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## Young Georg Lukács as a Crisis Thinker

### Subjectivism and the Problem of Form

›Crisis‹ was a buzzword among European intellectuals at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A nebulous notion which can indicate both imminent decline and potential renewal, ›crisis‹ at the same time suggests the need for a decision or for a new project. As such, it combines a broad and largely metaphorical semantic repertoire with a perlocutionary sense of urgency and potential culpability.<sup>1</sup> It possesses the communicative power to assign blame and responsibility and thereby justify radical courses of action. Yet it simultaneously serves as a way to attribute problems, uncertainties, and suffering to a generalizing periodization of time, in some sense abstracting them and mitigating our need to attend to the details. One explanation for why crisis became so fashionable a trope in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe was because it was able to draw together a wide range of different and contradictory negative sentiments into a vague consensus about the fallen state of the world.<sup>2</sup> Using crisis this way

This paper argues that the work of the young Lukács can be read as a wide-ranging mediation on what I am labelling ›the crisis of subjectivism‹. Reading Lukács this way allows us to see important continuities between his pre-Marxist and Marxist period. Most significantly, it allows us to see how positing the proletariat as a ›subject-object‹ of history and developing a crisis diagnosis of bourgeois society, allowed Lukács to bring the fruits of his earlier intellectual labour under conceptual control.

1 Koselleck: *Crisis*; Roitman: *Anti-crisis*.

2 Graf/Föllmer: *The Culture of ›Crisis‹ in the Weimar Republic*; Ringer: *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, pp. 259–260.

can bring highly complex and interconnected events under conceptual control by giving them a common origin and consequence, as well as an apparent beginning and end. This has been the recurrent trope of crisis thinking from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century up until the recent discourse on the ›Global Financial Crisis‹ of 2008.<sup>3</sup> Theories of crisis may therefore serve as complexity-reducing devices which allow us to perform a kind of cognitive ordering that allow us to grasp historical time as a definite, bounded thing.

I think this is unquestionably true for Georg Lukács's famous 1923 essay *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* (*Verdinglichung und das Bewußtsein des Proletariats*),<sup>4</sup> which has since become a touchstone for crisis thinking in much of the Western Marxist tradition. In that essay, the cognitive ordering is performed through a periodization of ›the commodity form‹ which is, for Lukács, the key to unlocking the contradictory logics of capitalist modernity as a totality, while also constituting the original source of crisis for that totality. The crisis is key to disclosing the collective agency of proletariat, who are in turn attributed the agency to transcend a social order grounded in commodification.<sup>5</sup> Yet what is interesting about the essay is how little Lukács engages with the experiences of inequality and hardship faced by proletarians. This stands in contrast to Marx, whose *Capital* energetically condemns the spiritual and physical degradation of workers wrought by the factory system.<sup>6</sup> For Lukács, the problem with capitalism seems to be less its class injustices (although he certainly was not blind to them), and far more the impoverishment of philosophy, ethics and culture he thought modernity had engendered. In the 1923 essay, ›crisis‹ is the cognitive ordering device through which a broad range of aporia, which had preoccupied Lukács prior to his membership with the Communist Party, are re-described. Revolution could then become the practical historical solution to the problem of *form*.

This chapter argues that the work of the young Lukács can be read as a wide-ranging mediation on what I am labelling ›the crisis of subjectivism‹. Reading Lukács this way allows us to see important continuities between his pre-Marxist and Marxist period. Most significantly, it allows us to see how positing the proletariat as a ›subject-object‹ of history and developing a crisis diagnosis of bourgeois society, allowed Lukács to bring the fruits of his earlier intellectual labour under conceptual control.

3 Thompson: *The Metamorphosis of a Crisis*, p. 59.

4 Lukács: *Reification and the Class Consciousness of the Proletariat*.

5 See chapter 2 of Gilbert: *The Crisis Paradigm*.

6 Marx: *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Esp. chapter 15.

## 1. Crisis-consciousness

The ›crisis-consciousness‹ which proliferated around central Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned on a perceived exhaustion of Occidental rationality, and concerns about the relativism, moral decline and decadence of European civilization.<sup>7</sup> The German idealist tradition had, since Kant, been occupied with the philosophical problem of subjectivism.<sup>8</sup> This problem, sometimes described as the ›crisis of the Enlightenment‹,<sup>9</sup> concerned the inability of post-Enlightenment thought to appeal to any enduring standards of truth or value. This threatened a scepticism where all judgements and ethical positions were no more valid than arbitrary choices or opinions. When in Germany, Lukács was immersed in this intellectual tradition via the neo-Kantianism, in which he was trained, and which shaped his outlook considerably. Neo-Kantians saw the philosophical positivism of their time as too closely indebted to the natural sciences, and thereby unable to account for humanistic qualities which could not be known or explained through a natural scientific method alone. In response, they sought to establish the philosophical (conceptual) ground for the human sciences as an independent domain of enquiry. This effort was accompanied by somewhat conservative concerns that modern Europe was becoming a decadent and materialistic culture and was losing its connection with subject-independent ethical and aesthetic values. They were attempting to account for value in a non-material and non-subjective way, which could preserve its integrity from subjective scepticism or psychologism on the one hand, and causal materialism on the other.<sup>10</sup>

Two of Lukács's most important mentors of the early 1910s, Georg Simmel and Max Weber, were taking up these problems in sociological and cultural terms. For Weber, rationality had become an ›iron cage‹ which colonized culture and the value sphere and deprived us of any greater sense of purpose than that of material gain, rational efficiency or control. The modern world was ›disenchanted‹, and human individuals struggled to connect meaning or purpose to their worldly activity. Efforts to reawaken spirit and find communion or redemption in political and social causes could only make things worse.<sup>11</sup> Simmel described a ›tragedy of culture‹ or

7 Harrison: 1910.

8 Beiser: *German Idealism*.

9 Beiser: *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 45.

10 Beiser: *The German Historicist Tradition*.

11 Weber: *Science as a Vocation*; Weber: *Politics as a Vocation*; Weber: *The Protestant Ethic*.

a ›crisis of culture‹, where cultural forms had taken on lives of their own, directed towards their own ends. The human being as the ultimate end was increasingly eclipsed by the ends of cultural media themselves; like money, social conventions and social organization.<sup>12</sup> Both Weber and Simmel saw only two possible outcomes to this trend: either a resilient and heroic individualism or the total disenchantment and regimentation of modern life.<sup>13</sup>

The young Lukács resisted this fatalism. He was calling for artists to find ways of representing this crisis through their work, seeing in this the possibility for giving form to a new, modern ethos which could again connect individual subjects with a more stable sense of shared human values. If we define ›crisis consciousness‹ as the ability to identify crises and take action,<sup>14</sup> Lukács can be read as attempting to stimulate artists into expressing and disseminating a crisis consciousness aesthetically. Hence, Lukács explored the idea that the representation and examination of the crisis through literature, theatre and painting was crucial in finding the cultural forms through which modernity could find renewal. He particularly queried whether this was just a question of finding the right technique or artistic method, or whether such a cultural revival could only come as a result of a more general ethical turn among society at large.

## 2. Crisis Reflected into Modern Drama

Lukács's first major published work was a study on the *History of Modern Drama* (*Entwicklungsgeschichte des modernen Dramas* [1909]).<sup>15</sup> Near the end of his life, he retrospectively summarized its thesis as »modern drama is not just the product of crisis, but crisis expressed in all its elements«. <sup>16</sup> His approach was to undertake a comparative historical sociology of drama to contrast the new world with an old one and thereby paint modernity as spiritually and ethically barren. Looking at medieval tragedies, Lukács explains how pre-modern forms of art exemplify a »unity« between »men's relations and dependencies«. <sup>17</sup> That is, they express the spiritual unity of the social and cultural order they are formed in. This has consequences

12 Simmel: *The Concept and Tragedy of Culture*; Simmel: *The Philosophy of Money*; Simmel: *The Crisis of Culture*.

13 Liebersohn: *Fate And Utopia*, p. 191.

14 Milstein: *Thinking Politically about Crisis*, p. 143.

15 Lukács: *History of the Modern Drama*.

16 Lukács: *Record of a Life*, pp. 149–150.

17 Lukács: *The Sociology of Modern Drama*, p. 153.

for the performance because within a homogeneous community, theatrical performances can relate to the audience in an immediate way. The audience is able to experience themselves as a trans-subjective mass and lose themselves in the event. The modern world – and modern theatre – has lost this capacity. According to Lukács, the ability of theatre to convey clear and potent narratives to ecstatic audiences is inhibited by the dissonance and differentiation of modern life.

Lukács employs sociological explanations inspired by Simmel and Marx to elaborate: Technological know-how in the pre-modern world was passed on through the interpersonal relations between masters and apprentices. These roles gave the individual the opportunity to express themselves via their labour, allowing work to function as a means for fulfilment and personal development. It also reaffirmed their rootedness in a community, as they performed a clear functional role which benefited the collective. Lukács argues that morality in such a context must become oriented toward reinforcing constraint, as individuals each performed functionally necessary interdependent roles within an integrated social totality. However, this was not a stifling conformism, as on »all occasions [individuals had] the opportunity to inject [...] personality into the order of things«<sup>18</sup> through their deeds. The ›totality‹ here indicates an idealized past where everyone's social role is mutually confirmed, and through participation in this functional order, one's identity finds both its expression and its confirmation.

The modern world, by contrast, is stuck in a paradox between uniformity and extreme individualism.<sup>19</sup> Modern capitalist society brings bureaucracy, technology, industrialism, and new forms of education which are all subject to uniform objective standards. Lukács calls this process ›thingification‹ or ›reification‹ (›Versachlichung‹), and it blocks the passage of subjectivity expression into the world of objects.<sup>20</sup> Modern society extinguishes individual human peculiarities as they become inefficiencies which only contaminate the mechanised system. Any human meaning of productive activity evaporates as everything becomes solely determined by the imperatives of capital accumulation and mechanized efficiency: »An objective abstraction, capital, becomes the true productive agent in capitalist economy, and it scarcely has an organic relation with the personality of its accidental owner; indeed, personality may often become superfluous [...].«<sup>21</sup>

18 Ibid., pp. 153–154.

19 Ibid., p. 152.

20 Harrison: *1910*, p. 106.

21 Lukács: *The Sociology of Modern Drama*, p. 153.

Against this growing uniformity and standardization of the object world, through which the human subject is denied objective expression, modern cultural values become oriented toward liberation and escape. Social bonds and communal ties come to be seen as burdens and limits on the individual will. Work no longer provides any satisfaction as it is dictated by impersonal forces and is performed only for survival. This change from the pre-modern to the modern can be observed in modern drama:

In summary: where the tragedy was previously brought on by the particular direction taken by the will, the mere act of willing suffices to induce it in the new tragedy. [...] [S]urvival as an individual, the integrity of individuality, becomes the vital centre of [modern] drama. Indeed the bare fact of Being begins to turn tragic.<sup>22</sup>

The tragedy of the modern individual is not that they failed to constrain their hubris and incurred the wrath of the fates, but rather the opposite: It is being there in the first place. It is being unable to find escape or release from a hostile, mechanical world of humanity's own making. The preservation of personality becomes the primary concern of the modern subject, who is forced to internalize their struggles. This finds representation in the dramatization of complex conflicts and misunderstandings between inner convictions and competing ideologies.

Lukács's diagnosis of modern drama – and by extension, modern life as a whole – is that it tragically represents »the fact that realization of personality will be achieved only at the price of suppressing the personalities of others«. <sup>23</sup> Modern individuals cannot achieve mutual recognition because the modern world forces them to objectify each other as vessels for the realization of their will. Moreover, they fail to find mutually recognizable cultural objects or actions through which they can reach any common ground.

Lukács argues that this poses an aesthetic problem for the dramatic form. Drama, which is performed on a stage and in front of an audience, must take place through the interaction of characters with each other, and with and through their common world. However, if modern individuals share no commonly recognisable values or standards, and if the world of objects they inhabit is determined by hostile external forces, achieving any reliable content for drama becomes doubtful. The lack of a vital centre of life, obstructs the ability of dramatists to find any shared sense of meaning with an audience, through which dramatic actions can become intelligible.<sup>24</sup> In response, the source of mutual intelligibility can only become the frac-

22 Ibid., p. 154.

23 Ibid., p. 160.

24 Hartley: *Georg Lukács and the Disintegration of Dramatic Form*.

ture and discord of modern alienation itself. Only in this way can we find a background which we all share in common and in reference to which our utterances and actions can be comprehensible to one and other. For Lukács, the fate of modern drama rests on its ability to successfully render the tragedy of modernity into common consciousness through the dramatic form.

My reading of Lukács's position is that he is calling upon art to aestheticize the lived experience of what would come to be called ›the crisis of modernity‹, thereby giving a recognizable and unified expression to the shared circumstances of modern individuals. Through this aestheticization of loneliness and isolation, individuals are able to regain a sense of communion; they are able to see themselves in each other. Crisis becomes a cultural form that artists must take up and render into artistic expression in order to connect to their audience in a meaningful way. The disenchantment which follows the decline of religion and community is answered by a reawakening, where we all recognise that we share this spiritual wasteland together. The pre-modern totality of a functional and enchanted communal order is replaced by a modern totality of generalized diremption and disintegration. Lukács is encouraging us to think of modernity as marked by crisis, not because he wants to celebrate and exacerbate the discord as later modernist movements would, but because he thinks that sharing the experience of crisis contains the only possibility for our collective redemption.

### 3. The Longing for Form

Similar themes are found in *Soul and Form* (*Die Seele und die Formen* [1910]),<sup>25</sup> which consists of a selection of Lukács's early literary criticism. The personnel Lukács chooses to discuss in the essays include some obscure and marginal figures. However, what is of interest is not the specifics of Lukács's literary criticism, or the works in question, but the way he uses criticism to flesh out a conceptual apparatus which can perform crisis diagnosis. In other words, I am reading *Soul and Form* as a preliminary attempt to construct a crisis paradigm with which he can read and judge modern works of art as failing on cultural terms. As Lukács explains in his introductory essay, he is searching for a way to articulate the problem of form, or the absence of form in modern culture; and he explains why the essay, as a form itself, is uniquely suited to this task. His hope is that by establishing the longing for form through his essayistic criticism, and by clarifying the aims of tho-



se artists who also share this longing, he will prompt a rediscovery of the problem of form which will illuminate the absent centre of modern life. Even though Lukács does not describe his problem as a crisis at this point, his approach is typical of crisis thinking: By knowing about the crisis of form, we are obliged to pursue the problem of form as an ethical priority. In crisis, what matters most or what is most essential is the thrust into the foreground of consciousness, and what is a distraction, or an illusion can be abandoned. Lukács thereby evaluates the artistic merit of works on the basis of whether they take crisis seriously or not. This will become clearer in the next subsection on his criticism of impressionism.

Lukács's central claims in *Soul and Form* revolve around three concepts; ›soul‹, ›form‹ and ›life‹.<sup>26</sup> Rather than recalling Lukács's enigmatic and baroque descriptions of these concepts, I will attempt to define them in clearer terms. This, it may be justifiably argued, does not do justice to the subtlety of Lukács's text. However, for the purposes of this thesis, a straightforward explanation will allow us to better see the structure of Lukács argument, and therefore permit a clearer view of his development of a crisis paradigm.

›Soul‹ consists of the judgements, emotions and dispositions which individuals have. The problem of subjectivism arises when the contents of the soul are deemed insecure and arbitrary. The subject lacks any means by which they can assess the contents of their soul, or another soul, as valid or invalid. Judgements therefore seem like individual choices which could just as easily be otherwise. In the classical Kantian scheme, the inner realm of subjective judgement, the soul, confronts an external world of factual and causal objects. But the ability of the soul to judge the content of that external world is in doubt. The question is posed: What makes my judgements valid? This is intensified in a modern society where there are a plurality of individual perspectives and individual judgements, without a necessary ethical centre to which all can refer.

As Lukács asserts, ›form‹ was unproblematic in the pre-modern world because it was implicit in the religions, cosmologies, and communal relations which people accepted without question. These served as the standards against which individual judgements could be validated. However, in a modern world, where religion, cosmology and communities are undermined by the causal rationality of the natural sciences, and the scepticism of Enlightenment reason, such a source of validity is now absent. Individual judgements are irrelevant to physical forces, which happen whether people want them to or not. Lukács often refers to form as a Platonist idea, and

26 Márkus: *Life and the Soul*, pp. 4–6.



celebrates Plato, »the greatest essayist who ever lived or wrote«,<sup>27</sup> for his ›form-giving‹ and his clear understanding of the problem. This makes explicit the transcendental connotations behind Lukács's conception of form.

›Form‹, in Lukács's view, is supposed to function as the medium by which soul finds meaning in life. Life consists of the content of our experiences, what we perceive throughout interaction with the world. Viewed scientifically, life is an aggregate of facts about things. For Lukács, this is an impoverished perspective on life which denies its human significance. The longing for form consists of a search for the enduring source of value by which soul can know whether its judgements about things or actions in the world are valid.<sup>28</sup> Another way to describe the absence of form in more contemporary terms is as a ›crisis of meaning‹. A life without form has no sense of a ground or a centre with which to connect the various strands together.

This is the most profound meaning of form: to lead to a great moment of silence, to mould the directionless, precipitous, many-coloured stream of life as though all its haste were only for the sake of such moments. Written works differ from each other for no other reason than that the abysses can be reached by many paths, and that our questions always arise out of a new astonishment. Forms are natural necessities for no other reason than that there is only one path leading to the abyss from any one place. A question, with life all around it; a silence, with a rustling, a noise, a music, a universal singing all round it: that is form.<sup>29</sup>

In his early work, Lukács sees form as a cultural or ethical problem. It also has strong artistic connotations, as artistic forms, but Lukács does not always define it in such a limited way. Form is the background structures of our understanding and expectations; what we share in common and appeal to when communicating or expressing ourselves, and which Lukács thinks should be coherent and unify us with our worldly existence.

One way of reading an overall thesis into *Soul and Form* is to say that Lukács holds that art must articulate a sense of crisis if it is going to be both intelligible and meaningful to a modern audience. In his essays, he celebrates the works of authors and artists who are able to find beauty and

27 Lukács: *Soul and Form*, p. 13 (»den größten Essayisten, der je gelebt und geschrieben hat«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 38).

28 Ibid., p. 173.

29 Ibid., p. 114 (»Und der tiefste Sinn der Formen ist dieser: hinführen zum großen Augenblick eines großen Verstummens und die ziellos dahinschießende Buntheit des Lebens so zu gestalten, als eile sie nur um solcher Augenblicke willen. Und nur weil man die Abgründe von vielerlei Aufstiege erreichen kann, weil unsere Fragen aus immer anderem Erstaunen auftauchen, nur darum sind die Schriftwerke auch verschieden. Und weil aus einer Gegend doch nur ein Weg zum Gipfel führt, nur darum sind die Formen Naturnotwendigkeiten. Eine Frage und um sie herum das Leben; ein Verschweigen und ringsherum und davor und dahinter das Rauschen, das Lärmen, die Musik, der Allgesang: das ist die Form.«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 160).

significance in the harshness of the modern world, thereby representing the absence of the problem, and opening up the possibility of new forms. At the same time, he condemns those artistic trends, such as impressionism, which prettify and soften modernity for the consuming audience. In the pre-war European society, which celebrated scientific advances as progress, and frequently mistook scientific achievements for cultural and ethical ones, the inability of such art to relate people and their world in a meaningful way becomes articulated by Lukács and his contemporaries as a cultural crisis. Lukács sees his role in this to explain to artists what they are doing, to clarify philosophically what they are groping for aesthetically, in order to clarify the problems that modern culture faces and awaken a longing for the great aesthetic.<sup>30</sup>

Within *Soul and Form*, Lukács surveys a number of different strategies for giving form to life. An essay on Kierkegaard describes his leap into an authentic relation with God, the purity of which is ultimately dissolved under the pressure of other people's conflicting interpretations – his former lover's – as well as the poisonous psychology of self-doubt. The lesson of this is that all individualistic attempts to arbitrarily create form as an act of one's will become a futile battle against the contingency of social existence.<sup>31</sup> An essay on Theodor Storm shows Lukács romanticizing early modern small-town Puritan Burghers, as a last vestige of genuine communal life.<sup>32</sup> He observes Storm within this environment, as a poet and storyteller who is a fully integrated member of the social fabric. This gave Storm's writing a coherence and simplicity where each individual life convincingly works as an »element of that whole from which a great epic shall one day be made«. <sup>33</sup> After admiring the ethically assured and stoically resilient characters which Storm portrays, Lukács laments that they are now relics of a lost world. He therefore rejects the fantasy of a romantic return to rural simplicity as naive.

Lukács reserves his praise for artists like Stefan George, Charles-Louis Philippe and Richard Beer-Hofmann who turn the absence of a totalizing worldview into the basis of their work, thereby approaching form in a modern context. While George and Philippe both bring out the subtlety and intimacy of modern social contact, Beer-Hofmann shows the fragility of modern self-absorption through his characters' encounters with

30 Ibid., pp. 17–18.

31 Ibid., p. 36.

32 Ibid., pp. 62–63.

33 Ibid., p. 65 (»als ob alles Einzelne nur eine Ballade oder ein Balladenfragment wäre, ein Element jener Materie, aus welcher dereinst ein großes Epos entstehen soll«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 102).

death. Likewise, in the essay *The Metaphysics of Tragedy* (*Metaphysik der Tragödie*),<sup>34</sup> Lukács discusses the neoclassical dramatist Paul Ernst, who attempts to return to a more austere and Sophoclean style of tragic drama. For Ernst, tragedy was always about encountering the transcendental a priori limits of a life or a personality, or »a categorical imperative of greatness and self-perfection«,<sup>35</sup> as Lukács puts it. Tragedy conveys to us timeless truths concerning the interrelation of freedom and necessity, the inevitability of death, the imperative toward realizing self-perfection; disclosing existential limits which ground our subjectivity.<sup>36</sup> Through tragedy »the soul becomes conscious of itself because it is thus limited, and only because and insofar as it is limited«. <sup>37</sup> However, to convey this tragedy requires great individuals to carry out their actions to the very end with a single-minded purposiveness and determination. It is only when observing the actions of exemplary and uncompromising individuals that existential limits become apparent. The modern world relativizes, historicizes and democratizes great individuals away, and in doing so threatens to dissolve the possibility of there being such tragic heroes at all.

#### 4. The Poverty of Aesthetic Culture

In two essays from 1910 called *Aesthetic Culture* and *The Parting of the Ways*, Lukács provides some clear diagnostic statements describing cultural decline. He argues that modern culture has been overcome by passive optimism, evident in the impoverished products of many contemporary trends in art. His immediate targets are the impressionists, whom he accuses of responding to the loss of form by essentially accommodating themselves to it. He sees such arts as self-consciously spurning any integration within a wider system of meaning or ethics and focusing instead on the transitory suspension of reality for pleasing aesthetic effect. This, he suggests, shows that the bourgeoisie are no longer even concerned with articulating a worldview in any coherent way, and are instead satisfied with debased and superficial experiences. For Lukács, these works are symptomatic of the

34 Lukács: *The Metaphysics of Tragedy*.

35 Ibid., pp. 197–198 (»zu einem kategorischen Imperativ der Größe und der Selbstvollendung«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 233).

36 Goldmann: *The Early Writings of Georg Lukács*; Marr: *Theory and Practice in the Dramas of Paul Ernst*.

37 Lukács: *Soul and Form*, pp. 197–198 (»zum Selbstbewußtsein Erwachen der Seele: sie ist, weil sie begrenzt ist; ist nur, weil und insofern sie begrenzt ist«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 217).

crisis, and from the position of his crisis narrative, he is able to judge them as aesthetic failures.

This trend, according to Lukács, had become the cultural centre of bourgeois society. He puts things in simple terms; the task of culture should be to provide stable guidance for »life-problems«. <sup>38</sup> But modern culture had either become confused with scientific progress or degraded into consumerism. A strong culture, grounded in a metaphysics of form, can reveal to the individual where they fit into the totality, and what their individual fate is. This needs to be something of objective necessity, something binding and certain, and not a mere subjective disposition or inclination, which will always be prone to change and vulnerable to scepticism. <sup>39</sup> The pathology of modern culture, or the pathological lack of culture, pertains to its subjectivism and historical relativism, which rejects the permanence of everything: »With the end of the solidity of things the solidity of the ego also ceased to exist; and the loss of facts meant the loss of values.« <sup>40</sup> Everything in the modern world becomes merely perspectival. All values are held individually and are therefore arbitrarily and incidentally posited. Nothing seems to matter.

This cultural pathology is exemplified, according to Lukács, in forms of impressionism, which become »the art of surfaces; surfaces behind which there is nothing, surfaces which signify nothing«. <sup>41</sup> Lukács sees in impressionism nothing but a facile satisfaction of momentary desires which absorbs the audience in immediate sensations and pleasures. It is an art form of convenience, as it demands no struggle, no effort and no obligation. It constructs joyful and comforting images or atmospheres which the consumer can simply take or leave at their leisure. An aestheticism such as this offers no challenge to the status-quo, and no secure grounds for affirming human values, and therefore slides easily into its place within the division of labour of a bureaucratized and rationalised society. The aesthete becomes another professional among the many, whose particular specialization is the manipulation of aesthetic effects and the creation of moods for consumption by the bourgeois intelligentsia. <sup>42</sup>

As Kadarkay suggests, <sup>43</sup> Lukács's criticisms of impressionism are ungenerous. He subjects it to both the demanding and specific requirements of his theory of culture, as well as to his austere dislike for all things ornamental

38 Lukács: *Aesthetic Culture*, p. 376.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 377–378.

40 Lukács: *The Parting of the Ways*, p. 168.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

42 Lukács: *Aesthetic Culture*, p. 372.

43 See Lukács: *The Parting of the Ways*, p. 173.

and prettifying. He also does not acknowledge the possibility that impressionism itself may contain value of its own as an aesthetic response to the ugliness and uniformity of urban industrialism. Instead, he sees it as serving little more than a momentary escapism for its pacified bourgeois consumers. However, what Lukács's argument about impressionism touches on, which will later become a guiding preoccupation for critical theory, is the sense of powerlessness and fatalism associated with the relativization of value. Here he anticipates much of the Frankfurt School's later condemnation of a trivial and uniform culture industry which serves only the satisfaction of desires and the pursuit of novelty, and which abandons the pursuit of loftier cultural ends. What concerns Lukács perhaps most of all is the way the serious problems of his age, as he sees them, have become belittled by this culture, so that they now seem outdated. The aesthete may reject all demands for a greater and more enduring sense of significance and as metaphysical delusions or even lies; they may insist fatalistically that »everything is equally false and differences can only exist in the composition«; and by this gesture the crisis of culture can even seem to be negated: »The feeling of eternal tragedy offers absolution for every frivolity.«<sup>44</sup> For Lukács, though, this is a defeatist stance and a vicious circle. By refusing to see things as a crisis they can only drive the pathology deeper. It is like passively awaiting the Last Judgement with the blind confidence that »everybody will be found light«.

Lukács even briefly nods at the redemptive possibilities of proletarian revolution, not as an expression of his political sympathies, but as a call for a ›healthy persecution‹ which could provoke a reaction of cultural re-awakening:

That hope is that the barbarians come and tear apart all excessive refinements with their crude hands; that persecution might serve to sort and select [...]; that when a culture hates and opposes art, nevertheless art grows deeper. [...] By sweeping everything peripheral away, it might lead us back to the truly essential [...].<sup>45</sup>

The idea seems to be that proletarian resistance to bourgeois society could amplify the crisis and throw light on the essence of the problem (the absence of form), thus obliging the abandonment of prettifying distractions. However, he concludes that this is unlikely to occur as socialism does not have the necessary mythic power that Christianity once had, and its culture only reproduces that of the bourgeoisie. He sees the socialist movement as, in its own way, ensnared within the same mechanized bureaucratic bourgeois world that it wants to escape from.

44 Lukács: *Aesthetic Culture*, p. 372, 375.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 373.

His final hope is that the tragedy of solitude endemic to the modern world can serve as the impetus for new forms of genuinely tragic art, as solitude itself becomes the common medium which art fixes upon. At this point his position comes closest to those of Simmel and Weber, who were not crisis thinkers in the sense that they did not think that exposure to the failure of form could stimulate a cultural reawakening. Instead they only acknowledged individual, ameliorative solutions. As Lukács remarks: »[...] the most important heroism, the heroism of forming oneself, grows from this solitude, just as the desire for, the possibility and reality of redemption grew from the knowledge of original sin. [...] Man can attain this redemption only by himself [...].«<sup>46</sup>

## 5. The Novel as Signal of Despair

*The Theory of the Novel (Die Theorie des Romans, 1914–15)*<sup>47</sup> is an important work because it marks Lukács's transition out of self-identified Platonism and into a historico-philosophical narrative. In Hegelian fashion, Lukács announces that philosophy itself is the symptom of a historical rift between inner world of the subject and external objectivity. It is »a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world, the incongruence of soul and deed [...]. Happy ages have no philosophy [...].«<sup>48</sup> The chaos and contingency of life and the dead abstraction of form are not fixed metaphysical truths, but historical circumstances. Lukács's understanding of the crisis changes from a modern failure to countenance the essential limits of life, to a philosophy of history – a narrative of humanity's long fall from grace. The crisis this suggests is of an alienated life within a present that awaits future redemption.

Lukács compares the form of Homeric Greece, exemplified in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to their modern equivalents, the novel. Homer shows us a homogeneous world of ready-made, coherent meaning.<sup>49</sup> Every action within the Homeric epic is imbued with a sense of purpose. Each deflection of a sword's blow, each slip of a foot, each move of the body finds itself purposively integrated within an ancient cosmology. As nothing occurs accidentally and nothing belies explanation, the subject is not essentially different

46 Ibid., p. 372.

47 Lukács: *The Theory of the Novel*.

48 Ibid., p. 29 (»[...] ein Zeichen der Wesensverschiedenheit von Ich und Welt, der Inkongruenz von Seele und Tat. Deshalb haben die seligen Zeiten keine Philosophie [...].«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 21).

49 Ibid., p. 32.

from the world of objects. They share their being within what Hegel had called the ›ethical substance‹ (›Sittlichkeit‹) of ancient life. Each individual's activity is continuous with others'. They relate to each other within a clear and understandable whole. For the epic hero, »a long road lies before him, but within him there is no abyss«. <sup>50</sup> In an integrated world, problems encountered are only ever problems of distance, never of qualitative difference.

In his *Aesthetics* Hegel argues that the classical era represented the highest achievement of beauty because it managed to give expression to a harmonious fusion between the empirical external world and ›spirit‹ – the shared cultural world of concepts and ideas. It achieved this through anthropomorphism, by investing every external event with human intentionality. Thus, the world of external nature appears as a conflict of will between human beings and anthropomorphic gods. There is an interpenetration of spirit and nature, and the meaning of every event becomes externally transparent. <sup>51</sup> The classical epic can provide an answer to the question of »how [...] life [can] become essential«. <sup>52</sup>

The ancient ethical substance, where the morality of human relations was a priori understood and unproblematic, could, for Hegel, be compared favourably against the rigid, conventional and formalized morality of bourgeois modernity. However, there was no prospect of, nor desire to turn back the clock. Ancient ethical life was unenlightened and unaware of itself, and the sense of communal meaning it engendered was naively received, merely as unreflexive common-sense. It »consists precisely in immovably sticking to what is right and in abstaining from any movement, any undermining, and any reduction«. <sup>53</sup> In contrast, any future ethical substance in an enlightened and sceptical modernity is possible only as a self-conscious and rational achievement; as a recognition of, and reconciliation with, complexity and ambiguity.

The extensive totality of the ancient world became problematic because it limited freedom to what can be achieved through external action, and hence did not allow room for reflection upon the significance of actions. Meaning is pre-given, and there is no space to challenge it. These limits of

50 Ibid., p. 33 (›es liegt ein weiter Weg vor ihm, aber kein Abgrund in ihm«, Lukács: *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 25).

51 Hegel: *Aesthetics*: p. 431.

52 Lukács: *Theory of the Novel*, p. 35 (›wie kann das Leben wesentlich werden«, Lukács: *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 27).

53 Hegel: *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 251 (›besteht eben darin, unverrückt in dem fest zu beharren, was das Rechte ist, und sich alles Bewegens, Rüttelns und Zurückführens desselben zu enthalten«, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 308–309).



classical art come to a head in the dramas of Greek tragedy, where in Hegel's typification, characters embodying ethical precept find themselves either at odds with others of contradictory ethics or with actuality. In the case of Sophocles's *Antigone*, Hegel's most famous example, Antigone comes to embody the old or divine pathos of family and myth, as opposed to Creon who embodies the new ethics of public order and the practical rationality and legitimacy of man-made political structures. The tragic consequences of each character one-sidedly following their interests is meant to demonstrate eternal justice; fateful and almost sacrificial retribution for their failure to harmonize interests. The tragedy itself functions as a reconciliation of conflict through the mutual destruction of protagonists, and a return to undisturbed harmony.

But the need for tragic outcomes to restore the immanence of essence suggests essence is losing its self-evidence.<sup>54</sup> It attempts to reconcile the growing gap between being and essence by positing it as the intensive totality of an individual fate. However, it is a short step from this to the philosophy of Plato, where pathos is abstracted and formalised as ›ought‹ and countered against the ›is‹ of life. This is heightened further by the emergence of Christianity, which ontologizes the ›is‹ of Earthly life as something beneath the purity of heaven, the latter being where everything is as it should be. The only way we can achieve heavenly purity is through a leap into faith. Perseverance of doubt and demands for evidence is seen as a trait of a poor character in Christian doctrine; you can never know, you can only believe. To the Christian, the object of spirit (God) is unknowable. We therefore turn inwards, to an examination of the self as a source of faith alone that must overcome scepticism, akin to Hegel's ›unhappy consciousness‹.<sup>55</sup>

Lukács uses this to contrast the classical world, where »great epic writing gives form to the extensive totality of life, [while] drama to the intensive totality of essence«, to the modern world where the individual appears at odds with their world, struggling to reconcile their longing for meaning.<sup>56</sup> Hegel describes romantic art as that which attempts to give representation to this inward struggle. The object becomes the spiritual beauty of the subject being represented. This is different from the more institutional ethical commitments of the protagonists of classical tragedy, as the substance of the romantic personality is not measured by the validity of the ethic they are

54 Lukács: *Theory of the Novel*, p. 35–37.

55 Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 281 (›unglückliches Bewußtsein«, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 375).

56 Lukács: *Theory of the Novel*, p. 46, 54 (›Die große Epik gestaltet die extensive Totalität des Lebens, das Drama die intensive Totalität der Wesenhaftigkeit.«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 37, 40).

prescribed to, but in the strength of their particular character; though both their commitment to duty and their resolve.<sup>57</sup> The connection art has to a substantive and divine totality is increasingly severed, with God, especially after the Reformation, now consigned to the abstract beyond while art is preoccupied with exploring the integrity of particular human individuals.

For Lukács, these conditions make true epics impossible, as the epic works through the revelation of a well-rounded all-embracing universe. For modern subjects, the world appears as contingent, incoherent and arbitrary. Their art consists of a struggle for inner meaning to find its expression in objects. This entails a choice: Either, it can proceed by narrowing its object to the point where the work can encompass it, thus creating an artificially limited, yet meaningful, world. This is the strategy of drama which, as we saw, becomes problematic once the shared pathos of the audience loses its force and the objective actions of protagonists themselves appear increasingly arbitrary and meaningless and symptomatic of the very loss it is attempting to overcome.<sup>58</sup> Or art can accept the impossibility of giving form to the fullness of life and become explicit about the inability to achieve the total work. This is the strategy of the novel, which for Lukács is the definitive form for modernity, as it attempts to give meaningful expression to the transcendental homelessness of the modern condition: »Every form is the resolution of the fundamental dissonance of existence, every form restores the absurd to its proper place as the vehicle, the necessary condition of meaning.«<sup>59</sup>

Like the epic, the novel works *extensively*, by situating itself as an aspect of an existence that reaches beyond its own limits. This is in contrast with drama that works *intensively* by creating its own enclosed world in which every action can be internally related.<sup>60</sup> But the historical reality means that »the objective structure of the world of the novel shows a heterogeneous totality, regulated only by regulative ideas, whose meaning is prescribed but not given.«<sup>61</sup> For the novel, there is no a priori meaning to the world.

57 Hegel: *Aesthetics*, p. 553.

58 Lukács: *Theory of the Novel*, p. 61.

59 Ibid., p. 128 (»Jede Form ist die Auflösung einer Grunddissonanz des Daseins, eine Welt, in der das Widersinnige an seine richtige Stelle gerückt, als Träger, als notwendige Bedingung des Sinnes erscheint.«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 52).

60 Ibid., pp. 50–54.

61 Ibid., p. 128 (»Die objektive Struktur der Romanwelt zeigt eine heterogene, nur von regulativen Ideen geregelte Totalität, deren Sinn nur aufgegeben, aber nicht gegeben ist.«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 114).

Hegel had argued that while modernity came at the cost of losing the heights of beauty represented by the symphony of meaning and existence in classical art, this loss was ultimately liberating. Modern artists are free from the fetters of representing an inscribed religious or mythical order and the human mind is now free to explore »the infinity of its feelings and situations.«<sup>62</sup> This means we can go beyond reproducing an integrated pre-given totality and express the unrealised potential of »everything in which man as such is capable of being at home.«<sup>63</sup> While the prospects of exceptional art were dim – a sort of groping around in the dark – the freedom this entailed was worth it.

Lukács shared Hegel's view of art as a transcendental homecoming. However, he is somewhat less optimistic. For him, the loss of great art comes as no liberation at all. Rather it is a source of greater angst. Without any intrinsic structure to the world, the human individual is only left with the raw material of the self to work with. What the novel indicates is a twofold irony: It is the hopelessness of the struggle of form against its historical reality, and at the same time, it is the hopelessness of any attempt to abandon reality and construct it anew:<sup>64</sup>

The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God. The novel's hero psychology is demonic; the objectivity of the novel is mature man's knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness of inessentiality.<sup>65</sup>

The expression of soul into form depends on its historical context in a twofold way. The soul must develop within a historical moment conducive to its reflection; it must be realistic about its ambitions. Moreover, the objective circumstances must be conducive to it; the soul must have the tools of expression at its disposal.<sup>66</sup> In modernity, freedom from religious

62 Hegel: *Aesthetics*, p. 607 (»die Unendlichkeit seiner Gefühle und Situationen«, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, p. 238).

63 Hegel: *Aesthetics*, p. 607 (»alles, worin der Mensch überhaupt heimisch zu sein die Befähigung hat«, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, p. 238).

64 Lukács: *Theory of the Novel*, pp. 85–86 (»Der Roman ist die Epopöe der gottverlassenen Welt; die Psychologie des Romanhelden ist das Dämonische; die Objektivität des Romans die männlich reife Einsicht, daß der Sinn der Wirklichkeit niemals ganz zu durchdringen vermag, daß aber diese ohne ihn ins Nichts der Wesenlosigkeit zerfallen würde [...]«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 77).

65 Ibid., p. 88 (»Der Roman ist die Epopöe der gottverlassenen Welt; die Psychologie des Romanhelden ist das Dämonische; die Objektivität des Romans die männlich reife Einsicht, daß der Sinn die Wirklichkeit niemals ganz zu durchdringen vermag, daß aber diese ohne ihn ins Nichts der Wesenlosigkeit zerfallen würde [...]«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 77).

66 Ibid., p. 92.

or mythical doctrine means ideals are free to develop to their fullest extent, as Hegel had declared. However, the conditions for actualisation are absent, with the modern soul being trapped by rationalization, where the purposes of actions are determined by the objective imperatives of the machine or the strictures of social convention. The novel is the quintessential modern form in the truest sense, as it is defined by a contextual impossibility of achieving transcendental harmony. The structure of the novel corresponds with the structure of its time.<sup>67</sup>

Lukács then offers a typology of strategies of the novel, categorized either by a definition of the soul as too narrow or as too broad in its relation to the world. In the first case, described as ›abstract idealism‹, alienation is seen as a purely external problem, with the interior of the self remaining a simple, harmonious unity. This is to pose the outside world as little more than a series of challenges that the outgoing, striving individual must meet.<sup>68</sup> It is the narrative of the adventurer, who never stops to contemplate their inner integrity, but confronts the entire world, seeing it as »bewitched by evil demons and that the spell can be broken, and reality can be redeemed either by finding the magic password or by courageously fighting the evil forces«. <sup>69</sup> Unlike the epic hero, modern adventurers are not guided along by fates or gods, but instead face the world completely alone, as isolated individuals. They fulfil their own singular destiny within a fragmentary, hostile world of natural forces and petrified human conventions.

The best representative of this is contained in *Don Quixote*, which, Lukács insists, must be understood as a product of its historical juncture: the breakup of the medieval worldview and the loss of Chivalric culture. Cervantes makes a mockery of the ›trivial‹ medieval epic by turning its world – a world of honour, duty and heroism ordained by God – into the delusions of a madman.<sup>70</sup> In the battle against the external world, Don Quixote simply refashions it into whatever fits his vision. Cervantes's moment as a time of transition means the hero never has to confront the truth of his delusions, but Lukács claims that this is something that cannot be afforded to works of later modernity.

The other type of novel, defined by an overly expansive soul, Lukács describes as ›romanticism of disillusionment‹. This is significant because it

67 Ibid., p. 93.

68 Ibid., pp. 97–99.

69 Ibid., p. 97 (›das von bösen Dämonen vollbracht, durch das Finden des lösenden Wortes oder durch das mutige Bekämpfen der Zaubermächte zur Entzauberung und Erlösung geführt werden kann«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 83).

70 Ibid., p.101.

emerges in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, once God is well and truly dead, and begins to problematize the integrity of the soul itself, rather than its relationship with action. In this type, alienation has been driven deeper; from the struggle to express the inner sense of significance in external objects, to the struggle to find any coherence and transparency of the inner world with itself. The protagonist of this type of novel must wrestle with their inner demons, as they confront themselves in a psychological drama. It marks the replacement of the »sensuously meaningful story by psychological analysis«; a rationalistic interrogation of the self.<sup>71</sup> Individualism has reached its apogee. The novel is longer an abstract idealism, as the subject's inner world is no longer the bearer of some transcendental generality. Now it is entirely particular and perspectival. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, everything is psychological.

Lukács considers the work of Tolstoy as an attempt to overcome the limitations of the novel, particularly the character of Levin in *Anna Karenina*. Levin attempts to escape the meaninglessness of bourgeois cultural conventionality by looking for fulfilment in the rhythms of nature. However, this is soon revealed as paradoxical, as it is only from the perspective of human culture that the need for this move can be conceived of and therefore carried out. The character becomes aware of his inability to retreat into an idyllic and naive peasant life and must instead reconcile himself with his bourgeois existence and responsibilities and its entwinement with those of others.<sup>72</sup> For Lukács, Tolstoy fails because he centres his holism on nature rather than in forms of culture.

Lukács ends by suggesting Dostoyevsky may offer the solution. It is in Dostoyevsky's characters, who eschew life lived according to convention, and live as if moved by a divine inner calling, that Lukács sees redemption in modernity. In this way, Lukács claims Dostoyevsky has gone beyond the novel, to a new form that is higher and more fully realised. But his dialectic still insists that the realisation of this is not something bought about by the work itself; we must resist the urge to see works of art as superseding each other along a path of linear aesthetic progression. Dostoyevsky is not a negation of the novel into a higher form; if he is anything, he is a signal of potential things to come: »Art can never be the agent of such a transformation: the great epic is a form bound to the historical moment, and any

71 Ibid., p. 113 (»der Ersatz der sinnlich gestalteten Fabel durch psychologische Analyse«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 99).

72 Ibid., p. 147.

attempt to depict the utopian as existent can only end in destroying the form, not in creating reality.«<sup>73</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In a letter he wrote to a friend during 1913, Lukács states that »Germany today is not in possession of a profound and fruitful ›Weltanschauung‹ that would encompass and embrace both the artist and the public.«<sup>74</sup> In this paper, we have traced this general sentiment of metaphysical homelessness to demonstrate how it echoes as a leitmotif throughout young Lukács's writing. It is a sentiment that becomes, especially after the First World War, collapsible by many thinkers under the master-category of ›crisis‹ and thereby registered as *the* problem faced by modernity.<sup>75</sup> This also becomes a lynchpin of Lukács's Marxism. In *History and Class Consciousness*, the cultural and ethical alienation that Lukács sought representation of were written up as symptoms of a society that was ordered through the commodity-form. The »contemplative stance«<sup>76</sup> of the bourgeois mind-set captures this circumstance – especially the subjectivation of judgement – while historicizing it as the pathology of a particular social class whose world-historical time had passed. ›Crisis‹ performs as a diagnosis of this condition, and a springboard that spurs the proletariat out of it via revolutionary action.<sup>77</sup> This achieves what art never could. Hence, any appreciation of Lukács's early Marxism should begin with an understanding of his prior thinking, as the turn to Bolshevism constituted an effort to bring the enigmas of his young thought under conceptual control.

73 Ibid., p. 152 (»Aber diese Wandlung kann niemals von der Kunst aus vollzogen werden: die große Epik ist eine an die Empirie des geschichtlichen Augenblicks gebundene Form und jeder Versuch, das Utopische als seiend zu gestalten, endet nur formzerstörend, aber nicht wirklichkeitschaffend.«, *Die Theorie des Romans*, p. 137).

74 Lukács: *Selected Correspondence, 1902–1920*, pp. 217–218.

75 See esp. Valéry: *The Crisis of the Mind*, p. 23.

76 Lukács: *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 98 (»kontemplative Haltung«, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*, p. 264).

77 Gilbert: *Crisis Paradigm*.

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