

Living Form and Living Criticism

(penultimate draft)

Forthcoming in *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics*. Ed. Michael Thompson. Continuum, 2011.

Lukács frequently made reference to the “unity of continuity and discontinuity” between his early and later writings, and though his literary career spanned over six decades, encompassing a proliferation of works and legendarily persistent corrigenda, the observation holds true.^{1,2} Yet even at the peak of the last century’s discussions of Lukács, partition of key elements of his thought had, and continues to exert, a magnified effect on his reception. Lukács’s own approach has probably exacerbated the misapprehension, in part because of the hyperbole with which he censures his own thought (as in the 1962 preface to *The Theory of Novel*, which declares that a healthy instinct will reject the book root and branch); in part because of his infamous ventures into dogmatic literary prescription and concomitant, facile dismissal of the “decadence” of complex bodies of work (such as Nietzsche’s); but perhaps most of all because of Lukács’s uncompromising vision of totality, which insists that even the savviest criticism is socially determined and socially accountable, and thus that the critic’s valuations are neither sovereign nor convertible into ahistoric taxonomy. Lukács will not accommodate any creative or critical work which pretends “pure historicism,” or the investigation of historical particulars without their economic and social contexts, nor will he abide the modern critic’s “anti-historicism,” which, “out of the rubble heaps of the meaningless past, [warrants itself to] arbitrarily pick out, like raisins from a cake, whatever scraps suit the fad of the moment.”³ This consistent historical materialism, as Fredric Jameson has illustrated, tends to unnerve Lukács’s Western readers, proving “the idea of Georg Lukács ... more interesting than the reality.”⁴

Yet for those who seek in aesthetic criticism more than a cataloging of types and lines of influence, and more than the descriptive casing of fashionable jargon around experiments in the arts, Lukács's distinctive handling of totality, of species-being, literary form, and of the authority of critique, offer irreducible insight. To grasp that insight at the root, it is worth revisiting Lukács's earliest book of essays, in which he sets out to question the relationship between literary text and lived experience, and in working through a range of possible answers, launches the sort of criticism in which he will subsequently engage. Reading *Soul and Form* for its determination of Lukács's critical enterprise will confirm something of the dynamic unity of his oeuvre; I will argue that the expression of that general project offers not only a corrective to persistent misreadings of Lukács, but a directive for contemporary literary theoretical and critical practices. In the final sections of this essay, I want to pursue the conditions of responding to that directive.

Soul and Form

The essays of *Soul and Form* were first published in 1910, when Lukács was twenty-five. Albeit from a range of perspectives, Lukács insists, in each of them, that the life of a given people at a given time demands representative articulation; *form* is the way in which life is condensed and expressed, before its expressive relevance is consumed again in the advance of time and changing circumstance. In these essays, Lukács wants to know how form is entitled, under what conditions it conveys accurately, and how its communicative power is advanced and limited. He wants to know how form, realized in particular artworks, may fail to affect people in their everyday lives even while it intrigues them intellectually or appears to be mastered in connoisseurship. Conversely, Lukács wants to know whether the creator of forms, one from the "form creating caste" must dissociate productive life from ordinary life—whether his cares and passions must be subservient to a more abstract reality

which transforms his care into products of intellection. Can the romantic, self-involved life of the artist extend to a whole community sustainably, so that through individual artistic pursuits, people are brought closer? How can anyone, born and raised in a particular class, ever conceive of the idea that he might live otherwise? How does a potential audience learn to read a work that appears before an understanding audience is constituted? How does poetic form capture a longing or a sentiment which must, after all, exceed it? Which forms do justice to the richness of reality?

Lukács uses the *Soul and Form* essays to test the gravity of different responses to this same set of questions; he pushes each essay to stage an aspect of the conflict between life and work, or to assess a consequence of that conflict. The tension Lukács means to preserve is not merely, as he says, one between “art and life,” but within and between the essays’ contesting management of that tension. György Márcus refers to Lukács’s comparison, in Lukács’s opening letter to Leo Popper, of the essay form and the court of law: the task of both is to examine, judge, and to create precedents. The dialectic of polemic and counter-polemic, Márcus points out, becomes constitutive of the Lukácsian essay, whose form is almost dialogical, and indeed gives way to dialogue in several works.⁵ In testing the possibilities, Lukács is both testing the logical entailments of his own positions and examining the process, or the inherently “problematic” structure of the essay form, which should be able to mediate between analytic philosophy and demonstrative art, while essaying the course of such mediation.

Romantic Disaffinity

The oscillations of *Soul and Form* are intentional; they are also characteristic of Lukács. Lukács and his interpreters have described the mood in which these essays were written as that of “romantic anti-capitalism.”⁶ But Lukács’s romanticism cannot be fully

demarcated with the desire for social solidarity and harmony with nature, so the fact that Marxist theory, once Lukács encounters it, is equipped to respond to such desire, leaves the matter of Lukács's identification with romanticism open. Having distinguished what he finds best in romanticism in the *Soul and Form* essays, Lukács retains its key elements, the presence and consequence of which compel revision of the standard reading of Lukács's so-called "objectivization theory" as well as his understanding of the posit of totality.

Unlike the nostalgic mood of romantic anti-capitalism, Lukács associates the romanticism of Jena with the vision of a golden age, "but their golden age is not a refuge in a past that is lost forever ... it is a goal whose attainment is the central duty of everyone."⁷ The purest form of romanticism, best characterized in the life and writing of Novalis, wants to create culture, to make cultural value an "inalienable possession"; this romanticism knows that "the only possible basis for such culture [is] an art born of technology and the spirit of matter" (SF 65). For Lukács, this romanticism is an active, goal oriented venture, realistic about the demands of its technological and material context. The Jena romantics express both a will for unity and the insistence that human divergences remain forceful; assimilation does not follow from the romantic desire for parity. The synthesis for which the romantics long remains a regulative goal, a matter of the fragmentary works that record it, and only once—only in the short life of Novalis—a unity of art and life in the "practical art of living" (71). Novalis is the true poet of the Romantic school, Lukács says, the only artist whose art and work form an indivisible whole, because what was provisional in romanticism becomes absolutely provisional in him; the merely exploratory becomes categorically exploratory in Novalis; what was unsettled in the romantic urge becomes permanently unsettled in Novalis. Where Novalis's Jena symphilosophers go wrong, Lukács finds, is in failing to preserve the dissonance that haunts the desire for unalienated communion, a desire which is not satisfied,

but recorded in romantic forms. The young men of Jena overlook the difference between artistic and concrete accomplishments without even noticing their evasion, so fervently do they follow the dreams of their art. In coming to make art exclusively about art, theory about theory, the romantics lose sight of the “spirit of matter”; they lose that about which writers and readers can communicate, the stuff of cultural deeds.

Lukács’s discussion of the Jena romantics is a cautionary tale. He writes about the Jena group as if he is retiring from a company he has loved and lost; as if the promise of his own youth is under discussion, and in order to recover it, he must come to terms with how something so exceptionally gifted could become so incurably sick. The Novalis essay announces that the romantic hope of real, unalienated lives should remain the goal of an “uncompromising, self-willed manner of writing [that will] produce the right and necessary communion between writers and readers” (67). But the romantics go wrong by thinking that reconciled language is reconciled life; as such, they lose the value-creating force which exists in the willed opposition, in text, of art and life.

That opposition is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s work. Lukács identifies with each of the author-heroes of *Soul and Form*, but none as much as Kierkegaard.⁸ In Kierkegaard, the romantic reckoning with dissonance and disunity, preserved concurrently with the longing for harmony and unanimity and expressed together in ironic form, is epitomized. The way in which the *Soul and Form* essays explore different aspects of Lukács’s relationship with Irma Seidler—who represented the frustrated possibility of “life” to Lukács at a time in which to choose “work” meant to choose over and against life—has already been the subject of secondary study.⁹ In Kierkegaard’s relationship with Regine Olsen, Lukács recognizes his own struggle to face up to this either/or. But Kierkegaard never loses sight of the choice that sets the work apart from the compromises of everyday life. In his thinking, there is no

compromise: only the separate, the individual, the irreducibly different. Kierkegaard sees all things as concrete and as distinct, and where it seems that life is but flux and undifferentiated happening, Kierkegaard “places fixed points beneath the incessantly changing nuances of life, and draws absolute quality distinctions within the melting chaos of nuances” (47).

It is no accident that Lukács’s Novalis and Kierkegaard essays end with his rumination on the emptiness of each man’s death. Each faces death as honestly as he faces his work, each wills death without renouncing life, yet Lukács cannot bring himself to romanticize the deaths of either: in the closing paragraphs of the essays, death becomes neither destiny nor gesture, but that which turns even the most courageous souls into its slaves. There is no proud death of the writer; his end offers no fulfillment or resolution, and Lukács remains gripped by a *romantic disaffinity* which characterizes the life and thought of his subjects. The writers Lukács considers treat their own, subjective desire for unbarred communion thematically and formally, and record the terms of their failure within the attempt. But romantic disaffinity (as I have called it) does not end with this irony (for Friedrich Schlegel already so defined the ironic, romantic form). Romantic disaffinity is characterized by open rejection of “solutions” to the problem of reconciliation between subject and world. For a writer may succeed at conveying his desire and difficulty to readers, and may thereby succeed at generating and organizing genuinely meaningful communication, but the thinkers in whom Lukács is interested reject the correspondence of literary and concrete achievement.

It is in the spirit of romantic disaffinity that Lukács tests different answers to the question of the potency of form. Likewise, romantic disaffinity describes the way that Lukács’s defense of the utopian function of art—or the idea that in alienated society, art presents the ethical goal of human living and a momentary experience of shared humanity

and species values, the experience of which can orient the fight to achieve them—is perpetually countered by Lukács’s parallel rejection of the Satanism of art—or the idea that art offers only a fabricated sense of value and communion, and that it thereby preserves and exacerbates human isolation, alienation, and a submissive posture toward the given social reality. To call this dissonance in Lukács a “paradox” is to risk losing sight of its active, contesting nature, for the concept of paradoxicality does not delimit the violent oscillations of Lukács’s treatment, or its exertion to demythologize every portrait of artistic heroism.

Reflecting on the work of Rudolph Kassner, Lukács begins by asking whether a life devoted to great works makes possible the congruous, internally resolved existence of its author. However, Kassner, too, exemplifies romantic disaffinity, for like the “Platonist” or critic he portrays, within Kassner “‘lives something for which he seeks but cannot find a rhyme anywhere’: he will always long for something he can never reach” (37). A true Platonist in his own sense of the term, Kassner uses others’ works as the stuff of self-inquiry, but faced with the “irreducible fact of his life” he can never say enough, never fall silent productively; his forms of expression remain unfilled in order to convey what little they can about the poetry of others. Kassner presents form as the “real solution” to the antithesis between poetry and criticism. He knows—as Lukács says Schlegel knows—that the right form makes the accidental necessary and the drift of tendency into rhythm and harmony. Yet Kassner can also see—as Schlegel could not—that as soon as one starts down the “weary road toward universal, model-creating life,” one’s being and work are betrayed (39). Unlike Schlegel, Kassner understands that to speak of himself he must speak through others, thus Kassner alone remains anchored in reality and aware of the cover under which he must work. Visionary poetry may require the critic’s recuperation in order to speak through dark times, but an awareness of the disparity between its vision and its critical

portrayal is a permanent condition on active or living criticism. For Lukács, Kassner's longing for open communion is basically romantic; yet his refusal of a merely aesthetic transformation of his life's limitations, and thus his disaffinity for the dominion of form, resonates with the purest expression of romanticism in Novalis and its persistence in Kierkegaard.

As Lukács writes of Stefan George, Paul Ernst, and Charles-Louis Philippe, in an essay he pens at about same time as the *Soul and Form* essays on each writer, these men are important not because they create culture, or new forms of life, but because they insist on living both without illusions about their contemporary culture and *as if* they could call culture forth: "They create no culture, but lead a life that would merit it. The whole atmosphere of their life is best described by Kant's insightful category, the 'as if' ... this unassuming heroism gives sanctity to their lives."¹⁰ In recognizing the romantic disaffinity of his writers, Lukács adopts and amplifies it. And as he says his authors must, Lukács affirms that he is also a product and an agent of the culture to which he is so hostile. This insight, which will be incorporated into his concept of totality, becomes the very crux of Lukács's aesthetic theory: for while the task of aesthetic criticism is to confront the adversity and atomization of modern society, Lukács determines that aesthetic criticism is itself a manufactured good or item for consumption—a true product—of modern society.¹¹ From its conception in Lukács's *Soul and Form* essays, aesthetic criticism begins with the conflictual task of articulating its own interinvolved derivation in the society it criticizes. Accordingly, art and aesthetic criticism are given the charge of critiquing cultural objects together with their own abstract objectification, even while they imagine alternatives, and even as every effort of imagination is treated as an outgrowth of its contemporary historical configuration. Art and aesthetic criticism are uniquely situated to narrate their own lack of autonomy, as well as

their efforts to turn their epistemic limitation into meaningful reflections on their times. Yet this “forlorn totality,” too, invites delusion, particularly in redemptive myths of artistic genius and artistic culture, so criticism must ever again intervene to pursue what has been excluded from narration. The oscillations studied and practiced in *Soul and Form*, or what I have called Lukács’s romantic disaffinity, are contrived to play this hypercritical role, to “place fixed points beneath the incessantly changing nuances of life,” to insist on value distinctions, and to reflect on the very possibility of writing and critique while reflecting the dispositional restraints of their times.

Poverty of Spirit

Lukács finishes *Soul and Form* uncertain about the ethical consequences of his oscillations in two urgent ways. In the first place, Lukács has begun to advance the claim that form, as the expression of and judgment on a way of life, transcends the sphere of ethics. Likewise, he has allowed that the creator of form belongs to a “caste” whose duty and highest virtue is the form-creating life, as against ordinary lives and loves and, should a choice between them have to be made, as against ethical obligations and interpersonal cares. Likewise, given that the end of the form-creating life is works, or in a parlance he adopts later, “objectivizations,” Lukács seems to hold that the objective work must be of inestimably higher value than the individual who produces it. Indeed, at times Lukács appears to consider the “person of the forms” a mere vehicle, and his will, if it can be called that at all, important not to the creative process itself, which happens to him as much as through him, but only insofar as he must struggle to deny himself the indulgences of “everyday life.” This is troubling because it leaves Lukács unable to account for the distinctiveness and the authorial command of the authors he most admires, a consequence Lukács wrestles with throughout *Soul and Form*. Where he entertains the thought that great writers dissolve

themselves as individuals in order to communicate, Lukács positions his efforts as a critic against that dissolution, resuscitating his authors one after the other in order to study their comprehensive accomplishment. Lukács appears to be caught between a psychologistic impulse he outwardly rejects and an aesthetic position which compromises its own legitimacy by simultaneously rejecting and claiming an inherent ethical obligation.

“On Poverty of Spirit,” which Lukács wrote immediately after finishing the *Soul and Form* essays, is addressed to precisely this incongruity. In it, the young man who coins the term “poverty of spirit” explains: “Work grows out of life, but it outgrows life; it has its origin among things human, but is itself nonhuman—indeed, it is counterhuman. The cement that binds the Work to the life that brings it forth, separates the two, at the same time, for all eternity: it is fashioned out of human blood” (SF 209). This young man is devastated, not just because he has failed to save a friend from suicide, but because the fact that he loved and wanted to help her was a violation of that which was most truly his, his intellectual caste. In feeling emotionally and ethically compelled, he has betrayed himself. The young man is thus determined to end his own life, and two days after the conversion recorded in the dialogue he does so. The young man’s categories, judgments, and final act are self-involved and convoluted, but this only brings home his basic position: neither his inappropriate handling of his friend nor his own suicidal resolution can be evaluated or resolved ethically.¹² Herein Lukács personifies his own romantic disaffinity. The dialogue ends with the words of the Apocalypse, which the young man marked and left open on his desk before ending his life: “I know your Works, that you are neither cold nor warm; oh, if only you were cold or warm. Because you are lukewarm, however, and are neither cold nor warm, I will spit you out of my mouth” (SF 214).¹³

Yet “On Poverty of Spirit” is a dialogue, and though the Scriptural pronouncement of romantic disaffinity ends the work, it has been framed by its narrator, Martha. As the only woman who “speaks” in Lukács’s works to this point, Martha rejects not only the young man’s assessment of his relationship to her sister (the first suicide), but the very idea of “castes.” An existential decision which transcends ethical categories, she argues, is a farce. Of course she fails to convince her friend, for his suicide and her letter to his parents is the literary context of the dialogue she recounts, but it is not the case, as Ágnes Heller has argued, that “the woman’s truth is just as irrefutable as the hero’s.”¹⁴ For in staging Martha’s counterarguments, as well as her living presence, as against the self-destruction of the young man, Lukács is revealing the course of his acceptance and refutation of his earlier ideas. As the hidden author of the whole, Lukács neither indulges the young man’s renunciation nor is he preoccupied with Martha’s goodwill. Rather, what survives, in and through the ethos of a new form, is the consequence of Martha’s ethical and emotional commitment as well as the faithful expression of the typicality of a certain youthful and doomed position; in the form of “Martha’s” letter, both become explicit.

Lukács’s dialogue is not an objectivization which exceeds or empties the individual who writes it; on the contrary, it is an actualization of his personality, the coming into awareness of an individual creator in and through a form of writing. Equally, when Lukács speaks of the objective work in his later aesthetics, particularly once he has appropriated the thrust of the Hegelian dialectic, his claim is not that individual personality is usurped within its works, but that the achievement of form is the documentation of self-overcoming. It is only by recording the process of an individual’s deepening awareness that any form can express its historical moment for the cultural group of which he is wittingly or unwittingly a part. When Lukács emphasizes the realization of works and forms, he does so after having

concluded that the real tension between life and work is not suffered in the artist's everyday life, but in the self-consciousness manifest in the work. Correspondingly, when Lukács begins experimenting with typological theory (in *The Theory of the Novel*), he at first supposes that a series of representative genera best epitomize the historical advance of civilization. Yet not only in his own later criticism of that position, but even, as Jameson has shown, already within *The Theory of the Novel* itself, Lukács begins admitting that ideal forms may express, but not encompass, the shifting reality of concrete historical particulars. As Jameson writes, *The Theory of the Novel* is a step away from the "abandonment of novelistic *types* as such"; Lukács is on the verge of apprehending the great novelistic work as a unique historical phenomenon, "an ungeneralizable combination of circumstances."¹⁵ It is this same movement—romantic disaffinity with a host of resolutions to the conflict between life and work, followed by the conclusion that a great work is an index of the emergence of meaning in human relations, to be felt by the individual and understood in and through his objectivations—which characterizes Lukács's activity as a critic. Aesthetic criticism becomes an inherently ethical enterprise not because it submits to any ethical prescription regarding individuals, classes, or institutions—these are in fact what it is adept at refusing—but because its ethos is the examination of all authoritative demands on the individual, including the aesthetic demand that he represent a type or submit to a form.

Despite a score of misunderstandings in the literature on Lukács of this central point, Lukács confirms his understanding of the integration of individuality and objectivation all through his works. The idea, for Lukács, is a dialectical one, for the artist succeeds in "becoming who he is" by staking himself in his creative activity, and by allowing that focused act of artistic production to burn away the pettier customs to which his individuality has otherwise conformed. Goethe, Lukács writes, knew this well, for:

“What today is called artistic personality, Goethe labeled ‘manner’ [by which he] understood recurrent, obvious personality traits, elements of native talent not yet disciplined enough to penetrate subject matter but merely adding certain superficial qualities to a work. The break-through of creative individuality into art, into real creation, Goethe called ‘style’. [...] And Goethe knew that the resultant paradox is a contradiction vital to art: only through the subjugation of the native or even of the artificially cultivated subjectivity can the artist’s real personality—the personality of the man as well as the artist—properly emerge.”¹⁶

Real personality emerges, Lukács insists, when it is applied with talent and care to the problems of the objective world in the creation of works.¹⁷ Meaningful forms are not phenomena to which their makers submit themselves; they are the ways individuals have ventured themselves in creative action, hence the authority with which such forms are organized and interpreted marks the emergence of meaning in communicative practices. By imposing form, an individual articulates the relationships that lay claim on her or him; by interpreting form, the critic discloses the dynamics of meaningful dependencies and contests of authority, personal and ideological. Thus for both the maker of form and the reader of form, the animation and logic of human relationships is the fundamental concern.

Totality and Being-in-Relation

The exertions that generate *Soul and Form* culminate in one insight above all: the critic’s imperative is to identify and evaluate the authority with which forms are organized and interpreted. The Lukácsian critic is bound to pursue the relation between art and life, and Lukács discovers early on that form’s vital achievement is a record of the emergence of meaning in living practices. Form is the register of a particular way of life and a judgment upon it. In developing the dialogic form to convey the life and thought of Socrates, Plato both encapsulates a vision of that life and provides a standpoint on its relation to the social, political, religious, and theoretical influences of its times. When Lukács goes on to defend realism, it is because of his sense for the capacity of realist forms to exemplify the moments wherein human interactions take on definitive consequence. With cognitive clarity, the realist

form should portray a point of human determination; the form itself should be a diagnosis of the rising and regulation of praxis. Lukács's early insight into the ability of form to register the entitlement of modes of human interaction persists throughout his work; it finds expression in his genre theory and it belies attempts to read his position, however dictatorial aspects of it may be, as predictably mimetic or as constrained by content analysis, especially in favor of some particular political ideology.¹⁸

Lukács repudiates “effects based solely on content,” by which he means works that make their claims without reliance on the cognitive function of form. Such works fail to communicate the emergence of human meaning, and their failure cannot be overcome through any “artificial politicization,” any more than it can be when they err on the side of an “equally abstract formalism.”¹⁹ Form sustains the encounter with content; qua structure, form relates to thinking as a structuring practice, which must submit to organizing principles to be communicated. As does cognitive reasoning itself, form “makes sense” only insofar as it orders and manages experience. Just as percepts submit to the order of spatiality and temporality, Lukács argues that ideas submit to the demands of literary practice.²⁰ And Lukács's key insight in this regard, which begins with the struggle to relate art and life recorded in *Soul and Form*, is given expression after his appropriation of Hegel, and which remains consistent throughout Lukács's own literary-critical examinations, is the understanding that formal organization is mediation. To order ideas is to set them into relation; to identify the character of thoughts is to distinguish their interrelations. Form is a demonstration of *being-in-relation* (as I will call it).²¹

Being-in-relation is a cognitive condition of experience, insofar as experience is understood via ordering forms, and being-in-relation is the content of experience, insofar as subjectivity is only encountered in intersubjective involvement and in its productive (and

thereby self-productive) objectivations. Whereas, despite Lukács's efforts, the ideological promises of dialectical materialism prove chimerical, the dialectical character of being-in-relation remains manifest in texts that allow for an encounter with the conditions of others' experience and action. When Lukács speaks of the *objectivity* of texts, he is referring to their capacity to arrange and convey relevant meaning; when he refers to their *universality*, he means that they encompass an optimal range of signification, precisely for conveying historical and contemporary social problems.²² A literary work with an objective, universal character is a work which stands in direct relation to the scheme of social interrelationships active in its time, and which mediates the reader's encounter with them. The soul of a text, as Lukács would have put it in his twenties, is its living connection to its times; its form is that inherently relational, inherently cognitive measure which grants access to those times, and to the otherwise lost, empty, or alien lives that inhabit them. All of which is to say that it is through the achievements of form that we experience our species-being.

To say as much is to realize the bearing of Lukács's thinking for our contemporary critical practices, for "species-being" is no (merely) dusty concept from the historical bin; it is a critical project, a form of human desire, endeavor, and limitation, communicative of a shared moment and geared toward active revision. To grasp species-being is to experience being-in-relation and to consider its conditions; it is to meet with a plurality of value and the concentrated strangeness of others, and to find oneself able to appreciate how they came to be as they are. In taking over the concept of *Gattungswesen*, Lukács understands that it cannot be a monistic standard, and accordingly cannot be the subject of evangelization. It is thus that Lukács insists that the works of the creative writer, regardless of any intellectual distortions she or he may impose, retain access to real, concrete life. Again, this is the "soul" the writer registers in form, and the point is that we need the writer's realization, no matter

how much criticism will have to be focused on releasing it, in order to address the full character of social reality. Where criticism distorts the social content in literature, as when it focuses exclusively on the character of certain writers, works, or movements and the lines of transmission between them, what it misses is precisely its route of access to “the life of society.”²³ Literary form and the social content it presents for analysis, perhaps more closely than any other human phenomenon, exhibits the open system of social reality at a given moment, and thus the shared requirements, understandings, and innovations of those caught up in it. Here again, these events are not prearranged, and the representation of species-being that critique might extract from them cannot be prescribed.

Unlike the Hegelian dialectic which describes movements of increasing and increasingly absolute self-consciousness, the Lukácsian dialectic therefore understands narration to be the concrete, historical interleaving of the experience and understanding of social issues, without necessary advancement or the fullness of completion. It is narration in this sense with which we approach totality. Lukács resolves the question of his early romantic disaffinity with the realization that works may both actualize personality and interpret a stage of social reality, but he retains the animus of that disaffinity in his handling of totality and of the fundamental nature of species-being, both of which retain a regulative, dynamic character.

Lukács praises Hegel for seeing, in Goethe’s *Urphänomen*, “aspects of the total process, aspects to be resolved ... disclosing the potentials latent within ... and then transformed into a succeeding ‘form’”; he extols Hegel’s conversion of archetypal forms into the reflection of historical destiny, into aspects of “the external and internal structure in the life of a people.”²⁴ But what is crucial for understanding the Lukácsian vision of totality is that sensibility already present in the *Soul and Form* essays, namely that form is a register of

life which achieves momentary relevance and dissolves into life's operational demands. It is with this vision of totality and its utopian aspect that species-being may function as a regulative goal, insofar as it informs the imagination of an integrated, non-alienated social reality, or any aspect of it. Yet even where such a goal is momentarily met, the demand to accurately represent social reality remains as insatiable as the ongoing life of a people, with all the relentless vitality of its natural processes (a point which Lukács lauded the Jena romantics for recognizing). Thus the "philosophic critic," as Lukács calls him, will always have cause to redirect knowledge at totality and the principles governing its shifting phenomena.²⁵

The Bequest of Criticism

For Lukács then, the onus is on the critic to extract the social reality from the narratives he examines, and to elucidate that reality in terms of the historical processes of which it is a part. Lukács discusses the role of the critic often and from a host of angles, beginning with the character of the critic he determines himself to be in the *Soul and Form* essays. Yet by the time of his essays of the 1940's, criticism was overtly attendant to the modern academic system governed by capital, and Lukács was unambiguous in his analyses of the effects. Lukács describes writers and critics in a milieu in which dedicated, talented thinkers may publish work as token names in venues read by an intellectual elite, but must live with a culture of petty personal aggrandizement and cults of personality and style. He writes of the containment practices that arise in such an environment, which exaggerate artistic or intellectual personality and the individuality of trivial stylistic refinements, but that make a point of their independence from concrete social considerations. Literary venues, which include for Lukács philosophy, modern language, art, and sociology journals and associations, obsess with biographical data, techniques of presentation, questions of the

personal influences on the thinkers treated, and internal conversations between movements in interpretation, in a flurry of activity which conceals their abandonment of the relationship between literature, or any formal textual productivity, and the real life of society.²⁶

Why, Lukács asks, have writers and critics largely ceased to have a constructive, progressive relationship? In part, he writes that in viewing one another's camps, even the most focused of thinkers cannot help but to take into account the "mass of mediocre and corrupt scribblers" who replicate and extol the dominant ideas of the moment. The worried overproduction of texts is the setting for any real criticism, which is a scene impossible to ignore. Moreover, neither creative writers nor critics tend to work with an "objective framework"—by which, again, Lukács means an understanding, informed by real, contemporary social issues, of the capacity of written works to convey meaning to their audiences. This lack encourages the evaluation of texts based solely on artistic quality, method, or political content, with no regard for how they might manifest a transformative intensification of authorial personality, little grasp of the cognitive, synthetic achievements of form, and thus little sense of how texts can be persuasive, moving, and actively involved in social life. Without an objective framework, the political positions of most thinkers, even sincere and intelligent thinkers, remain superficial and abstract. In social crises, such political postures offer no means of consequential analysis or resistance. More often, these postures are easily accommodated to the ideological demands of the status quo.

The end effect of such conformity is achieved by everyday environments in which thinkers are beset with the need to strive frenetically for publication opportunities and the recognition of small groups of specialists, and in which competitiveness, intrigue, social isolation and hothouse cultivation is the norm.²⁷ "Artistic and social nihilism" are typical, and in any case, thinkers do not have the time to care for popular understanding or judgment.

What sets current thinkers apart from the serious philosophers of the past, Lukács charges, is the universality of interest with which the latter treat the problems of their times. Aristotle, Epicurus, Spinoza, and Hegel (Lukács's examples) were social theoreticians as well as ethicists, metaphysicians, or aestheticians; indeed their colossal contributions to theory *derive* from "their general universality, which has its origin in social problems and its direction in the investigation of social problems."²⁸ Serious analysis and criticism begin their systematic efforts at universality, or the optimal range of relevant meaning, in the demands of their times, and these are experienced first and foremost in the life and thought of the thinker engaged in analysis. As the young writer of *Soul and Form* suspected, critique begins with consideration of the way that the influence of culture and its contemporary forms of elucidation tend to condition the critic's analyses.

If Lukács advises us of anything today, it is above all that philosophically minded criticism, which aims at general knowledge, must begin with its concrete situation, and that both the emblematic and individual phenomena the philosophic critic treats will prove to be involved in her or his intellectual development, and must be handled as such. As does the literary criticism of *Soul and Form*, working criticism must begin by determining the place of criticism in the culture and everyday life of its times, and by investigating the interpenetration of each.

The critic today, for all intents and purposes, is a professor. Even where criticism issues from independent scholars, journalists, editors, or interested laypeople, these write for an audience dominated by academics; for the vast majority, whether "writer critics" or "philosophic critics," university professorships are the standard. The critic is an academic professional.

Yet although scores of thinkers—most of them academic professionals—have analyzed and criticized the bureaucratic and administrative practices of the modern university, it remains unclear, and all too easy to ignore, how the context of our contemporary academic culture affects—and fails to be affected by—the advancement of criticism.²⁹ That context, when it is appraised in detail and vis-à-vis the social totality of which it is part, presents a form of life governed by practices which threaten to paralyze or distort criticism. Indeed, the fact that so many academic professionals have been long aware of the deteriorating conditions within the contemporary university, even as they have struggled to pose critical positions constructively, should itself call attention to the need for the holism of Lukács’s position, with its emphasis on the concrete circumstances of understanding and practical engagement.

As it now stands, where those engaged in criticism will come largely from the disciplines of philosophy, English, comparative literature, and a small set of modern languages, it is significant for the youngest generation of critics that graduates outnumber tenure-track jobs, and that scores of thinkers work within unstable and inadequately remunerated posts as adjuncts, lectures, or visitors, often while carrying the financial debts of graduate school.³⁰ The pecuniary cost of a PhD as compared with entry-level salaries is relevant, as is the all-pervading demand to “publish or perish.” Before seeing print (often even before the confirmation that they will see print), works may wait in a protracted queue, even at publishing venues with meager circulation and reputation. Once disseminated, given the demand for records of publications and the myriad venues which have arisen to meet it, most critical works published in journals serving humanities disciplines can expect small readership; in the case of junior scholars, these works must also count as satisfactory

“progress toward tenure” within their disciplines, with all of the formal and thematic expectations entailed.

A contemporary aesthetic criticism which ignores this context neglects its own conditions of entitlement, and thus its ability to speak meaningfully from within the tide of productivity-for-productivity’s sake. For in the university culture within which the contemporary critic must live, the emphasis is on full capacity production, regardless of need or use. And that this should be considered par for the course, that frenzied production and the quantifiable standards of academic success based upon it should be considered natural and fair, without consideration of the social conditions of production and its significant effects, is the very definition of fetishism.

By the middle of the last century, Lukács had already noted that “under declining capitalism, the philosopher, too, has become a ‘specialist.’”³¹ Today neither the philosopher, nor the philosophic critic, nor any academic can avoid specialization. Nonetheless, for criticism to gain traction, it must orient its specialized knowledge in consideration of its material conditions and its relation to social totality, and it must review how the principles which promote the vulgar calculability of academic work are “unthinkable without specialization.” Lukács warns that the “calculability” of results tends to extend to self-consciousness; with the normalization of calculable academic productivity, “the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into ... consciousness.”³²

Lukács today, that is, directs academic professionals to renew criticism with comprehension of the reification that pervades its professionalized enclaves. An honest assessment of academic culture, which is probably that sphere of society still most able to encourage, sustain, and extend criticism and critical thinking, shows it to be beleaguered by

estrangement in the full, traditionally Marxist sense of the term, and by a “veil of reification” which grants academic production a “phantom objectivity” that conceals “the relations between people.”³³ This, in the face of an element of social will which would equate the post of “professor” with meekness, a preoccupation with abstraction, and thus a withdrawal from everyday and political life (at the time of this writing, a common insult used by the political right to describe the current American president is that he is, or is just like, a professor³⁴). At the same time, we must deal with the judgment, among critics, that the smothering requirements of academic life must be (and are capable of being) dissociated from authentic critique. Among those who have considered the question, the judgment of Blanchot seems representative:

“The University is now nothing more than a sum of determinate bodies of knowledge having no relation with time other than a program of studies. [...] The competent master speaks before an interested audience, that is all. Evoke the leveling of relations that the slightly elevated position of the lecturer before a group of docile students introduces into philosophical language, and one will begin to understand how the philosopher, now a professor, brings about an impoverishment of philosophy so visible that dialectics cannot fail to break with what appears to it to be the idealism of speech in order to arrive at the more serious divisions of revolutionary struggle.”³⁵

What is criticism to do? Lukács tells us that the literary arts and the languages of the disciplines—or we might now say language or text widely speaking—are repositories and directives for the times that use them, and thus that their reification is the central matter for engaged criticism. Lukács often repeats that it is counterproductive to focus exclusively on the political import of the discourses we examine at the expense of an examination of their linguistic forms. He directs us to think of aesthetic works and the criticism that addresses them as the site of meaningful activity, and thus as the reinforcement of or challenge to social and political authority. It is the task of criticism to confirm whether the texts it treats have sufficiently grasped the compound human relationships they portray, and to make

explicit the authority with which texts succeed or fail to do so. Likewise, Lukács reminds us that the contemporary imagination is rooted in our current discourses, and with it, our ability to envision or posit alternative systems of relation and the end of reification. Lukács therefore tells us that we cannot afford a disengaged toleration of superficially historical discourses, any more than we should abide claims of historical neutrality or the transcendence of history. Lukács tells us that criticism must begin, ever again, with its own concrete situation, the flight from which, however appealing, dooms it to irrelevance.

¹ This paper benefitted greatly from the suggestions of a group of excellent readers. I am grateful to Edward P. Butler, Doris Borrelli, Sara Armengot, Laura Shackelford, and Lawrence Torcello for their invaluable insights.

² See for example the preface to György Lukács, *Deutsche Literatur in zwei Jahrhunderten, Werke, Band 7*. (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1964), 7.

³ Georg Lukács, "The Writer and the Critic." *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*. Translated and Edited by Arthur Kahn. (Lincoln: iUniverse, Inc., an Authors Guild Backinprint.com Edition, 2005), 223-224. (Originally published by Pontypool, Wales: Merlin Press, 1970.) (Hereafter, cited as WC.)

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*. (Princeton University Press, 1974), 160-161.

⁵ György Márkus, "Life and the Soul: the Young Lukács and the Problem of Culture." *Lukács Reappraised*, Edited by Agnes Heller. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 5.

⁶ See for example Lukács's 1962 preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 19. For an elaboration of "romantic anti-capitalism" in the literature, see Ferenc Fehér and Jerold Wikoff, "The Last Phase of Romantic Anti-Capitalism: Lukács's Response to the War." *New German Critique*. No. 10 (1977): 139-154. Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, "Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism." *New German Critique*. No. 32 (1984): 42-92. Michael Löwy, "Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and Romantic Anticapitalism." *New German Critique*. No. 42 (1987): 17-31. Michael Löwy "The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization." *Theory and Society*. Vol.16, No.6 (1987), 891-904.

⁷ György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, Edited by John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 65. Hereafter, all reference to the essays of *Soul and Form* will occur within the text as "SF," followed by page numbers from this edition.

⁸ Lukács's early identification with Kierkegaard, and the reasons he gives for it in *Soul and Form*, are not inconsistent with his later criticism of Kierkegaard, though it would take a different sort of essay to describe the continuity. Indeed, the terms of Lukács's later criticisms are already discernable and integrated within this early essay.

⁹ Agnes Heller, "Georg Lukács and Irma Seidler." *Lukács Reappraised*, Edited by Agnes Heller. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, "Aesthetic Culture." *The Lukács Reader*, Edited by Arpad Kadarkay (Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), 158.

¹¹ Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller open the leading essay of their volume on the topic with this point. *Reconstructing Aesthetics: Writings of the Budapest School*, Edited by Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. (Oxford, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1-3.

¹² Agnes Heller argues that "On Poverty of Spirit" is one of Lukács's most important documents, for in it he finally takes on the consequence of the conflict between life and work. Heller also analyzes the young man's "truth," or the idea that his decision cannot be described in generally valid ethical categories, in "Von der Armut am Geiste: A Dialogue by the Young Lukács." *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, Edited by Katie Terezakis. (Lanham; Lexington Books, 2009).

¹³ “On Poverty of Spirit” is included in the recent English edition of *Soul and Form*, Edited by John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ “‘Von der Armut am Geiste’: A Dialogue by the Young Lukács.” *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, Edited by Katie Terezakis. (Lanham; Lexington Books, 2009), 257.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 180-181.

¹⁶ WC, 213-214. In a preface to the English language translation of the work written in 1965 and revised in 1970, Lukács stands by the position expressed here. Indeed, he seems to associate it with his long-term, “two-front battle against the literature of crass and of sophisticated manipulation” and to hold it accountable for his subsequent rejection by “all dominant movements” in both socialist countries and in the “so-called free world,” where alike the view remains that “literature and art really can be manipulated and that content and form can be manufactured to order according to the needs of the day” (22).

¹⁷ WC, 213.

¹⁸ Lukács is emphatic: Literature and criticism which identifies an author’s politics with his significance “has seriously hampered the artistic development of radical democratic literature and of revolutionary proletarian literature ... encouraging a sectarian complacency about its generally low artistic and intellectual level” (WC 199).

¹⁹ WC, 193.

²⁰ I rely on the Kantian forms of sensible intuition as paradigms of organizational categories without further elaboration here. For the argument that Lukács maintains this (and other) Kantian commitments, see my Afterword to *Soul and Form*, Edited by John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

²¹ In choosing this descriptive designation (“being-in-relation”), I was inspired not only by the literature on “species-being,” but by the work of Maurice Blanchot, and by the excellent Foreword to *The Infinite Conversation* written by its translator, Susan Hanson. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Translation and Foreword by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

²² For a typical Lukácsian discussion of textual objectivity and universality see WC, 214-216.

²³ WC, 197.

²⁴ WC, 221.

²⁵ WC, 217.

²⁶ The description is from WC, 195-199, from which I also take the depiction of the practices of writer-critics and philosopher-critics.

²⁷ WC, 194.

²⁸ WC, 215.

²⁹ The work of Bill Readings is an excellent example of this kind of criticism. Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) has also become a paradigm for critical work on the administration of the contemporary university. In various ways, this work had been furthered by (to name only a few) Marc Bousquet, Frank Donoghue, Stanley Aronowitz, Susan Jacoby, Susan Haack, and Annette Kolodny. I do not mean to imply that any of these thinkers maintains Lukács’s political or literary positions exactly, but that they each assesses evidence which helps to account for ways that contemporary university culture can asphyxiate critical inquiry.

³⁰ The American Association of University Professor regularly publishes a “Report on the Economic Status of the Profession.” For the 2007-8 Report, see <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/Z/ecstatreport2007-08>. For recent reporting on the place of adjuncts in universities, see for example http://americanuniversities.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_road_scholars_of_new_york , as well as a number of articles published by The Chronicle of Higher Education. One case in point: <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Special-Needs-of-Adju/46744/>.

³¹ WC, 214.

³² The quotes are from *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971, 1997), 88; 93.

³³ Again, the quotes are from *History and Class Consciousness*, 83-84. Here Lukács himself is quoting from and elaborating on Marx, in particular in the prominent chapter of *Capital* (1.4) concerned with “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret.”

³⁴ For example, speaking at a Tea Party rally in Nashville, Tennessee in February 2010, Sarah Palin said (“to thunderous applause,” according to the Washington Post), “... to win [this] war, we need a commander in chief, not a professor of law standing at the lectern.” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/06/AR2010020603264.html>

³⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Translation and Foreword by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 8. (Originally published in French as *L'Entretien infini* in 1969.)