwalt' in *Linkskurve*, July–August 1932, followed by a reply by Ottwalt and a concluding rejoinder by Lukács in subsequent issues. Ottwalt co-scripted the film *Kuhle Wampe* with Brecht in the same year.

[2] Since the Second World War, it has often been alleged that Lukács's critical views can be seen essentially as a cultural justification or derivative of the Popular Front. While there is no doubt that they were to be politically instrumentalized as such, it is emphatically not the case that they represented an *ex post facto* adaptation of his convictions on Lukács's part. On the contrary, having abandoned political for literary work in 1929 precisely because of his opposition to the sectarian policies of the Third Period, he anticipated Popular Front orientations in his new field by at least three years. This was paradoxically possible at the height of the KPD's rabid campaigns against 'social-fascism', because of the protection in 1931–2 of Heinz Neumann and Willi Münzenberg, who sought to use the cultural apparatus of the party more flexibly than its mainline political strategy warranted, and covered Lukács's literary flanks in *Linkskurve*. (For the complex history of this conjuncture in the BPRS, see Helga Gallas, *Marxistische Literaturtheorie*, Neuwied/Berlin 1971, esp. pp. 60, 68–9, 200.) After the Nazi seizure of power, Lukács's attack on expressionism still predated the adoption of the Popular Front turn by some months. The advent of the new policy in mid-1934, which finally synchronized Lukács's evolution with that of the Comintern, at most affected the tactical trimmings of his pronouncements. The substance of his aesthetic positions had been arrived at by an original and independent route much earlier.

[3] See below, 'Conversations with Brecht', p. 95. It should be remembered, in assessing this episode, that Lukács had been an official and senior Communist militant in the International for nearly two decades, while Brecht's convergence with the KPD was relatively recent and had not led to formal party membership.

target was the legacy of expressionism in German literature, which he vigorously belaboured in the journal *Internationale Literatur* in January 1934, in an essay entitled '*Grosse und Verfall des Expressionismus*'. Brecht, like many other German writers of his generation, had of course started his career as a para-expressionist himself, in his plays of the early twenties. Lukács had thus assailed, in reverse order, both the two main phases of his own artistic development. Two years later, Lukács published his richest and most seminal essay of the period, *Erzählen oder Beschreiben?*. In this text, he set out the main categories and principles of the doctrine of literary realism that he was to maintain for the rest of his life: the reiterated antithesis between naturalism and realism, the notion of the typical character as a nexus of the social and individual, the rejection of both external reportage and internal psychologism, the distinction between passive description and active narrative, the extolment of Balzac and Tolstoy as classical models for the contemporary novel. Those modern artists who ignored or contravened these regulative norms of literary creation were insistently pilloried for 'formalism' by Lukács.

Brecht, the greatest German writer to have emerged in the Weimar epoch, and a fellow Marxist, evidently came to feel an increasing pressure and isolation as Lukács's precepts, ably articulated in the USSR itself (where Lukács had moved in 1933) and seconded by lesser associates like Kurella, acquired more and more official authority within the ambience of the Comintern. Benjamin, recording his conversations with Brecht in Denmark in 1938, noted: 'The publications of Lukács, Kurella *et al* are giving Brecht a good deal of trouble'.[3] Nominally, Brecht was

himself one of the three co-editors of the emigré front journal *Das Wort*, published in Moscow between 1936 and 1939; his two colleagues being Willi Bredel and Leon Feuchtwanger. In fact, his name was used for prestige reasons on the mast-head, and he had no say in its policy from his own exile in Svendborg. During 1938 however, besides giving vent to his feelings in violent objurgations in his private diaries, he wrote a series of trenchant and sardonic counter-attacks against Lukács, designed as public interventions in *Das Wort* – where a major debate was meanwhile still raging over the issue of expressionism, whose merits had been defended by, among others, Ernst Bloch and Hanns Eisler. The four most important of these texts written by Brecht, entitled respectively *Die Essays von Georg Lukács* (I), *Über den formalistischen Charakter der Realismustheorie* (II), *Bermerkungen zu einem Aufsatz* (III), and *Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus* (IV), are translated below. None of them were ever published in *Das Wort*, or anywhere else, in Brecht's life-time. Whether Brecht submitted them to *Das Wort* in Moscow and they were rejected, or whether his own characteristic tactical prudence dissuaded him from ever sending them, still remains unclear. Benjamin, to whom he read some of the texts, reports that: 'He asked my advice whether to publish them. As, at the same time, he told me that Lukács's position "over there" is at the moment very strong, I told him I could offer no advice. "There are questions of power involved. You ought to get the opinion of someone from over there. You've got friends there haven't you?" – Brecht: "Actually, no, I haven't. Neither have the Muscovites themselves – like the dead."'[4] At the height of the Great Terror, Brecht may well have himself decided against any release of these articles. In the event, they first came to light in 1967, with the posthumous publication of Suhrkamp Verlag's edition of his *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur* in West Germany.

Brecht's polemic against Lukács, while avoiding overly frequent invocations of his name after the first text, was in no way defensive in tone. On the contrary, it was caustic and aggressive, mustering a wide range of arguments designed to demolish the whole tenor of Lukács's aesthetic To start with, Brecht fastened on the manifest contradiction between Lukács's view of the great European realists of the 19th century as essentially bourgeois writers, and his claim that their literary achievements should serve as a guide to proletarian or socialist writers in the 20th century: for if the novels of Balzac or Tolstoy were determinate

[4] See below, pp. 97–8.

products of a particular phase of class history, now superseded, how could any Marxist argue that the principles of their fiction could be recreated in a subsequent phase of history, dominated by the struggles of another and antagonistic class? The social reality of capitalism had undergone radical modifications in the 20th century, and necessarily no longer produced historical forms of individuality of the Balzacian or Tolstoyan type – hence to refurbish such figures in new conditions would actually be a signal flight from realism. The position of women in the contemporary USA, for example, let alone the USSR, structurally precluded the peculiar pattern of conflicting passions typical of Balzac. Conversely, where Lukács charged 'modernist' writing with formalism because of its use of such fragmented techniques as interior monologue or montage, it was actually Lukács himself who had fallen into a deluded and timeless formalism, by attempting to deduce norms for prose purely from literary traditions, without regard for the historical reality that encompasses and transforms all literature in its own processes of change. True realism, of which Brecht considered himself to be a staunch champion and practitioner, was not merely an aesthetic optic: it was a political and philosophical vision of the world and the material struggles that divided it. At the same time, Brecht pointed out the extremely narrow range of literature in terms of which Lukács's theory was constructed, even within the aesthetic field itself – its overwhelming preoccupation with the novel, to the exclusion of poetry or drama. The omitted genres were, of course, those in which Brecht himself excelled. More generally, many of the most radical innovations within German culture after 1918 had been first developed in the theatre. Brecht stressed the indispensable need for experimentation in the arts, and the necessary freedom of the artist to be allowed to fail, or only partially to succeed, as the price of the invention of new aesthetic devices in any transitional epoch of history. Interior monologue, montage, or mixture of genres within a single work were all permissible and fruitful, so long as they were disciplined by a watchful truthfulness to social reality. Fertility of technique was not the mark of a 'mechanical' improverishment of art, but a sign of energy and liberty. The fear that technical novelties as such tended to render works of art alien or incomprehensible to the masses, moreover, was a fundamental error. Tartly reminding Lukács that working-class readers might often find notable *longueurs* in the leisurely narratives of Balzac or Tolstoy, Brecht invoked his own experience as a playwright as evidence that proletarian audiences and participants welcomed experimental audacity on the stage, and were

generous rather than censorious towards artistic excesses, where these were committed. By contrast, any fixed or inherited concept of 'popular art' (*Volkstümlichkeit*) was contaminated by notoriously reactionary traditions, especially in Germany. To reach the exploited classes in the tempestuous era of their final struggle with their exploiters, art had to change together with their own revolutionary change of the world and of themselves.

The legitimacy and stringency of Brecht's riposte to Lukács in the oblique polemic between the two, are plain and tonic. Brecht's positions have, in fact, won very wide assent on the Marxist Left in West Germany since the recent publication of his texts, on the eve of the political rebirth of 1968. Few critiques of Lukács's aesthetic theory have been so tersely effective in their own terms. Brecht's diagnosis of the insurmountable anomalies and contradictions of his adversary's recommendations for contemporary art remains largely unanswerable. Moreover, perhaps no other Marxist writer has defended (and illustrated) so forcefully – because soberly – the basic necessity for constant freedom of artistic experiment in the socialist movement. The intensity of Brecht's feelings about the dangers to his own work latent in the generic strictures of Lukács and his colleagues in Moscow against formalism, can be judged from his outburst to Benjamin: 'They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is the unforeseeable. You never know what's going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the *apparatchik* and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.'[5] This reaction of the artist to the critic, as practioner to spectator, confers much of its strength on Brecht's case. At the same time, it also indicates its limitations as a negative *fin de non recevoir*. For while Brecht was able to single out the weaknesses and paradoxes of Lukács's literary theory, he was not capable of advancing any positive alternative to it, on the same plane. For all its narrowness and rigidity, Lukács's work represented a real attempt to construct a systematic Marxist account of the historical development of European literature from the Enlightenment onwards. The precepts for 20th-century art with which it concluded were often nostalgic or retrograde; but analytically it was far more serious in its attention to the past, as the precondition of the present, than anything Brecht was to assay. Brechtian aesthetic maxims always remained pro-

[5] Below, p. 97.

gramme notes for his own productions. A remarkable achievement in its own way, even his doctrine of the theatre was essentially an expeditious apology for his particular practice, rather than a genuine explanatory typology of universal drama. Brecht's precepts were far more emancipated than those of Lukács, but his theoretical reach was much shallower. The great vices of Lukács's system were its consistent Europocentrism, and its arbitrary selectivity within the diverse strands of European literature itself – in other words, it suffered from too little history. Brecht was not in a position to correct these defects: his own attitude to the European past was at best empirical and eclectic (random borrowings, rather than repressive traditions), while his sporadic enthusiasm for Asian cultures was superficial and mythopoeic.[6] Tendencies to axe contemporary aesthetic debates within Marxism too centrally along the contrast between Brecht and Lukács, such as have currently developed in West Germany, overlook certain limits that in different ways they shared. In their own time, Lukács's aversion to Joyce, Brecht's to Mann, are suggestive of the divisions between them. But their common denunciation of Dostoevsky or Kafka is a reminder of the political and cultural bonds that made them interlocutors as well as antagonists in the thirties.

This degree of affinity can be seen most clearly by comparison with the two other outstanding German Marxists concerned with literature in the same period, Benjamin and Adorno.[7] Both the latter, of course, assigned pivotal importance to the work of Kafka, not to speak of Mallarmé or Proust. At the same time, there is a curious symmetry between the relationships of Benjamin to Adorno and Brecht to Lukács. With the Nazi consolidation of power, the German emigration had dispersed in opposite directions. By 1938, Lukács was institutionally installed in the USSR, Adorno was similarly established in the USA; Brecht remained solitary in Denmark, Benjamin in France. The personal, perhaps political, friendship between Brecht and Benjamin was much closer than their official relationships with Lukács or Adorno. Nevertheless, the main intellectual field of tension for both lay with their symbolically distributed correspondents in Moscow and New

[6] His uncritical cult of the Chinese philosophers Mo Ti (see his *Buch der Wendungen*) and Confucius (to whom he dedicated a projected play), as repositories of Oriental wisdom, are examples. The virulent campaigns recently orchestrated against Confucius in China cast an ironic light on Brecht's predilection for the latter. Needless to say, neither attitude towards Confucius has anything in common with historical materialism.

[7] See the important correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin, printed below, pp. 110–141.

York, respectively. From each of these capitals, theoretical challenges were made to the two men, which engaged the whole direction of their work. In both cases, the ideological interpellation was not exempt from institutional pressures, but was never reducible to the latter.[8] The organizational co-ordinates of the Communist movement created a common space between Lukács and Brecht, as the more impalpable ambience of the Institute of Social Research linked Benjamin to Adorno; but ultimately Adorno's criticisms of Benjamin and Lukács's of Brecht acquired their force because of their degree of cogency and proximity of concern to the work at which they were directed. It is noticeable that the 'Western' debate reproduced the same dual problematic as its 'Eastern' counterpart: a dispute over both the art of the historical past of the 19th century, and the present aims and conditions of aesthetic practice in the 20th century. Consonant with Brecht's desire to broaden Marxist literary theory beyond the novel, the prime object of the Adorno–Benjamin exchange was the poetry of Baudelaire. At the same time, whereas the clash between Lukács and Brecht over contemporary issues involved opposed conceptions of what socialist works of art should be within a framework of declared political militancy, the dispute between Benjamin and Adorno over modern cultural practice had different parameters: it was concerned with the relations between 'avant-garde' and 'commercial' art under the dominion of capital. The continuity and intractability of this problem has made it a central focus of aesthetic controversy on the left ever since, where the contradiction between 'high' and 'low' genres – the one subjectively progressive and objectively elitist, the other objectively popular and subjectively regressive – has never been durably overcome, despite a complex, crippled dialectic between the two. Against this history, Brecht's art retrospectively acquires a unique relief. For his theatre represents perhaps the only major body of art produced after the Russian Revolution to be uncompromisingly advanced in form, yet intransigently popular in intention. The most important of Brecht's claims in his polemic with Lukács was his assertion that his own plays found a vital resonance within the German working-class itself. The extent of the validity of this claim needs some scrutiny. Brecht's biggest successes in the Weimar period – above all,

[8] The coincidence of dates is striking. Brecht's remarks to Benjamin about the implications of Lukács's criticisms, cited above, were made in July 1938. Benjamin received the fateful comments from Adorno on his Baudelaire study on his return to Paris a few months later, in November. However, it should always be remembered that, although potential sanctions lay in the background of their interventions, neither Adorno nor Lukács were themselves at all secure in their own contrasted asylums.

The Threepenny Opera – enjoyed a large bourgeois audience, in ordinary commercial theatres. His fuller conversion to Marxism post-dated them. His greatest plays were then written during exile and war without any contact with a German audience of any kind (*Mother Courage*: 1939; *Galileo Galilei*: 1939; *Puntila*: 1941; *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*: 1944–5). When they were finally staged in East Germany after the War, their audiences were certainly in the main proletarian, but since alternative entertainments (to use a Brechtian term) were not widely available in the DDR, the spontaneity and reality of working-class responses to the Berliner Ensemble remain difficult to estimate. But that the overall structure of Brecht's dramaturgy was always potentially lucid and comprehensible to the spectators for whom it was designed, cannot be doubted. The magnitude of this achievement is suggested by its very isolation. After the Second World War, despite a plethora of socialist writers, no comparable work was produced anywhere in Europe; while in the West, the ascent of Beckett (critically consecrated by Adorno) as a new avatar of 'high' art, was actually to provoke Brecht to plan a play deliberately intended as an antidote to *Godot*. The fragility of Brecht's synthesis, already evidenced in this episode shortly before his death, has only been confirmed by aesthetic developments since. The collapse of the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, in many ways the most brilliant and ambitious revolutionary artist of the last decade, when it attempted a political turn and ascesis not unlike that effected by Brecht's theatre in the thirties, is the most recent and eloquent testimony to the implacable antinomies of cultural innovation in the imperialist world. Brecht's example marks a frontier that has not been passed, or even reached again, by his successors.

Bertolt Brecht

Against Georg Lukács

I

[The Essays of Georg Lukács]

I have occasionally wondered why certain essays by Georg Lukács, although they contain so much valuable material, nevertheless have something unsatisfying about them. He starts from a sound principle, and yet one cannot help feeling that he is somewhat remote from reality. He investigates the decline of the bourgeois novel from the heights it occupied when the bourgeoisie was still a progressive class. However courteous he is in his treatment of contemporary novelists, in so far as they follow the example of the classic models of the bourgeois novel and write in at least a formally realistic manner, he cannot help seeing in them too a process of decline. He is quite unable to find in them a realism equal to that of the classical novelists in depth, breadth and attack. But how could they be expected to rise above their class in this respect? They inevitably testify, too, to a decay in the technique of the novel. There is plenty of technical skill; it is merely that technique has acquired a curious technicality – a kind of tyranny if you like. A formalistic quality insinuates itself even into realistic types of construction on the classical model.

Some of the details here are curious. Even those writers who are conscious of the fact that capitalism impoverishes, dehumanizes, mechanizes human beings, and who fight against it, seem to be part of the same process of impoverishment: for they too, in their writing, appear to be less concerned with elevating man, they rush him through events, treat his inner life as a *quantité negligeable* and so on. They too rationalize, as it were. They fall into line with the 'progress' of physics. They abandon strict causality and switch to statistical causality, by abandoning the individual man as a causal nexus and making statements only about large groups. They even – in their own way – adopt Schrödinger's uncertainty principle. They deprive the observer of his authority and credit and mobilize the reader against himself, advancing purely subjective propositions, which actually characterize only those who make them (Gide, Joyce, Döblin).[1] One can follow Lukács in all these observations and subscribe to his protests.

But then we come to the positive and constructive postulates of Lukács's conception. With a wave of his hand he sweeps away 'inhuman' technique. He turns back to our forefathers and implores their degenerate descendants to emulate them. Are writers confronted by a dehumanized man? Has his spiritual life been devastated? Is he driven through existence at an intolerable pace? Have his logical capacities been weakened? Is the connection between things no longer so visible? Writers just have to keep to the Old Masters, produce a rich life of the spirit, hold back the pace of events by a slow narrative, bring the individual back to the centre of the stage, and so on. Here specific instructions dwindle into an indistinct murmur. That his proposals are impracticable is obvious. No one who believes Lukács's basic principle to be correct, can be surprised at this. Is there no solution then? There is. The new ascendant class shows it. It is not a way back. It is not linked to the good old days but to the bad new ones. It does not involve undoing techniques but developing them. Man does not become man again by stepping out of the masses but by stepping back into them. The masses shed their dehumanization and thereby men become men again – but not the same men as before. This is the path that literature must take in outrage when the masses are beginning to attract to themselves everything that is valuable and human, when they are mobilizing people against the dehumanization produced by capitalism in its fascist phase. It is the element of capitulation, of withdrawal, of utopian idealism which still lurks in Lukács's essays and which he will undoubtedly overcome, that makes his work, which otherwise contains so much of value, unsatisfactory; for it gives the impression that what concerns him is enjoyment rather than struggle, a way of escape rather than an advance.

[1] Alfred Döblin (1878-1957): German novelist and exponent both of Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Neo-Objectivity). His major work was *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), written under the influence of Joyce and Dos Passos.

II

On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism

The formalistic nature of the theory of realism is demonstrated by the fact that not only is it exclusively based on the form of a few bourgeois novels of the previous century (more recent novels are merely cited in so far as they exemplify the same form), but also exclusively on the particular genre of the *novel*. But what about realism in lyric poetry, or in drama? These are two literary genres which – specially in Germany – have achieved a high standard.

I shall continue in a personal vein so as to provide concrete material for my argument. My activity is, as I see it myself, much more diverse than our theorists of realism believe. They give a totally one-sided picture of me. At the present time I am working on two novels, a play and a collection of poems. One of the novels is historical and requires extensive research in the field of Roman history. It is satirical. Now the novel is the chosen sphere of our theorists. But I am not being malicious if I say that I am unable to get the smallest tip from them for my work on this novel: *The Business Affairs of Herr Julius Caesar*. The procedure, taken over by 19th century novelists from the drama, of massing all manner of personal conflicts in long, expensive drawing-room scenes, is of no use to me. For large sections I use the diary form. It has proved necessary for me to change the point of view for other sections. The montage of the points of view of the two fictitious authors incorporates my point of view. I suppose that this sort of thing ought not to have proved necessary. Somehow it does not fit the intended pattern. But this technique has proved to be necessary for a firm grasp of reality, and I had purely realistic motives in adopting it. My play, on the other hand, is a cycle of scenes which deals with life under the Nazis. So far I have written 27 separate scenes. Some of them fit roughly into the 'realistic' pattern X, if one shuts one eye. Others don't – absurdly enough, because they are very short. The whole work doesn't fit into it at all. I consider it to be a realistic play. I learnt more for it from the paintings of the peasant Breughel than from treatises on realism.

I scarcely dare to speak about the second novel, on which I have been working for a long time, so complicated are the problems involved and so primitive is the vocabulary which the aesthetic of realism – in its present state – offers me. The formal difficulties are enormous; I have constantly to construct models. Anyone who saw me at work would think I was only interested in questions of form. I make these models because I wish to represent reality. As far as my lyric poetry goes, there too I take a realistic point of view. But I feel that one would have to proceed with extreme caution if one wished to write about it. On the other hand, there would be a great deal to be learnt about realism in the novel and drama.

While I am looking through a stack of historical tomes (they are written in four languages, in addition to translations from two ancient languages) and attempting, full of scepticism, to verify a particular fact, rubbing the sand from my eyes the whole time, so to speak, I have vague notions of colours at the back of my mind, impressions of particular seasons of the year; I hear inflections without words, see gestures without meaning, think of desirable groupings of unnamed figures, and so on. The images are extremely undefined, in no way exciting, rather superficial, or so it seems to me. But they are there. The 'formalist' in me is at work. As the significance of Clodius's Funeral-Benefit Associations slowly dawns on me and I experience a certain pleasure in the discovery, I think: 'If one could only write a very long, transparent, autumnal, crystal-clear chapter with an irregular curve, a kind of red wave-form running through it! The City puts its democrat Cicero into the consulate; he bans the armed democratic street clubs; they turn into peaceful Funeral-Benefit Associations; the leaves are golden in the autumn. An unemployed man's funeral costs ten dollars; you pay a subscription; if you are too long in dying, it is a bad bargain. But we have the wave-form; sometimes weapons suddenly appear in these Associations; Cicero is driven from the city; he has losses; his villa is burnt down; it costs millions; how many? Let us look it up – no – it's not relevant here. Where were the street clubs on 9 November 91 BC? 'Gentlemen, I cannot give any guarantees' (Caesar).

I am at an early stage of my work.

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. If one wants to call everything that makes works of art unrealistic *formalism*, then – if there is to be any mutual understanding – one must not construct the concept of formalism in purely aesthetic terms. Formalism on the one side – contentism on the other. That is surely too primitive and metaphysical. Looked at purely in terms of aesthetics, the concept

presents no special difficulties. For instance if someone makes a statement which is untrue – or irrelevant – merely because it rhymes, then he is a formalist. But we have innumerable works of an unrealistic kind which did not become so because they were based on an excessive sense of form.

We can remain entirely comprehensible and yet give the concept a further, more productive, more practical meaning. We have only to look aside from literature for a moment and descend into 'everyday life'. What is formalism there? Let us take the expression: *Formally he is right*. That means that actually he is not right, but he is right according to the form of things and only according to this form. Or: *Formally the task is solved* means that actually it is not solved. Or: *I did it to preserve the form*. That means that what I did is not very important; I do what I want to do, but I preserve outward forms and in this way I can best do what I want. When I read that the autarky of the Third Reich is perfect *on paper*, then I know that this is a case of political formalism. National Socialism is socialism in form – another case of political formalism. We are not dealing with an excessive sense of form.

If we define the concept in this way, it becomes both comprehensible and important. We are then in a position, if we return to literature (without this time abandoning everyday life altogether), to characterize and unmask as formalistic even works which do not elevate literary form over social content and yet do not correspond to reality. We can even unmask works which are realistic in form. There are a great many of them.

By giving the concept of formalism this meaning, we acquire a yardstick for dealing with such phenomena as the *avant-garde*. For a vanguard can lead the way along a retreat or into an abyss. It can march so far ahead that the main army cannot follow it, because it is lost from sight and so on. Thus its unrealistic character can become evident. If it splits off from the main body, we can determine why and by what means it can reunite with it. *Naturalism* and a certain type of *anarchistic montage* can be confronted with their social effects, by demonstrating that they merely reflect the symptoms of the surface of things and not the deeper causal complexes of society. Whole tracts of literature which seem, judging by their form, to be radical, can be shown to be purely reformist, merely formal efforts which supply solutions *on paper*.

Such a definition of formalism also helps the writing of novels, lyric poetry and drama, and – last but not least – it does away once and for all with a certain formalistic style of criticism which appears to be interested

only in the formal, which is dedicated to particular forms of writing, confined to one period, and attempts to solve problems of literary creation, even when it 'builds in' occasional glances at the historical past, in purely literary terms.

In Joyce's great satirical novel, *Ulysses*, there is – besides the use of various styles of writing and other unusual features – the so-called interior monologue. A petty-bourgeois woman lies in bed in the morning and meditates. Her thoughts are reproduced disconnectedly, criss-crossing, flowing into each other. This chapter could hardly have been written but for Freud. The attacks which it drew upon its author were the same as Freud in his day suffered. They rained down: pornography, morbid pleasure in filth, overestimation of events below the navel, immorality and so on. Astonishingly, some Marxists associated themselves with this nonsense, adding in their revulsion the epithet of petty-bourgeois. As a technical method the interior monologue was equally rejected; it was said to be *formalistic*. I have never understood the reason. The fact that Tolstoy would have done it differently is no reason to reject Joyce's method. The criticisms were so superficially formulated that one gained the impression that if Joyce had only set his monologue in a session with a psycho-analyst, everything would have been all right. Now the interior monologue is a method which is very difficult to use, and it is very useful to stress this fact. Without very precise measures (again of a technical sort) the interior monologue by no means reproduces reality, that is to say the totality of thought or association, as it superficially appears to do. It becomes another case of *only formally*, of which we should take heed – a falsification of reality. This is not a mere formal problem that could be solved by the slogan 'Back to Tolstoy'. In purely formal terms we did once have an interior monologue, which we actually prized very highly. I am thinking of Tucholsky.[2]

For many people to recall expressionism is to be reminded of a creed of libertarian sentiments. I myself was also at that time against 'self-expression' as a vocation. (See the instructions for actors in my *Versuche*.) I was sceptical of those painful, disturbing accidents in which someone was found to be 'beside himself'. What does this position feel like? It was very soon evident that such people had merely freed themselves from grammar, not from capitalism. Hašek won the highest honours for *Schweik*. But I believe that acts of liberation should also always be taken seriously. Today many people are still reluctant to see wholesale assaults

[2] Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1938): radical publicist and novelist of the Weimar period, and editor of *Die Weltbühne*.

on expressionism because they are afraid that acts of liberation are being suppressed for their own sake – self-liberation from constricting rules, old regulations which have become fetters; that the aim of such attacks is to preserve methods of description which suited land-owners even after land-owners themselves have been swept aside. To take an example from politics; if you want to counter putsches, you must teach revolution, not evolution.

Literature, to be understood, must be considered in its development, by which I do not mean self-development. Experimental phases can then be noted, in which an often almost unbearable narrowing of perspective occurs, one-sided or rather few-sided products emerge, and the applicability of results becomes problematic. There are experiments which come to nothing and experiments which bear late fruits or paltry fruits. One sees artists who sink under the burden of their materials – conscientious people who see the magnitude of the task, do not shirk it, but are inadequate for it. They do not always perceive their own errors; sometimes others see the errors at the same time as the problems. Some of them become wholly absorbed in specific questions – but not all of these are busy trying to square the circle. The world has reason to be impatient with these people and it makes abundant use of this right. But it also has reason to show patience towards them.

In art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success. Our metaphysicians must understand this. Works of art can fail so easily; it is so difficult for them to succeed. One man will fall silent because of lack of feeling; another, because his emotion chokes him. A third frees himself, not from the burden that weighs on him, but only from a feeling of unfreedom. A fourth breaks his tools because they have too long been used to exploit him. The world is not obliged to be sentimental. Defeats should be acknowledged; but one should not conclude from them that there should be no more struggles.

For me, expressionism is not merely an 'embarrassing business', not merely a deviation. Why? Because I do not by any means consider it to be merely a 'phenomenon' and stick a label on it. Realists who are willing to learn and look for the practical side of things could learn a great deal from it. For them, there was a lode to be exploited in Kaiser, Sternberg, Toller and Goering.[3] Frankly I myself learn more easily where problems similar to my own are tackled. Not to beat about the bush, I learn with more difficulty (less) from Tolstoy and Balzac. They had to master

[3] Georg Kaiser, Leo Sternberg, Ernst Toller and Reinhard Goering were all expressionist playwrights and authors of the immediate post-World War One period.

other problems. Besides – if I may be allowed to use the expression – much of them has become part of my flesh and blood. Naturally I admire these people and the way in which they dealt with their tasks. One can learn from them too. But it is advisable not to approach them singly, but alongside other authors with other tasks, such as Swift and Voltaire. The diversity of aims then becomes clear, and we can more easily make the necessary abstractions and approach them from the standpoint of our own problems.

The questions confronting our politically engaged literature have had the effect of making one particular problem very actual – the jump from one kind of style to another within the same work of art. This happened in a very practical way. Political and philosophical considerations failed to shape the whole structure, the message was mechanically fitted into the plot. The 'editorial' was usually 'inartistically' conceived – so patently that the inartistic nature of the plot in which it was embedded, was overlooked. (Plots were in any case regarded as more artistic than editorials.) There was a complete rift. In practice there were two possible solutions. The editorial could be dissolved in the plot or the plot in the editorial, lending the latter artistic form. But the plot could be shaped artistically and the editorial too (it then naturally lost its editorial quality), while keeping the jump from one idiom to another and giving it an artistic form. Such a solution seemed an innovation. But if one wishes, one can mention earlier models whose artistic quality is beyond dispute, such as the interruption of the action by choruses in the Attic theatre. The Chinese theatre contains similar forms.

The issue of how many allusions one needs in descriptions, of what is too plastic and what not plastic enough, can be dealt with practically from case to case. In certain works we can manage with fewer allusions than our ancestors. So far as psychology is concerned, the questions as to whether the results of newly established sciences should be employed, is not a matter of faith. It is in individual cases that one has to test whether the delineation of a character is improved by incorporating scientific insights or not, and whether the particular way in which they are utilized is good or not. Literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction, or swift combination. If a scientific approach is to be involved, it is the tireless energy of science that is needed to investigate in each individual case how the artistic adoption of these skills has worked out. Artists like to take short cuts, to conjure things out of the air, to work their way through large sections

of a continuous process more or less consciously. Criticism, at least Marxist criticism, must proceed methodically and concretely in each case, in short scientifically. Loose talk is of no help here, whatever its vocabulary. In no circumstances can the necessary guide-lines for a practical definition of realism be derived from literary works alone. (Be like Tolstoy – but without his weaknesses! Be like Balzac – only up-to-date!) Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such – as a matter of general human interest.

III

[Remarks on an Essay]

One must not expect too much from people who use the word 'form' too fluently as signifying something other than content, or as connected with content, whatever, or who are suspicious of 'technique' as something 'mechanical'. One must not pay too much attention to the fact that they quote the classics (of Marxism) and that the word 'form' occurs there too; the classics did not teach the technique of writing novels. The word 'mechanical' need frighten no one, as long as it refers to technique; there is a kind of mechanics that has performed great services for mankind and still does so – namely technology. The 'right thinking' people among us, whom Stalin in another context distinguishes from creative people, have a habit of spell-binding our minds with certain words used in an extremely arbitrary sense.

Those who administer our cultural heritage decree that no enduring figures can be created without 'reciprocal human relationships in struggle', without 'the testing of human beings in real action', without 'close interaction between men in struggle'. But where in Hašek are the 'complicated' (!) methods with which old authors set their plots in motion. Yet his Schweik is certainly a figure who is hard to forget. I do not know whether it will 'endure'; nor do I know whether a figure created by Tolstoy or Balzac will endure; I know no more than the next man. To be frank, I do not set such an excessively high value on the concept of endurance. How can we foresee whether future generations will wish to preserve the memory of these figures? (Balzac and Tolstoy will scarcely be in a position to oblige them to do so, however ingenious the methods with which they set their plots in motion.) I suspect it will depend on whether it will be a socially relevant statement if someone says: 'That' (and 'that' will refer to a contemporary) 'is a Père Goriot character.' Perhaps such characters will not survive at all? Perhaps they arose in a web of contorted relationships of a type which will by then no longer exist.

Characters and Balzac

I have no reason to advocate the montage technique used by Dos Passos, against wind or tide. When I wrote a novel I myself tried to create something in the nature of 'close interactions between human beings in struggle'. (Whatever elements of the montage technique I used, lay elsewhere in this novel). But I should not like to allow this technique to be condemned purely in favour of the creation of durable characters. First of all, Dos Passos himself has given an excellent portrayal of 'close interactions between human beings in struggle', even if the struggles he depicts are not the kind Tolstoy created, or his complexities those of Balzac's plots. Secondly, the novel certainly does not stand or fall by its 'characters', let alone with characters of the type that existed in the 19th century. We must not conjure up a kind of Valhalla of the enduring figures of literature, a kind of Madame Tussaud's panopticon, filled with nothing but durable characters from Antigone to Nana and from Aeneas to Nekhlyudov (who is he, by the way?).[4] I see nothing disrespectful in laughing at such an idea. We know something about the bases on which the cult of the individual, as practised in class society, rested. They are historical bases. We are far from wishing to do away with the individual. But we nevertheless notice with a certain pensiveness how this (historical, particular, passing) cult has prevented a man like André Gide from discovering any individuals among Soviet youth.[5] Reading Gide, I was on the point of discarding Nekhlyudov (whoever he may be) as an enduring figure, if – as certainly seemed possible – this was the only way those figures among Soviet youth, whom I have seen myself, could endure. To come back to our basic question: it is absolutely false, that is to say, it leads nowhere, it is not worth the writer's while, to simplify his problems so much that the immense, complicated, actual life-process of human beings in the age of the final struggle between the bourgeois and the proletarian class, is reduced to a 'plot', setting, or background for the creation of great individuals. Individuals should not occupy much more space in books and above all not a different kind of space,

[4] Nekhlyudov: liberal aristocrat who is the central figure of Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*.
[5] Reference to Gide's *Retour de l'URSS*, which had been translated into German the previous year (1937).

than in reality. To talk in purely practical terms; for us, individuals emerge from a depiction of the processes of human co-existence and they can be 'big' or 'small'. It is absolutely false to say that one should take a great figure and allow it to respond in manifold ways, making its relationships with other figures as significant and lasting as possible.

The drama (force of collision), the passion (degree of heat), the range of the characters – none of this can be separated from social functions, and portrayed or propagated apart from it. Those close interactions between human beings in struggle are the competitive struggles of developing capitalism, which produced individuals in a quite particular way. Socialist emulation produces individuals in a different way and shapes different individuals. Then there is the further question whether it is as individuating a process as the competitive struggle of capitalism. In a certain sense, we hear from our critics the fateful slogan, once addressed to individuals: 'Enrich yourselves'.

Balzac is the poet of monstrosities. The multiplex character of his heroes (the breadth of their sunlit side, the depth of their shadowy side) reflects the dialectic of the progress of production as the progress of misery. 'With him business became poetical' (Taine) but: 'Balzac was first of all a businessman, indeed a businessman in debt . . . he took to speculation . . . suspended payments and wrote novels to pay his debts.' So in his case poetry in its turn became a business. In the primeval forest of early capitalism individuals fought against individuals, and against groups of individuals; basically they fought against 'the whole of society'. This was precisely what determined their individuality. Now we are advised to go on creating individuals, to recreate them, or rather to create new ones, who will naturally be different but made in the same way. So? 'Balzac's passion for collecting things bordered on monomania.' We find this fetishism of objects in his novels, too, on hundreds and thousands of pages. Admittedly we are supposed to avoid such a thing. Lukács wags his finger at Tretyakov on this account. But this fetishism is what makes Balzac's characters individuals. It is ridiculous to see in them a simple exchange of the social passions and functions which constitute the individual. Does the production of consumer goods for a collective today construct individuals in the same way as 'collecting'? Naturally one can answer 'yes' here too. This process of production does take place and there are individuals. But they are such very different individuals that Balzac would not have recognized them as such (and Gide today does not do so). They lack the element of monstrosity, the combination in one person of the lofty and the base, of criminality and

sanctity, and so on.

No, Balzac does not indulge in montage. But he writes vast genealogies, he marries off the creatures of his fantasy as Napoleon did his marshals and brothers; he follows possessions (fetishism of objects) through generations of families and their transference from one to the other. He deals with nothing but the 'organic': his families are organisms in which the individuals 'grow'. Should we therefore be reconstructing such cells, or the factory or the soviet – given that, with the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, the family is generally supposed to have ceased to shape individuals? But these new institutions which undoubtedly shape individuals today are precisely – compared to the family – the products of montage, quite literally 'assembled'. For example in contemporary New York, not to speak of Moscow, woman is less 'formed' by man than in Balzac's Paris; she is less dependent on him. So far this is quite simple. Certain struggles 'to a fever-pitch' therefore cease; other struggles which take their place (naturally others do take their place) are just as fierce but perhaps less individualistic. Not that they have no individual characteristics, for they are fought out by individuals. But allies play an immense part in them, such as they could not in Balzac's time.

IV

Popularity and Realism

Whoever looks for slogans to apply to contemporary German literature, must bear in mind that anything that aspires to be called literature is printed exclusively abroad and can almost exclusively be read only abroad. The term *popular* as applied to literature thus acquires a curious connotation. The writer in this case is supposed to write for a people among whom he does not live. Yet if one considers the matter more closely, the gap between the writer and the people is not as great as one might think. Today it is not quite as great as it seems, and formerly it was not as small as it seemed. The prevailing aesthetic, the price of books and the police have always ensured that there is a considerable distance between writer and people. Nevertheless it would be wrong, that is to say unrealistic, to view the widening of this distance as a purely 'external' one. Undoubtedly special efforts have to be made today in order to be able to write in a popular style. On the other hand, it has become easier; easier and more urgent. The people have split away