

GEORG LUKÁCS "ART AND OBJECTIVE TRUTH" (1954)

Lukacs, Georg. "Art and Objective Truth." "Writer and Critic," and Other Essays. Ed. Arthur D. Kahn. London: Merlin, 1970. 25-60.

The very title of this essay points to a paradox, if not a contradiction: can works of fiction, or pretence, beautiful lies, as Sidney would put it, claim to represent the truth? There is a long history of reflection within aesthetics / critical theory on 'mimesis' in art, that is, the relationship between art and the real, external world which it purports to represent, reflect, mirror, describe, etc. As a Hegelian Marxist, Lukacs is keen to understand how fiction may *accurately* re-present in verbal form what Hegel called the 'world-historical forces' peculiar to a particular socio-historical context. In other words, he seeks to grasp how a given work may objectively reflect the social totality of a given place and time in the process of change.

The key to understanding how this may be possible is to grasp the important role played by the author's consciousness which necessarily mediates between the work and the world. Not all writers can know the truth about things and, therefore, reflect this truth in their work. However, Lukacs believes that some do capture the truth. Lukacs argues elsewhere (e.g. in The Historical Novel) that many of the works of prose fiction written by bourgeois writers (like Sir Walter Scott) in the nineteenth century, the so-called 'golden age of realism,' that is, during the heyday of capitalism, capture the reality of the time and place in question (though he writes in the nineteenth century, Scott often writes about previous places and times: Ivanhoe, for example is about the Middle Ages). This claim was controversial at the time to many critics in the Soviet Union who espoused the doctrine of what is today called 'Soviet realism,' the view that only working class writers (who are also members of the Communist party in the Soviet Union, needless to say), can know and thus express the truth about the social totality. Lukacs was seen as a bit of a traitor for arguing as he did.

Part I: "The Objectivity of Truth in Marxist-Leninist Epistemology"

Lukács argues in this section that the basis for any correct cognition of reality, whether of nature or society, is the recognition of the objectivity of the external world, that is, its existence independent of human consciousness. Any apprehension of the external world is nothing more than a reflection in consciousness of the world that exists independently of consciousness. This basic fact of the relationship of consciousness to being also serves, of course, for the artistic reflection of being. (25)

Referring in particular to the views of Lenin, Lukács contends that there are several aspects of Marxist-Leninist epistemology which are "especially significant for the *problem of objectivity in the artistic reflection of reality*" (26), not least the problem of the "direct reflections of the external world. All knowledge rests on them; they are the foundation, the point of departure for all knowledge" (26).

Lukacs contends that sense-impressions may be the starting-point of knowledge but they are not the end-point of scientific inquiry. As Marx points out, science "would be superfluous if there was an immediate coincidence of the appearance and reality of things" (26). The goal is to see beyond the surface appearance of things: as Lenin puts it, truth is "not to be found at the beginning but at the end, . . . truth is not the initial impression" (26). Lenin's point is that observation must be followed by "generalisation, . . . the formulation of concepts (judgements, conclusions)" (27), the "perceptual image" (27) must be turned into "abstract thought" (27), mere perception succeeded by concrete scientific knowledge.

What Lenin and, by extension, Lukacs is getting at here is that there is a distinction between perception and conception, between the empirical illusions afforded

by the eye and the other senses and the scientific knowledge that is the product of rational reflection. Their point is that the inherently dialectical nature of all things is not something immediately apparent to the perceiving senses. This 'fact' of existence, the claim that all things and events are inevitably caught up in dialectical relationships, is something not known by what they call the 'bourgeois' philosophers, thinkers like Descartes, Locke or Kant, who did not benefit from Hegel's partially true and, later, Marx's allegedly scientific, iron-clad insights into the true nature of things. Early modern philosophers, especially the empiricists, were quite content to stay at the level of appearances. However, appearances are deceiving as a result of which one must go beyond them if one is to grasp the absolute truth, certain principles which are universally true of all places and time. The key to understanding these principles lie in Marx's historical materialism.

Part III: "The Artistic Reflection of Reality"

Lukács's argument here is that the goal of the "artistic reflection of reality" (34) is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual, is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity. . . . The universal appears as a quality of the individual and the particular, reality becomes manifest and can be experienced within appearance, the general principle is exposed as the specific impelling cause for the individual case being specially depicted. (34-35)

The truly historical literary work "by its very nature offers a truer, more complete, more vivid and more dynamic reflection of reality than the recipient otherwise possesses" (36).

Lukács is at pains to differentiate his own Marxist brand of *realism* from the *naturalism* of Émile Zola and others in the nineteenth century. For Lukács, realism is not a matter of the detailed particularism characteristic of photographic accuracy, as Zola claimed. In other words, it does not matter so much whether the reader can visualise the dust on the window pane, to cite a famous example drawn from Zola's work, as a result of the author's skill in depicting reality. Realism is not a matter of a one-to-one correspondence between particular things that are really 'out there' (e.g. an actual window pane or dust on it) and their verbal representation. Rather, the *truly realist* literary work "reflects the full process of life and does not represent in its details reflections of particular phenomena of life which can be related individually to aspects of actual life" (41). By the 'full process of life,' Lukács means that any *properly historical* literary work reflects or captures the class conflict intrinsic to the place and time which it depicts and which is the engine of history (to be precise, the dialectical progression from one mode of economic production to its successor) by which that social totality is subject to transformation. Each moment in history is one of tension between the dominant economic and social forces in place (a particular configuration of the means, forces and social relations of production) and those struggling to emerge, that is, a conflict between a dominant class eager to protect its interests and others struggling to take its place. Historical change is the product of the dialectic of these antithetical forces and this is what truly realist literature mirrors. It is in this way that realist literature may be said to reflect the "process of life in motion and in concrete dynamic context" (37).

Crucial to the historical accuracy of truly realist works is what Lukács terms the *typicality* of their characters. By *typicality*, Lukács does not have in mind the somewhat crude notion shared by Vulgar Marxist critics of a one-to-one correlation between individual characters in the work and the members of an actual social class as a criterion of literary judgement. Such critics would often simplistically sift (and thus either praise or condemn) a work for its character portraits – here is your typical evil

capitalist, here is your deluded bourgeois, a victim of false consciousness, there is your typical conscientious revolutionary, and so on.) However, this is not what Lukacs means by 'typicality.'

Lukács derives his conception of the term 'typicality' from a comment made by Engels in one of his letters on literature on characterisation: "each is simultaneously a type and a particular individual" (35). Realist writers must capture this dialectic between the individual and the social, between what makes him / her a unique personality and those forces which determine his existence without regard for the individual. To be *typical*, in Lukács's sense of this term, characters must therefore embody in their *individual* fictional existence the *larger 'world-historical'* forces peculiar to the place and time which they are supposed to inhabit, that is, their place in the class-struggle and, by extension, within the social totality and in the dialectical progression of history. This is what Lukacs means when he writes that the truly realist author, by "representing individual men and situations, . . . [by] depicting them as exemplary men and situations (the unity of the individual and the typical), in bringing to life the . . . objective conditions of life as the particular attributes of individual people and situations" (39), makes his own fictional world in this way "emerge as the reflection of life in its total motion, as process and totality" (39). He puts it this way a little later: "any extract, any event, any individual or any aspect of the individual's life must represent such a context in its concreteness, thus in the unity of all its important determinants" (47). The successful portrayal of the psychology of individual characters must seek to capture the "dialectic of human existence and consciousness" (51), to be precise, the contrast between what a man "is objectively and what he imagines himself to be" (51), that is, the conflict between those class determinants operative upon the individual and his / her false consciousness, illusions concerning his / her freedom from such determinants.

Part IV: "The Objectivity of Artistic Form"

Given this emphasis on what a text represents, one might assume that Lukacs prioritises content over form. However, his argument in this section is that form is not secondary to content, a "technical aid" (46), as it were, nor is it the product of mere subjective whim on the part of the author. Drawing upon Hegel's view that content is nothing but the conversion of form into content and form the conversion of content into form, Lukacs suggests that form and content ought to be understood as dialectically related. His argument is that the form of an *accurate* work of prose fiction is dictated by the content, that is, its depiction of a particular place and time. It is in this sense that artistic form is "just as much a mode of reflecting reality" (45) as are categories of thought. For Lukacs, artistic form can never be abstracted from history. Rather, form is always culturally and historically specific, every genre being the "outgrowth of definite social conditions and of the ideological premises of a particular society" (56). With regard to the history of particular artistic forms, Lukacs is of the opinion that the "introduction and mastery of new thematic material calls forth a new form with significantly new principles within the form" (52). In this schema, therefore, content (the depiction of a particular socio-historical context) dictates form (the precise manner in which this content is presented).

The unity of the particular and the universal, the individual and the typical, the concrete and the general in the properly historical work of art is the product of the interpenetration of form and content. The concrete represents the "synthesis of many determinants" (46). The task of art is the reconstitution of the concrete: as a result of this, a work of art "considered from the point of view of its content, provides only a greater or lesser extract of reality" (47). Artistic form has the responsibility of "preventing this extract from giving the effect of an extract" (47). The extract, rather, must seem to be a "self-contained whole and to require no external extension" (47). In short, in the work of art, any "extract, any event, any individual or any aspect of the

individual's life must represent such a context in its concreteness, thus in the unity of all its inherent determinants" (47). These determinants must appear as "concrete, direct, perceptible qualities of individual men and situations" (48). Form plays a crucial role in this regard: these determinants may

seem to be merely factors of content. They are. But they are at the same time, and even primarily, factors emerging and becoming apparent through artistic form. They are the result of the transformation of content into form and result in the transformation of form into content. (48)

For the work to be truly representative of the "individual contradictions of the life mirrored in the work of art" (51), its content must be "transformed into a form through which it can achieve its full artistic effectiveness" (50).

For an accurate exposure of the typical aspects of the basic contradiction peculiar to a given society, 'typical' characters becomes a sine qua non as does plot as a vehicle of character:

only through plot can the dialectic of human existence and consciousness be expressed, . . . only through a character's action can the contrast between what he is objectively and what he imagines himself to be, be expressed in a process that the reader can experience. (51)

In short, as Lukacs puts it, the "breadth and depth of subject matter convert into decisive problems of form" (52). The more seemingly artless a work of art, the more it seems to give the effect of life and nature, the "more clearly it exemplifies an actual concentrated reflection of its times" (52) and the more clearly it demonstrates that the "only function of form is the expression of this objectivity" (52).

In conclusion, the realism of a literary work is a function of the degree to which the plot, perhaps the most important category of form, successfully mirrors the conflict between the dominant and emerging classes characteristic of a given stage of history and which is the dynamo, according to Marx, of history. To accomplish this, the plot almost always revolves around a conflict between characters thought to be typical of their respective classes. Form is, thus, not merely a vehicle for or artificial appendage to content. Rather, the two are inseparable and inter-related. The realism of a particular literary work (which consists in the "unity of the particular and the universal, of the individual and the typical" [46]) is a function of the "interpenetration of form and content" (46), a product of the "dialectical unity" (45) or "mirroring quality" (45) of form and content.