

# LUKÁCS, DECADENCE AND MODERNITY

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In a late interview, Lukács recorded the last of many words on the course of his life's work. From that perspective, his earliest reviews and articles, dating from 1902 and 1903, are dismissed as the "impressionistic" false start to a body of work in quest of its own critical premises.<sup>1</sup> This first Lukács was a drama critic who retired from journalism at the age of eighteen. The elder Lukács describes how, after sustained theoretical study, during which he published nothing for some three years, his initial impressionism was replaced by "an approach based on German philosophy with a tendency towards aesthetics".<sup>2</sup> Theory was, in turn, supplemented by practical (behind the scenes) experience of the theatre, for between its creation in 1904 and its demise in 1908, Lukács was a leading member of the *Thalia Társaság* [Thalia Society], Hungary's first independent theatre company. Both interests converge in his first book-length text, *The Evolution of Modern Drama* - published in 1911, but initially drafted between 1906 and 1907 - which declares itself a "theoretical response" to "the most tangibly practical, dramaturgical and theatrical questions".<sup>3</sup>

*Modern Drama* asks: "is there such a thing as modern drama, and if so, what is its style?" (MD, 17). Style is the principal category at issue in Lukács' study: the stylistic heterogeneity of modern drama suggests that no one style is adequate to drama's representation of modernity. By that token, however, Lukács' quest for a style of criticism, which is not merely a symptom of its own inquiry, does not cease with the "tendency" informing *Modern Drama*. It follows that his early criticism may be regarded as symbiotic with, rather than fully succeeded by, the drama book. Both seek to make prescriptive the central descriptive category of dramatic style, and both are confounded by the inability of an approach governed by this category among others to legislate for its object. Yet "impressionism", with its appeal to a singular aesthetic sensibility, accounts for neither endeavour; on the contrary, Lukács consistently seeks to ground his judgements in a formal quality (style) whose transformations within the modern period are referred to the tribunal of the history

which produced them. The present inquiry will describe the history of Lukács' critical project in the years which precede the composition of *Modern Drama*. My purpose extends beyond the recovery to the reevaluation of a body of work largely unfamiliar to an English-language readership, arguing that the uncertainties attending Lukács' early work must continue to generate and frustrate any criticism conducted in the name of style.<sup>4</sup> My analysis will assess the conflicted modernity of that inquiry by turning it upon its own, avowedly pre-critical, foundations.

Lukács' reviews of 1902-1903 combine cultural and dramatic criticism in equal measure. His writing addresses a Hungarian context whose condition he describes in the last chapter of *Modern Drama*: "In the international history of modern drama, Hungarian drama can only be discussed as a case apart" (MD, 581). The major reasons for Hungary's isolation from the mainstream of European drama are "sociological" in nature, for Lukács' account of post-Enlightenment European drama is constructed on the thesis that "modern drama is bourgeois drama" (MD, 64), engaging at its heart the conflict of individual and collective interest within bourgeois society. In Lukács' estimation, however, neither the Hungarian revolution of 1848, nor subsequent political events, had succeeded in creating "a world-view corresponding to eighteenth and nineteenth century bourgeois ideology" (MD, 583).

The cultural politics of Lukács' reviews are informed by the fact that a large Hungarian bourgeoisie emerged only after the *Ausgleich* [Compromise] with Austria of 1867. The founding of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in that year led to rapid expansion within a country still dismantling the feudal structures formally abolished in 1848; at the nexus of investment, Budapest was Europe's fastest growing city between the Compromise and the Great War. In the same period, however, political power remained to a significant degree with the landed aristocracy, while many of Hungary's half-million lesser nobility, impoverished by peasant emancipation, joined the swelling state bureaucracy. As Jörg Hoensch has noted, it was this group, collectively known as the *dzscentri* [gentry], which, in the absence of "a broad, economically independent and self-confident middle class, [...] formed the nucleus of an emergent urban bourgeoisie comprising assimilated groups and Magyar social climbers of petty-bourgeois or peasant origin."<sup>5</sup>

"Gentrification" was the social ambition of many new arrivals to the Hungarian middle class, among them those Jewish businessmen - some, such as Lukács' father, later ennobled - who were influential in the country's financial oligarchy. Identification with a romantic version of the national past (enshrined in the Hungarian millennial celebrations of 1896) partly compensated for, and offered security against, the absence of class interest or power; the

gentry became the self-appointed preservers of that past.<sup>6</sup> Politics were organised around national and constitutional, rather than class issues; and when a new party of class did emerge - in 1890, with the Hungarian Social Democratic Party - it was to represent proletarian rather than bourgeois interests. In Lukács' retrospect, historical conditions thus conspired against the rise of a self-confident "bourgeois ideology" in Hungary. Instead, swayed by feudalism, "one section of the Hungarian intellectual world [...] fell short of this world-view", while the other, "supported by socialist beliefs", went beyond it (MD, 583).

The theatre presented in turn of the century Budapest was, in Lukács' terms, almost entirely at the service of a bourgeois audience without a bourgeois ideology. John Gassner has described the outcome as a triumph of dramatic confection over conflict: "Entertainment, spiced with urban sophistication, became the criterion for modernity in the Hungarian theatre."<sup>7</sup> Although Budapest's first commercial theatre, the *Vígyszínház* [Gaiety] opened as late as 1896, its success was rapidly copied by a number of other theatres offering the same surrogate sophistication. In his response to such drama, Lukács engages as a matter of course with the pretensions of its public: "They rave about classical purity, and flock to French farces; this is the nature of our [Hungarian] audiences. In theory, classical and moral drama. In practice, the Gaiety, because one has to amuse oneself now and again."<sup>8</sup>

Lukács' criticism extends beyond the event to the institution of theatre, and proceeds to target a circle of self-interest between the critical and theatrical establishment. Thus his account of József Prém's *Léha világ* [Giddy World] announces: "The play is prize-winner, need I say more? [...] The author's mistake is great: he believed the play was good. The Academy's is greater: it said so in writing. But the National Theatre made the greatest, and wholly unforgivable mistake: it staged the play" (IM, 76).<sup>9</sup> The refusal to identify with these institutions lends to Lukács' reviews an air of willed embattlement. This is a journalism which contracts out of the very public sphere - that of an emergent, leisured middle class - within which it is inscribed. It amuses not by prolonging the theatrical *divertissement*, but at the expense of the drama reviewed. Lukács' "esteemed reader" is instructed by an ironic assault of paradox upon prejudice, whereby dramatic failures are regularly praised for their exception to the theatrical rule. This reader is part of a general class of readers implied in Lukács' denunciation of the entire "giddy, frivolous" Budapest public as one which (in a paraphrase of *Dorian Gray*) visits galleries "in order to regard itself rather than to look at the pictures" (IM, 16).<sup>10</sup>

The style of these articles is as unstable as their stance, by turns inside and outside the culture which they address. Lukács' jauntily aggressive manner is

more self-fashioning than self-assured, its precocity of judgement entertaining an unelaborated and not altogether consistent poetics of the drama. In this respect Lukács is far removed from the feuilletonist who features in his late self-portrait. This figure was typically one for whom, as Carl Schorske has observed: "To render a state of feeling became the mode of formulating a judgement." Here, the shape-shifting world of modernity is arrested by a gaze principally focused upon its own receptivity: "objective analysis of the world" is transformed into "the subjective cultivation of personal feelings".<sup>11</sup> Attention to one's impressions operates both as a barrier against the world and as a basis for its possible critique. By contrast, Lukács' early reviews are stylistically and critically distressed; what passes in them for impressionism is rather the self-dramatising testimony of a subject ill at ease in its address to the present. Instead of simply reflecting upon the theatrical event, these reviews rehearse their own form of critical theatre in which judgement of the drama plays to reflection on the very criteria of judgement.

Lukács' first words in print announce the principal of these criteria: "Turgenev at the National Theatre. Praise be to God, a modern play at last!" (IM, 11).<sup>12</sup> The reader, he anticipates, may well think otherwise, protesting a diet of "Dumas, Sardou, Capus and more". But such a response is, according to Lukács, mistaken in one important respect: "the new is by no means modern". The last term is inimical to novelty, and it is in the name of modernity that he prefers Turgenev to the more technically proficient authors of *the pièce bien faite* and their Hungarian imitators: "What do we demand of modern drama? Two things chiefly: ideas and characters." Lukács' demand is strongest when mobilised as critique, in which respect he approaches Shaw's lampooning of "Sardoodledom". The well-made play has, he laments, sacrificed character to a plot enacted by "puppets reciting graceful iambs or cracking bad jokes". In Turgenev, however, rather than seizing the opportunity for their own greater glory, the actors "behave and speak as if the audience does not exist" (IM, 12).

Implicit in these remarks is a normative poetics which can be aligned with that mode of dramatic "realism" established on the late nineteenth century stage by André Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* (founded 1887) and Otto Brahm's *Freie Bühne* (1889). The call for depth - and truth - of characterisation is but one aspect of the call for a faithful representation of modern life answered by both directors in their championing of, among others, Ibsen and Hauptmann. Moreover, the separation of stage and auditorium, which Lukács admires in the production of Turgenev, had been raised by Antoine to a major element of realist dramaturgy in his doctrine of the "fourth wall" through which the spectator observes the world of the bourgeois chamber play. Under this

regime, the cast turns its back on the audience in an illusionistic negation of the illusion which it is perpetrating: what is presented is life itself.<sup>13</sup>

A similar spirit of disabusement informs Lukács' concluding statement to this, his first review: "Alas, I shall never make a good 'critic' " (IM, 14). Irony at the expense of his reader is only one function of Lukács' self-deprecation. At the root of the Hungarian term which, he apostrophises [*ítész*], is the act of "judgement" in its juridical, philosophical and eschatological senses. If judgement is wanting in this particular critic, it is at a conceptual rather than perceptual (aesthetic) level: he is unable to adumbrate what he means by a drama of "ideas". Of course, in one aspect his is merely a plea for the *idea* of modern drama, for a drama which answers to its age; but in another, it points to the uncertain constitution of Lukács' sense of the modern. He confesses that he cannot locate any single "idea" in Turgenev's *The Parasite*, the reason being that: "Modern literature prefers ideas which are unexpressed in words" (IM, 13).<sup>14</sup> The dramatic work is not predicated by its idea, but pursues it; it shimmers through the action and is admired for just this quality of "obscurity" and, above all, "infinity". Idea is dissolved into the all-pervasive atmosphere of the play.

Lukács imagines himself before a group of "aesthetes" [*esztétikus urak*] who demand to be shown that idea. His critical theatricality signals a possible disjunction between this concern and his demand for the authentic portrayal of character: the latter should be tangible, the former intangible. Indeed, it may be possible to extrapolate from the review a critical confusion of two quite contrary dramatic or artistic modes, in which a latent tendency towards realism merges with a desire for the aestheticisation of the life - or the "idea" of that life - represented on stage. Whatever the tensions palpable in this and other early reviews, Lukács claims that his own twin demands of modern drama are effectively convergent. If the play has an idea, it concerns the representative nature of its protagonist, the "parasite" Kuzovkin; Lukács proposes that this figure "is not just one man among many, [...] but that Kuzovkins exist everywhere". This idea of typicality - if we may so name it - is of a different order to the "infinity" elsewhere inferred, and makes more particular the imperative to put (real) people on stage: "whether good, evil, weak, strong, wise or foolish, let them *be people*" (IM, 11). Again, however, the reader is required to tease out a reluctant conceptuality in Lukács' text, and here we may suspect an evasion of the judgement to which his own critical idea must answer.

Lukács' review dramatises its own ambivalence towards a drama whose liminal "modernity" bears upon its formal imperfection - ascribed to its status as an "early" work. To take this analysis further, the typical status claimed for

the play suggests that, in Lukács' own earliest work, artistic modernity is a category which is best understood as (a condition of) coming into being, rather than as a quality which submits to codification once and for all. Yet such an understanding is, in Lukács' case, at best an unhappy and at worst an unacknowledged one, for he continually appeals to the modern as the criterion by which to evaluate a cultural present empty of the value (prospectively) embodied in that same modernity. Perhaps the most positive element of this judgement lies rather in its appeal to a correlative understanding of *history* as the locus of any and every present, including those past and yet to pass. At this point, the idea of the potentially representative nature of the artwork achieves new resonance, for it proposes that, in one aspect, art can mediate a critical understanding of history: Kuzovkin is a creature typical of his age.

Many of these first reviews are animated by protest against historical misrepresentation. This is itself typified by the "new romantic" mode of drama favoured by Hungarian audiences, in which "tirade upon tirade" replaces "characterisation and any feeling for history" (IM, 72).<sup>15</sup> One play resembles another in formulaic plot (patriotic struggle plus love interest) and stilted diction: "Only the laughs are different; in other respects, the periods are interchangeable," This deformation of the national past into a single, ever-recurring storyline - the phantasy projection of a gentrified present - is, complains Lukács, compounded by the most casual attention to fact on the part of most critics. He cites, as one example, a Hungarian version of Rostand's *Les romanesques*, whose title - mistranslated as *The Romantics* - led to the play being reviewed as an exercise in romantic self-mockery.<sup>16</sup> And in the same article, he attacks critical approval for Prém's *Léha világ* as complicit with the play's regard for itself as a modern piece of work: "Modernity [*modernités*] seemingly calls for modern dress, just as romanticism calls for romantic dress; or perhaps a play is modern when the husband is unfaithful and the chambermaid is kissed?" (IM, 76).

This critique of a theatre that shirks engagement with the real world is enlarged in Lukács' account of *Aföld* [The Soil] by Jenő Kemechey and Dezső Malonyay, a play which presents the condition of modern Hungarian society as a three-way struggle between "the peasantry, the nobility, and the Jews" (IM, 20).<sup>17</sup> Lukács admires the formal intention behind the work, which is to dramatise this struggle through a single "symbolic action" wherein each character and group assumes a representative role. Thus he identifies the conflict presented between smallholders and the large estates as of greatest significance for what it shows of "the perpetual struggle between individualist and centralising movements today." But the play fails because, according to Lukács, each author has a finger in the scale, notably in their implausible

portrayal of the play's Jewish characters. While the play may be correct in its conclusion that "only the gentry have any claim to the soil" - Lukács remains fastidiously neutral in this matter - "one should not have to distort the action in order to prove one's point" (IM, 23). Such manipulation is, however, inevitable in authors who "wished to write a modern play using the techniques of Dumas", or - which comes to the same thing - who wished to "resolve a sociological question by deductive means". By slavishly following the model of the well-made play, Hungarian dramatists merely pander to those "fickle historians who blithely assert one thing today and the opposite tomorrow".

The imperative is rather "to write a drama which is at once particular and general" (IM, 22). Lukács insists both that drama must proceed inductively from the former to the latter, and that the particular event which precipitates the action must itself be of representative status. This question of representation is, he states, "the most important [...] to confront the whole of modern dramaturgy". His own proposals in this respect echo early experiments in "laboratory" drama (Lukács elsewhere uses the phrase of Björnson's work), where, having established a situation, "one permits forms to develop of themselves, and waits until a solution emerges of itself." Such thinking also implicates conceptions of dramatic necessity, and thus also of tragic pattern, an issue tangentially present in the discussion of Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna*, which follows that of *The Soil*. Here Lukács admires the "strange and disquieting phenomenon" of a modern art which, in its author's words, takes upon itself "the representation of the unknown" (IM, 26). This is at once a drama of metaphysical generality (the unknown is "death") and of historical particularity, however factitious that may be. In a later review of the same piece, Lukács argues with the assumptions behind Hungarian discussion of the play's "renaissance" characters. The play may be set in the past, but its view of the world is, he observes, that of the present. The problem lies with an audience and establishment who think in "theatrical" terms alone, and who thus, by implication, treat history as a form of costume drama in which differences of then and now may be explained (away) as a matter of mere surface appearance (IM, 56).<sup>18</sup> The result is that all sense of "period" is made relative to a present oblivious to its own relativity.

It is in the context of this emergent historical critique that Lukács introduces the term most central to his analysis: style. The dissociation of theatre and drama will be overcome in the epoch of what he names "great style" [*nagy stílus*], and the history of modern drama is perceived as a protracted struggle for or against this "classical" paradigm (IM, 35).<sup>19</sup> Lukács maintains that the art of the nineteenth century was largely hostile to style, grounding his generalisation in a quotation from Fontane: "What does great style mean? It

means ignoring everything that truly interests people."<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the endeavour to create or recreate this style is everywhere evident "from D'Annunzio to the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts", which celebrated example of Hungarian *art nouveau* architecture was opened as part of the millennial celebrations in 1896. In the drama, Lukács anticipates an "age of style" in which "characters neither declaim in social dramas nor [...] speak Shakespeare as if they were quoting grain prices on the stock exchange" (IM, 32).<sup>21</sup> Such judgements are reinforced by mapping the history of ideas onto the stylistic development of modern drama: "The old battle between idealists and naturalists is over. But the naturalist movement had scarcely triumphed before it had to take up arms against new opponents. The study of nature, requiring immersion in the natural world with the aim of discovering a great 'Truth', necessarily led to the revelation of some such truth [...] in every image, phenomenon and situation - and thus to the emergence of symbolism" (IM, 17).<sup>22</sup>

Throughout his reviews, and with increasing frequency, Lukács proves the advocate of a symbolist theatre which aspires to certain universals in its representation of the world. He observes with approval that symbolism embodies "a return to the renaissance and the classical tendency". This is not the "sham classicism of the academy", but that of those "many-sided" artists of the renaissance who, in deriving beauty from nature, "paid homage to more than one muse" - artists who sought an ideal unity of the arts. He names as the foremost representatives of this mode Wilde, Maeterlinck and Hauptmann (the only dramatist whom he claims to have survived the naturalist movement). Wilde is lauded as "the most gifted writer of the younger generation", and *Salome* offered as a rare example of the maxim that "great" drama inheres in "historical" as opposed to "social" subject-matter (IM, 62).<sup>23</sup> The aim of Wilde's play is that of "the greatest artists since Wagner: the total work of art" (IM, 41).<sup>24</sup> Not only has he "moulded one of the greatest events in world history into one act", but the play is all-embracing in its portrayal of "a despoiled Roman Empire, a literal-minded Jewry, a refined, decadent and wicked ruling family, nascent Christianity — in short, a whole epoch". Similar praise is extended to *Lady Windermere's Fan*, an "harmonious unity of French, German and English spirit" which takes as its point of departure the Nietzschean project of a "transvaluation of all values" [*Umwertung aller Werte*] (IM, 61).<sup>25</sup> Thus Lukács identifies the critical power of such drama with its artifice; its very distance from life confers upon Wilde's art an "objective" and corrective function in relation to the world of "everyday morality".

This model of a synthetic drama which insists upon its own exemplary relationship to life is nowhere more evident than in Lukács' discussion of



Hauptmann: the former naturalist now meets with Maeterlinck at "the gates of classicism" (IM, 38).<sup>26</sup> Hauptmann's *Florian Geyer* joins *Monna Vanna* and *Salome* in opposing an authentically historical art to what might be termed the "historicist" drama dominant in Hungary. These works enable us to discover "in the individuals and tendencies specific to and characteristic of the period in which they are set, a quality which is common to us all and which engages our interest" (IM, 81).<sup>27</sup> Each play "could, *mutatis mutandis*, be set in the present day, because each will remain true in essence, because the ideas which live in each [...] will always live, so long as there are people to live them". Yet if Hauptmann's career typifies a general movement from naturalism to symbolism, then his work is implicated, in particularly acute fashion, in the question of the present direction of modern drama: "Where is this road leading to?" In Lukács' view, the "classical" is not as yet a fully substantiated category in Hauptmann's work; his work asks questions of the world, but it cannot - because it lacks a "world-view" [*világ?tézet*] - answer them (IM, 41).<sup>28</sup>

In "The New Hauptmann", the last of his early reviews, Lukács states that the "true", and new, Hauptmann is most evident in those plays which must be judged dramatic failures: *Michael Kramer*, *Der rote Hahn*, and the fairy-tale play *Der arme Heinrich*. Whereas the young Hauptmann portrayed a series of situations rendered dramatic by "chance" alone, it is the task of the mature writer to create a drama of "process" [*fejlődés*] oriented by necessity. To this end, Hauptmann must abandon representation of the "individual case" for that of the "type"; by this means alone will he answer the questions asked of the arbitrariness of his naturalist dramas (IM, 85).<sup>29</sup> Hauptmann thus strives for "symbolic characterisation in a language no longer tied to the particularity of milieu"; yet his later plays, however epoch-making in their dramaturgy, "make no impression on modern audiences" (IM, 88). Having mastered stage technique, he turns his back on it. From a determinist presentation of milieu and a "Darwinist" world-view, Hauptmann has progressed to an apparent "void" governed by the two great powers in which he now places faith: "love and death" (IM, 89). In his handling of social and political questions, fatalism has succeeded determinism. Whereas formerly he sought to "shake an already decayed society" by laying bare its foundations, his present attitude can be summarised as: "whatever must happen, let it happen". This Hauptmann does not preach, but consoles in a spirit of *tout comprendre, tout pardonner*. The world is surveyed at a distance, and "without bitterness", from the same point of view attributed to one of the characters in *Der rote Hahn*: "it is interesting to watch, but who would want to take part? There's no need for revolution: the oppressed are no better than their oppressors" (IM, 87).<sup>30</sup> Lukács affirms the abandoning of a world-view prejudicial to the generic disinterestedness of

drama, but implicitly questions the ideological sufficiency of the perspective that replaces it. Like Hauptmann, he asks but cannot answer the question of drama's future path.

At this critical impasse Lukács' reviews and articles cease, only to resume in 1906 with the publication of "Thoughts on Henrik Ibsen".<sup>31</sup> The latter essay restates many previously established concerns, but resituates them within the question of (and quest for) a form of tragedy appropriate to the age. This new orientation, born of the study of "theory and history" to which Lukács had devoted the interim years, enables a clearer sense of the unresolved poetics of his first reviews by raising their founding questions to a higher power. Resolution of the criteria of judgement does not follow; rather, the essay allows us to locate an already conceived ambivalence towards modernity within the very terms of modernity's conception.

"Thoughts on Henrik Ibsen" offers two accounts of the dramatist - as late romantic and tragic poet - whose relationship it leaves in some doubt: such is the measure of Lukács' uncertain assessment of Ibsen's modernity. The first Ibsen belongs to "the great chorus of *poètes maudits*", among whom are ranked Baudelaire, Flaubert and Schopenhauer (IM, 90). These are figures "in eternal conflict with their age and with themselves", and Ibsen's work is typical in its expression of "pure bitterness" towards a society in which "rationalism reigned supreme". While this "dissonance" is seen as a reaction to the "unsuccessful revolutions of 1830 and 1848", its true source is held to lie "in the disposition of the romantic soul" (IM, 92), for romanticism was, principally, "a revolution of the emotions" against "all forms of rationalist restriction", a project which could not be completed because its pursuit of the "infinite" represented a "flight" from the real (IM, 93). Hence, what began as a revolutionary impulse ended not only by seeking a "prop in religion", but even by "propping up reaction". Moreover, among those who enter the scene late, romantic illusion is inherited as disillusion. The result is "romanticism *à rebours*", disappointed with the world and resigned to disappointment (IM, 95). Aspiration to "naive synthesis" is replaced by "radical, all-embracing doubt", and just as "piety becomes atheism", so people turn to worship at the altar of "*l'art pour l'art*". Art is not only divided from life, but is raised up over and against it; the living moment is either ignored or "stylised" by the late romantic artist.

Ibsen's place in this narrative is, with that assigned to Flaubert, a double-edged one. Circumstances of place and time meant that, for both, the passage to a "literature representative of the modern age" was an experience of "bitter disappointment". The "realism" of both writers "proceeds from irony", and is

directed, in a typically romantic gesture, "*Contre les philistins*". Both seek to portray the petty bourgeois "so truly, so typically, that no one dare say: that is not me" (IM, 96). But at the same time, this irony is directed against their own (formerly held) highest ideals; even in his late plays, where Ibsen entertains the romantically "fantastic", all is invested with a mode of "nihilistic irony" (IM, 98). And because disillusion informs Ibsen's entire aesthetic, Lukács insists on dissociating him from those "social-critical writers" among whom he is habitually classed.

Disapprobation then cedes, in the second part of Lukács' essay, to an account of Ibsen the tragedian. In this capacity, while the principle of necessity distinguishes his work from that of the romantics, he is nonetheless said to "complete a process of development" which, it may be inferred, is as much literary-historical as personal. The "exclusive form of the analytic drama" paradoxically achieves that representational inclusiveness which the romantic fragment, despite (or by virtue of) its openness to infinity, forever excluded. Implicit in Lukács' evaluation is a recasting of the "classical" goal of modern drama. For that imperative is now understood as a "striving for tragedy" in which the dramatist lays bare "the causes of conflict" in those "few truly great questions to which there is no answer". In the collision of the individual with some "unknown power", there is "always a certain mystical element at the essence of tragedy" (IM, 100).

At this point, the exposition curves back towards Lukács' earlier account of romanticism, save that his formerly critical inflection gives way to tones of recommendation. Thus tragedy is celebrated in its opposition to the "rationalist" tendency of "social drama". Because it supposes that, "through institutional change and enlightenment [*felvilágosítás*], certain conflicts can be avoided", rationalism is, in the final analysis, "anti-tragic". (The tragic ending of an Enlightenment drama such as Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* is "forced" upon the play by a mechanism of intrigue.) Tragedy is, by the same token, inherently anti-rationalist; its sources are posited in an inscrutable and unchanging "human nature" [*ember természeté*]. This is the basis of Ibsen's drama from *Rosmersholm* onwards; he works with types who are "born for a tragic fate" and who live their "true life" in the *amorfad* of the moment of destiny (IM, 102).

The highest statement of those beliefs lies, for Lukács, in the artist dramas of Ibsen's last years, where a fundamental antagonism between "art and life" is played out through the fundamentally different psychical dispositions of "man and woman" (IM, 103). We find ourselves once more within a major topos of late romanticism: "The artist must stand apart from life if he wishes to represent it; woman is, for him, only line and form; feeling only word and

rhythm. There is necessity in this, for otherwise he could not create" (IM, 104). The lives of both man and woman are sacrificed to the "work" of the former. The tragedy of the artist is primary; the ruin of the woman is consequent upon an "inner struggle" already endured by the artist in the name of creation (*When We Dead Awaken*). He must die to life in order to shape it; art is a "great martyrdom" (IM, 105).

The dialectic which presents Ibsen as, in effect, a composite late romantic tragedian, appears to offer the second term as an antidote to the first. But the immanent mode of Lukács' analysis suspends judgement on precisely this point. His essay describes, but does not in any diagnostic sense acknowledge, a process whereby Ibsen's tragedies consummate and legitimate romantic "disillusion" - a term of critique in the first part of his discussion - within a metaphysic which lays claim to the status of the real. Lukács' unmasking of the ideological condition of disillusion all but succumbs, in the second part of his discussion, to its romantic imago as a condition without illusion. In these last terms it is tragedy that does the unmasking, stripping us of the illusion that life is, at base, anything other than that. It does so, moreover, by taking as given (and to that extent as its subject), the alienation of life and art which Lukács has already identified as symptomatic of romantic "resignation".

It may be said, therefore, that Ibsen's tragedies transcend resignation only by resigning themselves to that condition. His later work, at least in Lukács' version, does not jettison the romantic legacy, but takes it to an extreme, which is not even a necessary precondition of its abandonment. The crisis to which Ibsen presents a seeming "solution" lies rather within Lukács' own critical schema. Schematically, if not historically, Lukács' Ibsen responds to his Hauptmann: whereas the drama of the latter lacks completeness because its questions cannot be answered, that of the former finds completion in the very unanswerability of the questions which, as it were, ask his work into existence. The path of modern drama, so open to question in the work of Hauptmann, apparently discovers its end in that of Ibsen. Yet the historical resolution decreed by this conclusion stands in uneasy relation to Lukács' earlier critique of dramatic historicism, and is possibly subject to the very complaint that it avowedly remedies. Ibsen's tragedies indeed offer a critical response to modernity's weak conception of its own present, but they point the way beyond that present only by representing a symptom of its historical crisis (the division between life and art) as the principle of universal crisis. Insofar as this "beyond" secedes from history, Ibsen's drama only appears and actually fails to reply to the question of historical prospect previously asked in respect of Hauptmann.

It follows that we may infer an historical uncertainty in Lukács' construction of both dramatists as modern. Modernity is a conception at odds with

itself, not only because it names, at one and the same time, the end and the beginning of an epoch, but because, as a term of critique, it endorses art as the "better made" of its age in a manner that reproduces the same late romantic configuration identified with that age in its decline. What is named as modern art is then projected as the image of historical modernity as it ought to be; art is not only elevated in judgement over life, but in that judgement their present dissociation is absorbed within a form of critical subjunctive, which announces the "ought" in what is. Far from resolving, by its categorical cast, a critical ambivalence towards modernity as it is and ought to be, the announcement that tragedy is the very style of modern drama only serves to inscribe a crisis in judgement within the categories of judgement.

The same crisis structures the emergent poetics of Lukács' first reviews in the real or potential incompatibility of some of the judgements offered there. Ambivalence even has a biographical locus in Lukács' recollection that he was introduced to modern European literature by Max Nordau's *Degeneration*: "I read the book and came to understand what real decadence meant in the work of Ibsen, Tolstoy, Baudelaire, Swinburne and others."<sup>32</sup> Discovery of their writing led him, by the age of fifteen, to "what was for the time an extremely avant garde Western position" - a position hostile to the local values of Hungarian literature. In consequence, he began to write plays "in the manner of Hauptmann and Ibsen", an activity that both furthered his interest in criticism and was terminated in Platonic fashion by that interest when, at the age of eighteen, he burned his manuscripts.<sup>33</sup> Critically, Lukács' retrospect encourages us to redeem the typical from the idiosyncratic: in this case, the convergence of "decadent" and "avant garde" occurs as an expression of opposition to prevalent cultural and political reaction. Given this contest of modernity, Lukács sides with an art which refuses the (exchange) values of a culture in thrall to commerce. In its quality of negation, however, decadent art is susceptible to Nordau's charge of a "degeneracy" which would locate it - the mere illusion of an alternative - within the domain against which it reacts. Nordau's analysis proceeds from an account of the "Symptoms" of degeneration to a "Diagnosis" of their pathology (*Degeneration* chapters two and three). His literally symptomatic reading of the "mystical" character of contemporary art and literature anticipates Lukács' rather wishful discussion of Turgenev, but with a very different inflection. Thus, from the "shadowy thinking of the mystic" emerges a "washed-out style of expression" whose "shapeless representations" take the form of a language "the cloudy, chaotic sense of which is intelligible only to himself".<sup>34</sup> Where Lukács praises such qualities in Turgenev (to whose *Nest of Gentlefolk* Nordau refers), he does so

as a form of refusal of philistinism. But this negative advocacy sits uneasily with a simultaneous call for "realism" of representation on stage. The hesitation between - or conflation of - these distinct dramatic modes is itself symptomatic of the ambivalent politics of Lukács' reviews, which display, by turns, a version of Ibsenite aristocratic disdain and a keen sense of intervention in the cultural sphere.

Lukács was not unaware of the problematic status of the modern. In "Berlin in July", his second published article, he defends the "secessionist" exhibition in that city against the accusation that "art is degenerating" [*hanyatlik*] (IM, 16). But he does so in precisely the terms which Nord identifies with that condition. The gallery is proclaimed a "temple to art" for the few who appreciate "quality", and the art is admired for a "philosophical refinement" quite different in outlook to the painterly fare which "surveys the world from coffeehouse windows". Munch is given special mention, although Lukács is obliged to confess that he does not understand much of his work. This is, however, "the case with a number of symbolist artists", who ask to be understood "not with the mind, but with the emotions"; where we do not follow, concludes Lukács, "the fault lies in us" (IM, 18). It is here that he declares symbolism the herald of a classical "renaissance" in the arts; whether indeterminate or overdetermined, what matters is the endeavour of the "symbol" to signify.

Paradigmatic in this respect is the all-signifying ambition of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and in Lukács' enthusiasm for that model of artistic totality we can place his criticism within one of the most celebrated conjunctures of the decadent and the modern, Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner* (1888). Where Lukács perceives (or indeed performs) the contradictory relation of these terms, Nietzsche insists on their paradoxical interdependence, acknowledging the decadence necessary to his own critique of decadence: "I am, no less than Wagner, a child of this time; that is, a decadent: but I comprehended this, I resisted it."<sup>35</sup> He resisted philosophically, through a dialectic which understands decadence as mystifying by mistaking the causes and effects of cultural decline. In the domain of art, whose function is to organise experience in an aesthetically meaningful way, decadence represents disaffection with life (*ressentiment*) as the effect rather than the cause of the alienation of art and life. But just as decadence offers its own diagnosis of sickness, to which it declares itself the only possible cure, so Nietzsche claims that the philosopher needs Wagner even as he rejects him: "Through Wagner modernity speaks most intimately, concealing neither its good nor its evil [...]. Wagner sums up modernity. There is no way out, one must first become a Wagnerian."<sup>36</sup> If his modernity is, nonetheless, a false dawn, that is in part because he "was unable

to create from a totality", but could offer instead only a "patchwork" of motifs whose unity is, in a surrogate sense, purely stylistic.<sup>37</sup> Wagner is said to have "invented a style for himself charged with 'infinite meaning' [...] - Music as 'idea' ". The "totality" of the work of art is an idea alone; Wagnerian opera is decreed the ignominious "heir of Hegel" in "its playing hide-and-seek behind a hundred symbols, its polychromy of the ideal".<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche perceives that style assumes an artlessly conceptual role, which in turn needs to be conceptualised. Style is, in this account, a means of "inducing intimations" of a significance, which does not inhere in the work itself: "To speak in the language of the master: infinity, but without melody."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, one can conceive of decadence in the arts as itself a style. Not only is it "the sign of every *literary decadence*" that "the whole is no longer a whole", but this must be seen "as the simile of every style of *decadence*: every time, the anarchy of atoms, disaggregation of the will".<sup>40</sup> That being the case, decadence is, in more ways than one, the style of modernity: different evaluations are implied in the differently dialectical function attributed to each term. Decadence represents itself as the stylistic overcoming of one modernity for another; Nietzsche represents it as modernity's stylistic double. Where Lukács hails a news classicism, Nietzsche identifies "romanticism through and through". Implicated in this stylistic characterisation of modernity is its historiography, for the critical tensions evident in Lukács' reviews may be considered an index of, in Nietzsche's sense, their proper "untimeliness". Yet this necessary quality of critique - which in Nietzsche' *Untimely Meditations* inaugurates an account of the romantic pre-history of modernity - is given a more acute inflection when, from a Hungarian context, Lukács announces as progressively of moment the same Germany which Nietzsche has lamented "the most retarded civilized nation in Europe".<sup>41</sup>

These tensions likewise inform Lukács' response to historicism in the arts. His vision of "great style" as the model of cultural and historical authenticity is particularly open to question where specific works are recommended. Wagner's operas offer only one such instance; the single Hungarian example unequivocally associated with this stylistic renaissance - Budapest's Museum of Applied Art - is, in its millennial aggrandisement of the present, analogous to the forms of historical misrepresentation denounced by Lukács in the drama. The museum, instantly dubbed "the palace of the gipsy king", employs a language of folkloristic motifs in notably grandiloquent fashion; it dresses the present in an image of the past designed to affirm the continuity of one thousand years of the Hungarian nation. By means of such historical pastiche, the millenium is legitimised as both a second founding of the nation and a peculiarly "timeless" moment wherein history describes a mythical circle.<sup>42</sup>

The literally crowning moment of 1896 - the presentation of Franz Joseph's regalia to the Hungarian parliament - reminds us that artistic mediation of this imperial(ist) mythopoeia can be located within the wider context of Habsburg decline. János Nyíri has observed that, within the Dual Monarchy, the rise of national self-confidence in Hungary was accompanied, in liberal Austria, by a loss of confidence in "the rational structure of history".<sup>43</sup>

Within this cultural convergence, Lukács' reviews can finally be related to a critical discourse of "style" which crystallises around the specifically Viennese idea and institution of *Secession*. Elements of his polemic are, in the first instance, anticipated by Hermann Bahr, the leading ideologue of the movement, whose *Studien zur Kritik der Moderne* (1891) perceived the "sickness of our century" as a double malaise: "Life has become transformed, down to its very depths, and is transformed anew from day to day, restless and unstable. But the spirit remains old and rigid - motionless, immobile - and now it is suffering, lonely, deserted by life."<sup>44</sup> As an artistic formation, the Secession was founded in 1897 in reaction to an Academy whose stylistic model was a history painting equally "deserted by life". This academicism exemplified what Hermann Broch has called "the non-style of the nineteenth century", a style tending "toward bourgeois restriction and bourgeois pomp".<sup>45</sup> Both Bahr and, in retrospect, Broch characterise this style by its eclectic facade of "false Baroque, false Renaissance, false Gothic", at once retouching and refusing the transformations of modernity.

Bahr's criticism of Vienna's *Ringstraße*, the principal monument to Habsburg historicism and hubris, conceives of turn of the century Vienna as the site of a contest for the modern. Against the "frenzied" and "profligate modernity" of the Ring, a "colossal quarry of motifs" plundered from history, he opposes the "up to date [*neueste*] modernity" of the "young architects of the Secession".<sup>40</sup> The project of the latter is an architecture which will express rather than conceal its function: "Earlier, people used to require that a building should 'look like something'; we demand that it should 'be something'."<sup>47</sup> This projected reintegration of the aesthetic and the social aspires to a vision of culture as, normatively, a unity of style and function. Here we find the same imperative reproduced in Lukács' demand that drama must represent modernity as it really is, yet in a style remote from the purely contingent details of everyday life: this newly modern aesthetic strips modernity of its experiential contingency in order to reveal the pattern behind its shape-shifting and day-to-day aspect. As with Lukács' agenda for symbolist drama, modern art is held to preserve a critical distance from modern life in order to show what modernity might be - a double moment captured in Bahr's observation that: "The modern exists in our desire alone, and yet is everywhere around and



outside us. [...] We need only take within that which lies without and we shall both cease to be strangers."<sup>48</sup> Through this fantastic ingestion of the "modernism", ascribed by Bahr to the "aesthetic revolution" which overturns naturalism, modern art *becomes* (the simulacrum of) modernity: "The nature of the artist [is] no longer to be the mere instrument of reality, in the service of its perfect likeness; on the contrary, reality once more [becomes] the stuff of the artist, in order that its nature might be proclaimed in clear and powerful symbols."<sup>49</sup>

Lukács' secessionist affinities make it plain that even the most powerfully normative aspects of his poetics are inflected by the crisis of modernity against which they are directed. Foremost among these is the incipient Hegehanism of his demand for "typicality". Although mobilised against dramatic historicism, both this term and the implicated category of "totality" lend themselves as much to the symbolic confection of modernity as to its critique. In sum, this first phase of Lukács' criticism is structured by an "ambivalence" towards modernity inherent within its conception and experience as an epoch of envisaged order and actual chaos. Modernity is an era of disfunctional reason whose social and cultural forms cannot be sustained; modern existence, as Zygmunt Bauman has remarked, "forces its culture into opposition to itself, thereby engendering a "form of life [...] of continuous restlessness" evacuated of any present (fulfilled) sense of the present."<sup>50</sup> Those cultural forms which, in reaction, pursue or propose an ethical and aesthetic totality resistant to rationality may thus be understood to be driven by the dynamic which they oppose. The "symbolic" mode of the latter forms is complementary - and in no way alternative - to the "allegorical" mode of an anxious rationalism which, in Hermann Broch's analysis, "leers backwards in order to uncover in some former earthly reality the rules it needs for an evaluation of the present".<sup>51</sup> Symbolism does not inaugurate a new epoch; it takes us beyond historicism only by taking us beyond history. Allegory, on the other hand, evacuates the present in its resort to the "abstract particularity" which Lukács, in "The Ideology of Modernism", would come to lament as the general fate of modern literature and art. Yet, with his earliest work in mind, we may well hesitate before the late critique that: "Modern allegory, and modernist ideology, [...] destroy the *typical*".<sup>52</sup> Here, it seems, the categorical judgement to which Lukács' first criticism aspired is achieved at the primary cost of an ambivalence refused.

## Notes

1. Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life*, trans. R. Livingstone, ed. I. Eörsi (London: Verso, 1983), 32. The interviews in *Record of a Life* were conducted between March and May 1971, the month of Lukács' death.
2. *Ibid.*, 33.
3. György Lukács, *A modern dráma fejlődésének története*, 2 vols (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1911), I, iv. This work has been republished in one volume, ed. Ferenc Kőszeg (Budapest: Magvető, 1978). Further page references are to the latter edition, and are incorporated within the text.
4. Anglophone discussion of Lukács' early drama criticism is available only within the conspectus of intellectual biography. See Lee Congdon, *The Young Lukács* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), ch. 1; and Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), ch. 2.
5. Jörg K. Hoensch, *A History of Modern Hungary, 1867-1986*, trans. Kim Traynor (London and New York: Longman, 1988), 37.
6. John Lukács, *Budapest 1900: An Historical Portrait of a City and its Culture* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1989), ch. 3 *passim*.
7. John Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 3rd edn (New York: Dover, 1954), 1178.
8. György Lukács, *ifjúkori művek* (1902-1918) [Early Works], ed. Árpád Tímár (Budapest: Magvető, 1978), 69. Lukács' article first appeared in *Magyar Szalon* [Hungarian Salon], March 1903. Further references to *Ifjúkori művek* are incorporated within the text, and are annotated only where a new or different work is cited.
9. *Magyar Szalon* (April 1903), 749-51.
10. Lukács, "Berlin júliusban" ["Berlin in July"], *Magyarság* [The Hungarian], 18 July 1902, 1-2.
11. Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 9.
12. Lukács, "A kegyelemkenyér" ["Alms Bread"], *Magyarság*, 20 February 1902, 1-2.
13. J. L. Styan, *Realism and Naturalism (Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, vol. 1) (C.U.P., 1981), ch. 5 *passim*.
14. For further details of Turgenev's play (1849), see the author's entry in the *McGraw-Hill Encyclopaedia of World Drama*, vol. 4 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).
15. *Magyar Szalon*, April 1903.
16. *Magyar Szalon* (May 1903), 847-48.
17. *Magyar Szalon* (January 1903), 401-11.
18. *Magyar Szalon* (February 1903), 497-502.
19. *Magyar Szalon*, January 1903.
20. Quoted in German. Lukács cites the same lines, spoken by Ebba Rosenberg in Fontane's *Unwiederbringlich*, in *Deutsche Realisten des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1952), 282, where he attributes this point of view to Fontane's own "realism".
21. *Magyar Szalon* (December 1902), 309-15.
22. Lukács, "Berlin júliusban".
23. *Magyar Szalon*, March 1903.
24. *Magyar Szalon*, January 1903.
25. *Magyar Szalon*, [Ma.cñ](#) 1903. Lukács quotes Nietzsche's phrase in German.
26. *Magyar Szalon*, January 1903.
27. *Magyar Szalon* (July 1903), 1073-77.

28. *Magyar Szalon*, January 1903.
29. Lukács, "Az új Hauptmann" ["The New Hauptmann"], *Jövendő [Prospect]*, 23 August 1903, 29-32.
30. Lukács suggests that these lines are spoken by the Jewish Dr. Boxer; but although the sentiment may be Boxer's, the words are not to be found in *Der rote Hahn*.
31. Lukács, "Gondolatok Ibsen Henrikről", *Huszádik Század [Twentieth Century]* 7, 8 (August 1906), 127-37.
32. Lukács, *Record of a Life*, 30.
33. *Ibid.*, 31.
34. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* trans. from the 2nd edn (London: Heinemann, 1913 [1893]), 57-58.
35. Friedrich Nietzsche, "*The Birth of Tragedy*" and "*The Case of Wagner*", trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 155.
36. *Ibid.*, 156.
37. *Ibid.*, 177.
38. *Ibid.*, 178.
39. *Ibid.*, 167.
40. *Ibid.*, 177.
41. *Ibid.*, 181.
42. Vera Varga, "Some Reflections on the Decorative Arts of Hungarian Art Nouveau", in *Lélek és forma: Magyar művészet, 1896-1914 [Soul and Form: Hungarian Art, 1896-1914]* (Budapest: Hungarian National Gallery, 1986), p. 59.
43. J. C. Nyíri, "From Eötvös to Musil: Philosophy and its Negation in Austria and Hungary", in *Austrian Philosophy: Studies and Texts*, ed. J. C. Nyíri (Munich: Philosophia, 1981), 21.
44. Hermann Bahr, "Die Moderne", cited in Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna, 1898-1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and their Contemporaries* (London: Phaidon, 1976), 12.
45. Hermann Broch, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and his Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920*, trans. and ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 35 and 33.
46. Bahr, "Die Ringstraße", in *Die Wiener Moderne: Literatur, Kunst und Musik zwischen 1890 und 1910*, ed. G. Wunberg and Johannes J. Braakenburg (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), 108-109.
47. Bahr, *Secession* (1900), cited in Vergo, 90.
48. Bahr, "Die Moderne", in *Die Wiener Moderne*, 189-90.
49. Bahr, "Die Überwindung des Naturalismus", *ibid.*, 200.
50. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 10.
51. Broch, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, 34.
52. Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin, 1963), 43.