



TWO WAYS OF COMING BACK TO REALITY: KIERKEGAARD AND LUKÁCS

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Georg Lukács, in his confrontation with *Existenzphilosophie* after World War II, poured scorn on what he called this 'permanent carnival of fetishised inwardness' which continued, he said, to 'mesmerise and mislead bourgeois intellectuals'.¹ Historically, he held Husserl and Heidegger accountable, but also Kierkegaard, and the latter together with Nietzsche he described as 'antidemocratic', holding both responsible for the destruction of reason. Yet Lukács's pupil, Lucien Goldmann, regarded Lukács as *Existenzphilosophie*'s true father; not only did Lukács's first book *Soul and Form* (1910) contain a decidedly appreciative though critical piece on Kierkegaard, entitled 'The Foundering of Form on Life',² much of Lukács's earlier work reads as an attempt to bring Kierkegaardian themes to bear on social problems in pre-World War I Europe. What happened in between to cause this change of mind or heart?

It is worth noting that the later criticism is tempered. Kierkegaard (and Schopenhauer) still had some of that 'good faith' and 'consistency' which the existentialist philosophers were engaged in 'casting off' as they 'increasingly became apologists of bourgeois decadence'.³ Perhaps what the later Lukács saw in these earlier writers was some kind of heroic example that allowed them to escape the charge of decadence that he levelled at their works. Or was there even something in Kierkegaard's thinking itself that positively protects it, that is to say even in Lukács's eyes, from the charge of decadence? My main argument here is that there is, but that Lukács didn't see it. If he had, he might have seen that the charges of decadence he levelled at Kierkegaard, could just as well *mutatis mutandis* be levelled at himself.

In the early essay, itself a fine example of poetic prose, Lukács accuses Kierkegaard of having made a poem out of his life. It all began with a 'gesture', the act both of renunciation and deception by which Kierkegaard jilted Regine and tried, in furtherance of his love of her, to expunge all traces of his own life in her mind by presenting himself in the role of cynical reprobate. Lukács correctly sees this attempt on Kierkegaard's part to free Regine for a future untrammelled by vestiges of their common past as totally in vain. Among the possibilities Kierkegaard is forced to leave her with, is that of reflecting that he might well be deceiving her, a possibility which in turn spawns an endless sea of further reflections on possible motives and their implications for their present relationship, which is of course just the situation graphically presented in *Either/Or*'s 'Shadowgraphs', a fact which suggests that the futility of the 'gesture' was early apparent to Kierkegaard himself and that his subsequent writings might be better understood as an attempted accommodation to *that* fact. But

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Lukács sees this early gesture as setting the pattern for the rest of Kierkegaard's life. What Kierkegaard had really done was sacrifice ordinary life for a poet's existence. Regine had to be sacrificed but still loved, as the knight of resignation loved his unattainable princess, with an idealised love vested in a transcendent being. Lukács suggests that Kierkegaard's religiosity derives from his poet's need for a transcendental locus of an idealised love, beyond the fluctuations and pettiness of ordinary human relationships, a fictive relationship in which the actual object of love no longer stands in the way of that love (p. 24). The ordinary and everyday is sacrificed to creativity, but with the love itself preserved in a purified and 'unreal' form. Looked at in this way, the religiosity in Kierkegaard's works is not, as Kierkegaard presents it, a 'second movement' *back* to reality for which resignation of one's love to a higher being is a necessary preliminary. It is simply a requirement of resignation itself; to preserve the love in an unreal form there must be a transcendent God to preserve it. A line can be traced directly from Regine to the transcendent God of love 'above' and 'beyond' the everyday 'sometimes you're right, sometimes I'm right' world, a God for isolated human beings against whom they are always in the wrong.

As Lukács sees it, Kierkegaard is trying to force an intractable infinity into a mould formed of personally significant but necessarily life-defying choices. Objective time with its plethora of possibilities is frozen heroically but falsely into moments which purport to disambiguate an inherently ambiguous reality. In the subsequent *Theory of the Novel* (1916) Lukács was to say the ambiguity was a political and therefore contingent fact. The novelist fabricates forms embracing subject and world where the world itself offers no such visible unities.⁴ So the novelist's passion is a useless one. How much more so then the passion with which one makes of one's own life a novel! Kierkegaard's 'heroism', says Lukács, was that he wanted to 'create forms from life', he lived 'in such a way that every moment of his life became rounded into the grand gesture' (p. 41). Kierkegaard's 'honesty' was that he 'saw a crossroads and walked to the end of the road he had chosen'. His 'tragedy' was that he wanted to live 'what cannot be lived' (p. 40), since, although the whole of life is the poet's raw material, by trying to give limit and significance to 'the deliquescent mass of reality', he simply spites that reality. The choice the poet makes is never a choice of an absolute and the choice never makes him absolute, never a 'thing in itself and for itself' (p. 40); the poet as such never touches bottom. Kierkegaard's greatness lay in the special situation and talents that enabled him to conduct his apparently successful campaign against life's necessity. But really, by giving 'every appearance of victory and success', all they did was lure him 'deeper and deeper' into 'the all-devouring desert', Lukács's says, 'like Napoleon in Russia' (pp. 40–41).

Lukács was himself later lured quite literally into Russia, in the belief that he was aligning himself constructively with an historical process of humanisation. Since Lukács's Russia proved to be very much a desert, and all-devouring at that, it is tempting to compare Lukács's early portrayal of Kierkegaard with the facts of his own life, the better to clarify the differences in their views on soul, form, life, reality, necessity and so on. Might it not be that Lukács's life, though politically engaged as Kierkegaard's never was, scarcely touched bottom either?

Soul and Form, as the title indicates, was greatly influenced by the neo-Kantian notion that human subjectivity impresses forms on an inchoate manifold, not in *History of European Ideas*

the limited 'transcendental' context within which Kant himself worked, but in the wider post-Hegelian context of historical forms of consciousness which include everything from anthropology to culture and art. In a central chapter, among all the forms that consciousness can take, Lukács claims a privileged place for 'tragedy'. It is privileged in something like the traditional epistemological sense, as it is the self-conscious form of the soul in which reality is faced most fully and openly, with 'death—the limit in itself' as an 'ever immanent reality', a thought which quite soon gained currency in Heidegger's 'being-unto-death'.

There are various ways of interpreting and responding to the full acknowledgement of finitude. The Kierkegaardian way is to describe the form of consciousness in which it occurs as one of total isolation in which the self, conscious of finitude as a limit, interprets itself as poised before possibilities that transcend that limit. The Heideggerian way is to insist that the self has no such possibilities and that mankind's possibilities are circumscribed by its ongoing finite projects. Lukács represents a third response. It is customary, following Goldmann, to say that Lukács's path-breaking *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) represents the overcoming of tragedy.⁵ But, if that is correct, it is a solution in a special sense. Lukács does not think that what he asserts in the later book are truths you can only have access to from the privileged position of tragic consciousness. On the contrary, genuinely overcoming tragedy means discovering that the tragic form of consciousness is neither essential nor privileged. So in the subsequent work Lukács has in effect revised his notion of the sense of finitude as affording privileged epistemic access to reality and now rejects the 'narrow' access to reality implied by the notion of an individual consciousness. *History and Class Consciousness* widens the epistemological base to embrace the shared, collective perspective of the proletariat. So the maturer Lukácsian view is that what is needed for establishing an authentic relationship to reality is not the individual soul's tragic insight but insight into the actual disrelationships—provisional, contingent tragedies one might say—to be found in existing societies. Lukács thus came to deny that anxiety and despair afford a fundamental perspective on the human condition, seeing in it simply a psychopathological detour which can and should be avoided.

It isn't difficult to find in the Hegelian thought that inspired much of Lukács's work a rationale for this step away from subjective forms of consciousness. A Hegelian would find any attempt to provide a solution to the tragic consciousness that simply takes that form of consciousness for granted totally 'undialectical', as if the sense of tragedy could be conceived as in some way an eternally valid cognitive achievement to be chalked up to humanity and taken at its face value. To do that would be to assume that any 'solution' must regard it as an unsurpassable spiritual fact which itself lays down the conditions for human fulfilment. It is precisely an assumption of this kind that provokes cries of 'decadence' from Hegelians. Wolf Lepenies nicely expresses this in the thought that 'the element of reflection in bourgeois melancholy was not a phenomenon of rational thought; rather, it represented a return of disempowered subjectivity to itself and the attempt to make a means of self-confirmation out of the inhibition of action'.⁶ Here we have the conventional critique of decadentism. The philosophy that seeks subjective solutions to subjective problems, and tries in this way to legitimate the condition of the problem itself, reinterpreting it as a

necessary precondition of the solution, is nothing more than melancholy's narcissistic reflection on itself. Since the solution reflects the problem it does not constitute a genuine escape. Nor is it hard to see how a Hegelian might read Kierkegaard too in this light, for we see once again how Kierkegaard's concept of faith might easily be diagnosed as a *de facto* acceptance of despair, as simply an attempt to legitimate despair rather than 'overcome' it. To overcome despair in the style proper to Hegelians, one must locate and define the limited forms of consciousness out of which it emerges. Subjectivity and its travails can be pinpointed as bourgeois and in the long term as surpassable contingencies of the human condition. Thus idleness and *ennui*—along with the novel—arise in a certain phase in capitalist society. Inside the frame of that society's own self-image these negative features are given positive interpretations. The subjectivity in which they arise secures its own legitimacy as the medium of authenticity, martyrdom, suffering for the truth, sin and personal redemption, or just plain decadence which now acquires metaphysical status. But, says this rationale, whatever the flavour of the positive philosophies erected on it, the solutions here are no less decadent than the problems.

But it would be a serious mistake to think that Kierkegaardian subjectivity was undialectical in this way. The succeeding 'spheres' of life do not form solutions to problems as defined in their predecessors. The 'solution' provided by the religious stages for example, diagnoses melancholy and despair in religious terms, and therefore as problems of a quite different kind and description. Thus there is a deep divide between the *ersatz* heroisms of authenticity, or 'positive' decadence, and the Kierkegaardian notion that the Good can only ever materialise in individual wills aligned to tasks done 'consistently' and in 'good faith'. The latter amounts to an entirely *new* form of consciousness, as new and radical as the one that Lukács adopted when he chose a transindividual solution to tragic consciousness. It is this genuinely revolutionary feature that made other left-wing thinkers such as Adorno and Marcuse take Kierkegaard seriously as a genuinely edifying thinker, as when Marcuse concedes that Kierkegaard's existentialism 'embod[ies] many traits of a deep-rooted social theory'.⁷

It was just this revolutionary feature that post-World War II existentialism lacked. Without the religious point of view and its heroic promise of a world socialised by individual conscience in a distributive relationship to God, there remained only 'authenticity' or the cult of subjectivity as an end in itself, what Lukács calls 'bourgeois decadence'. So in a way Lukács is right about the existentialists but much closer to Kierkegaard than he allows, also in the way he prosecutes his version of 'reality' against their common foe, the bourgeoisie. Lukács and Kierkegaard are both martyrs to the cause of what they assume is the Good. Even the terms of their cultural criticism run parallel. Most of what Lukács says about decadent literature can be paraphrased in terms of Anti-Climacus's typology of despair. The only terminological difference is that what Kierkegaard calls despair Lukács calls irrationality. But since what Lukács calls irrationality is the failure to face the possibility of a humanised world in the way *he* believed that must be done, the real disagreement is about the method and content of humanisation.

Lukács systematically ignored the possibility of an unfetishised subjectivity. True to Marxist form, he assumed that the answer to all the travails of *History of European Ideas*

subjectivity can be given indiscriminately in terms of some transindividual realm of forces to be controlled and diverted so as to produce some special state of human being, a state in which tragedy and despair need no longer occur. As a self-appointed custodian of the 'subjectivities' of the great writers, Dante, Shakespeare, Balzac, Mann, Tolstoy, whose works he interpreted as sources of insight into the course that the historical process should take, Lukács felt he was both saving communism from its anti-humanistic image and preserving a heritage that would one day be the property of the people. A noble and humanistic aim. If this was Lukács's 'heroism', we could say that his 'honesty' lay in a proved commitment to the belief that literature is the irrational soul's striving for expression, with mankind as its topic, and that in order to be 'really' rather than fictitiously and decadently about mankind, literature must catch on to history. In this way Lukács, too, it can be said, walked to the end of the road he had chosen.

What then was Lukács's tragedy? To overcome tragedy for Lukács's means overcoming the aesthetics of subjectivity. This too is something he shares with Kierkegaard, though with quite different alternatives in mind. The counter-intuitions here in both their cases are due as much to left-wing philosophers as others, to Adorno, for instance, who saw the 'aesthetic' as a growth point and not just a locus of sterility and decadence. It seems odd to talk of decadence and sterility in the same breath. Decadence is an integral part of Aristotle's sublunary world along with birth and growth, while sterility seems to be an intrusion of timelessness or eternity. This is just what allows Lukács to talk of the carnival of fetishised inwardness as 'permanent'. Making the eternal into a feature of the self is to lift the self *out* of reality and leave it in stasis. That indeed is sterility. But the aesthetic, according to Kierkegaard, is only boring or sterile when developed into a cult that *refuses* any kind of continuity, that refuses to impose form on life. The Kierkegaardian idea of the 'eternal' in one's self is not that of fixing a path for oneself ahead of history and in defiance of reality, as Lukács's extrapolation from Kierkegaard's 'gesture' on behalf of Regine (and himself) would have us believe; it is the idea of there being a constant readiness to solve ethical tasks, precisely by providing a dimension of inner time or continuity which allows human (and other) value originally to manifest itself. Form does not *founder* on life, it is what makes the life of value possible.

Lukács's wanted to live a life for humanism. When he found his bourgeois clothes ill-suited to the better self he thought he should be, instead of taking the Kierkegaardian route via self-conscious nakedness back to reality from a position of radical choice and ethical resoluteness through faith, Lukács reached resolutely into the wardrobe and grabbed a uniform. He chose the part of a militant 'we'. Instead of embarking on an inner history, he chose to be directed by the 'dialectic of the historical process'.⁸ Lukács saw better than Kierkegaard the tragedy of human exploitation, and his great contribution was to bring humanising insights to bear on the prevailing Marxist interpretation of that tragedy. But it remained essentially an intellectual contribution, and in Kierkegaardian terms therefore also an aesthetic one. Lukács managed to live most of his revolutionary life in a world of literature, supposing that there lay humanity's insight into its own humanisation. Really, he was taking the European heritage hostage, having appointed himself its guardian on behalf of a

universal 'we'. This doubly vicarious participation in the life of poetic subjectivity was Lukács's own way of making a poem of his life. Lukács's tragedy was his failure to see through the myth of the universal 'we' and to detect its dehumanising power.

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NOTES

1. G. Lukács, *Existentialisme ou marxisme?* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), p. 84.
2. G. Lukács, *Soul and Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971). Unprefixed page references are to this work.
3. G. Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (1954) (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981), p. 296.
4. G. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).
5. G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).
6. W. Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society* (1969) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 153.
7. H. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941), 1960 edn., p. 264.
8. Stephen Spender, 'With Lukács in Budapest', *Encounter* (December 1964), p. 55.