Art’s Struggle for Freedom: Lukács, the Literary Historian

Abstract: Lukács began his career as a literary and theatre critic, and he responded throughout his life to developments in contemporary literature. Literature also forms much of the material he treats in his great aesthetic syntheses. He also had an interest in the theoretical and methodological issues of literary history writing.

His work in this field is particularly closely tied to the language and literature of his native land. His critiques of the Hungarian literary works of his era and his writings on the classics of Hungarian literature are relatively unknown internationally, even though they form a significant part of his literary historical work.

A striking feature of Lukács’s conception of literary history and his literary criticism is the intensity of his interest in the canonical works representing the classics of world literature.

Present chapter deals with Lukács’s theory of the history of literature. Special attention is paid to his judgment on Dante, Goethe and Imre Madách, the Hungarian dramatist of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Hungarian literature; literary criticism; literary genres; literary history; world literature

Georg Lukács's writings on literature form a significant part of his oeuvre, which comprises several thousand pages. He began his career as a literary and theatre critic, and he responded throughout his life to developments in contemporary literature, producing studies on many classic authors of world literature. He also had an interest in the theoretical and methodological issues of literary history writing—and this is not even to mention his aesthetic syntheses (from his various periods) or the many articles he wrote on the history of aesthetics, where literature once again formed much of the material.

In consequence of all this, one cannot evaluate Lukács's oeuvre as a whole without describing his work as a literary critic and historian and asking how his ideas should be viewed in the light of recent developments in literary theory. For several reasons, this is a difficult undertaking. The differences between the various periods in Lukács's work—the young and the old Lukács, the Kantian, Hegelian and Marxist Lukács—may be too great for us to be able to answer the question in global terms. Moreover his work in this field is particularly closely tied to the language and literature of his native land. His critiques of the Hungarian literary works of his era and his writings on the classics of Hungarian literature (together with his much disputed value judgements of these works) are relatively unknown internationally, even though they form a significant part of his literary historical work.

Despite these difficulties, I think it is possible to draw a unified picture of Lukács, the literary historian. Behind the contrasting trends manifested in the various periods, which Lukács himself dwelt upon in his self-critiques in the field of philosophy and politics, we find a sufficient amount of continuity. For instance, a striking feature is the extent to which his aesthetical thinking focuses upon exemplary canonical works representing the high points of world literature. In this regard, Lukács shows a surprising consistency despite his dramatic ideological and political reversals. The same authors and works—as for example the Greek tragedies, Dante, Goethe, Balzac, Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann—mark the horizon of his aesthetic theoretical work, both in his early writings and in the late major work on aesthetics.

His critical and historical work covering the history of world literature (more precisely European literature) and aesthetic theories has two "points of crystallization": his preference for German classicism and 19th-century realism. Accordingly, as well as his realism-centric view of art, we may also speak of Lukács's "classicism."