

LUKÁCS AFTER ADORNO

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Review of *Georg Lukács and Critical Theory: Aesthetics, History, Utopia*, by Tyrus Miller (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

“The aura that continues to grace the name of Georg Lukács, even outside the Soviet bloc, he owes to the writings of his youth – to the volume of essays *Soul and Form*, to *The Theory of the Novel*, and to the studies collected as *History and Class Consciousness*”. So begins Adorno’s (1991a: 216) “Extorted Reconciliation”, his notoriously hostile review of Lukács’s *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Though the “Lukács revival” of the last decade has gone some way to restoring Lukács’s philosophical standing, it is still through Lukács’s early works that most recent critics have sought to recuperate aspects of his

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thought: most notably, the concept of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*. Tyrus Miller's essays in *Georg Lukács and Critical Theory: Aesthetics, History, Utopia* advance an appealing argument for a broader reading of Lukács's thought across his 60 years of writing. The book's titular conjunction of Lukács and critical theory does not, thankfully, precede a study of the relation between Lukács and what we know as the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Indeed, retrieving Lukács from his long exile to precisely this domain of intellectual history has been a common objective across the recent "Lukács revival". Instead, in his introduction, Miller sets out to disencumber Lukács of "the polarized Cold War frameworks" that have shaped his reception, most prominently by Adorno, and revitalize his thought through a more expansive reading of his works. Miller's introduction revisits the "long goodbye" between Lukács and critical theory through a reassessment of Adorno's critique of Lukács, a critique whose exemplary instance is "Extorted Reconciliation": an "unwarrantedly authoritative" polemic, according to Miller, that has for too long distorted perceptions of the works Lukács produced after the 1920s (p. 3–4). The originality of Miller's interpretation of such a familiar essay consists of his framing its now rather overdrawn modernism–realism opposition as a more fundamental "argument about the educative function of culture and critique". Thus, writes Miller,

[w]e can sum up the fundamental terms of that debate as the confrontation of two conceptions of education, which literary criticism and theoretical reflection should serve: 'education into maturity', which Adorno

advanced with both Kantian and Weberian accents, or education as preparation for historical action, as Lukács after his turn to Marxism persistently believed (p. 19).

It is through understanding Adorno and Lukács as dissenting thinkers within the circumstances and constraints of their respective Cold War blocs that we might return anew to problems that emerge between their mutually insufficient positions. The appeal of Miller's approach as the basis for a broader reconsideration of Lukács's writings is obvious, given the substantial body of work omitted from most recent critical assessments of his thought. Perhaps more surprisingly, given Adorno's "victory" over Lukács in "Extorted Reconciliation", it also offers a productive way of reading Adorno. Thus, in the book's fifth chapter, an essay considering the "anti-avantgardism" of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* through Adorno's negative appraisal of surrealism, Miller approaches Adorno from the premise that "[t]he intensity of Adorno's critical focus was bought [...] at the price of a set of exclusions that, for all their evident differences, appear as restrictive and defensive as those of Lukács in his anti-modernist advocacy of 'critical realism'" (p. 106).

Although the essays of *Georg Lukács and Critical Theory* tackle disparate topics, Miller's return to the Adorno–Lukács arguments proves a useful framing for relating aesthetics to concepts of history and utopian thought across the book's three sections: on Lukács, Adorno, and one simply titled "Critical Theory". In the first, on Lukács, we have essays comparing utopianism in his early aesthetics with contemporaneous works by Ernst Bloch, on drama and historical action in Lukács's liter-

ary criticism, and on the visual arts in Lukács's aesthetics; second, on Adorno, three essays covering the avant-garde and surrealism, the avant-garde and kitsch, and opera. The third section comprises essays on perversion and utopia in Sade and Fourier, the relation between interdisciplinarity and the critique of authoritarian culture from the Frankfurt School to the musealization of historical communism in post-socialist Hungary, Dewey's response to the Moscow trials and Lukács's late writings on democratization in the Soviet bloc, and a brief conclusion on István Eörsi's dramatization of his interviews with Lukács. Of the latter, the essay on Dewey and the Moscow trials is especially timely given recent interest in the theorization of democracy across Lukács's writings, and demonstrates the critical value of the more expansive reading of Lukács demanded by the essays of the first section. For this reason, it is in the opening essays on Lukács where Miller's approach of "constellating" established topics in critical theory in new contexts is most productive, and on which the rest of this review will focus.

Most important in this respect is the first essay, where, through a reading of messianism and utopianism in the early writings of Bloch and Lukács, Miller develops a programmatic thesis for understanding Lukács's thought as a whole. Here, Bloch's and Lukács's "shared terminology of utopia" encompasses two incompatible theories of art's relation to utopia, which diverge through Lukács's emphasis on form (p. 32). For Bloch, Miller writes, "art has no specificity and no autonomy [...], but rather flows into a utopian continuum urging towards future salvation" (p. 39). In contrast, in the unpublished *Heidel-*

berg Philosophy of Art (1912–14), Lukács attempts to develop a neo-Kantian aesthetic theory in which art has an autonomous objectivity, regulated by the formal immanence of the artwork. Hence, Miller writes,

for Lukács, the artwork realizes utopia as *present reality* with no direct relation to the future in its extra-aesthetic dimension. The realized utopian perfection of the artwork demonstrates only that utopia *already exists* in the real world, but only aesthetically. At the same time, thus, the artwork also indexes its own inefficacy with respect to the future and to the solution of the problems of life (p. 42).

That is to say, the utopian dimension of the artwork resides not in its relation to the future, but in its very formal separation from any domain of action in which the future might be brought about. Where Miller’s treatment of this material is most interesting is in the continuity he discerns between Lukács’s early aesthetics and his later realism. Whereas Bloch’s utopianism emphasizes the latent futurity immanent to art, the formal specificity of the artwork in Lukács’s early writings necessarily separates the utopian dimension of art from the anticipation of the future. Lukács’s subsequent turn to realism (and implicitly his opposition to modernism) can thus be read as an attempt to understand the possibilities for historical action under the constrained circumstances of the present. Therefore, Miller suggests, Lukács’s post-1919 writings as a whole may be construed as “a series of answers to the question of what a *decelerated* path to socialism might mean” (p. 38).

Defining Lukács's life's work as an attempt to navigate a delayed or deferred path to socialism is an original and appealing way to conceptualize his thought as a whole, and provides a way to read Lukács beyond the limited selection of works for which he is best known. Though this approach is not without problems, which I shall consider briefly below, its critical value is clear from how it frames the book's subsequent essays on Lukács. It is worth noting that the connection Miller draws between Lukács's theories of literary realism and his broader writings on aesthetics might address a notorious problem in Lukács's writings on realism: his simultaneous use of realism as a category of cultural form, and as a category of literary periodization that is inappropriate to the history of cultural forms other than the novel. Identifying Lukácsian realism with the theorization of historical action, which can be construed through forms other than the novel, offers a way to suspend this problem. Miller's positioning of realism within Lukács's wider philosophical concerns is particularly effective across the impressive range of material covered in the subsequent essay, on drama and historical action. Here, Miller argues that it is drama, as much as Lukács's better-known studies of prose narrative, that sustains Lukács's lifelong preoccupation with the problem of historical action. "Drama", Miller writes, "in revealing the regulative anthropological conditions of human action, has a close proximity to the *philosophy of history*" (p. 75). From here, Miller will suggest in a later essay that the position opera occupies in Adorno's musical criticism is analogous to the position of drama in Lukács's literary criticism: "a concentrated site where histori-

cal experience could be performatively mediated” (p. 144). If, as Fredric Jameson (1974: 163) wrote, Lukács’s writings form “a continuous and lifelong meditation on narrative”, then Miller’s essay makes a persuasive argument that it is through drama – prose narrative’s dialectical counterpart in Lukács’s studies of the novel – that we might understand Lukács as a theorist of historical action. Thus, we might in turn emphasize critique over reconciliation in Lukács’s studies of the realist novel. And, as Miller contends in the book’s following essay, on Lukács and visual arts, Lukács’s thought may appear “profoundly out of step with contemporary art and aesthetics”, but for that reason it retains a critical non-contemporaneity of unrealized possibilities in its conception of realism (p. 81).

A key aspect of Miller’s essays on Lukács, then, is a rigorous and expansive reappraisal of Lukács’s theory of realism. This aspect is worth emphasizing, for such a reappraisal has been notably absent in both the recent anglophone literature on Lukács and the concurrent but largely separate revival of critical interest in literary realism. But what of Lukács’s studies of prose narrative before, as he wrote in a 1940 letter to Béla Balázs, “Balzac took the place of Flaubert, Tolstoy that of Dostoevsky, and Fielding that of Sterne” (Kadarkay 1991: 357)? Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Sterne: here one thinks, of course, of *The Theory of the Novel*, which, along with *History and Class Consciousness*, Miller mostly leaves outside his purview. These two works, Miller argues, “are rather exceptional in [Lukács’s] overall corpus” and have effaced a broader body of thought that, as Miller’s book demonstrates, is far more vital than often supposed (p. 59). The

problem here is that it is difficult to frame Lukács's defence of realism through the broader question of critical education that Miller discerns in Adorno's quarrel with Lukács – and thus the problem of historical action within a decelerated path to socialism – without also considering why *The Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness* are exceptional works that present substantive discontinuities with Lukács's later writings.¹ Indeed, Adorno's own writings on literature are so indebted to Lukács's earlier works that "Extorted Reconciliation" may be understood as an early-Lukácsian critique of Lukács's later theoretical positions. Here it is helpful to remember a point Jameson (e.g., 2012: 124) has repeatedly emphasized, that the modernism–realism opposition through which the Adorno–Lukács arguments are usually viewed obscures the distinction between an aesthetic category (modernism) and an epistemological one (realism). The critique of Lukácsian realism in "Extorted Reconciliation" can thus also be read as an argument over the adequacy of the historical present as a standpoint for mediating critical thought's opposed moments of negativity and positive social content. Or, from another angle, we might say that the positivity of critical realism supplanting the negativity of the critique of reification at the centre of Lukács's thought involves not only a diminished horizon of revolutionary expectation, but a changed understanding of the actuality of the present. Perhaps,

1 Miller's contention that anglophone scholarship has selectively emphasized *The Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness* is also rather dubious with respect to the former: one struggles to think of a more recent complete study in English than Jay Bernstein's *The Philosophy of the Novel* (1984). And in the UK, at least, students of literature are far more likely to encounter Lukács as a theorist of realism or the historical novel than through *The Theory of the Novel*.

then, a more dialectical solution to what Adorno (1991b: 31) once diagnosed as “the crisis of literary concreteness” would be a realism orientated towards the *untruth* of the present.

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