

## "Young" Lukács: tragic, utopian and romantic?

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### **ABSTRACT**

Given the controversial character of "Young" Lukács' intellectual course, especially in what concerns the works *Soul and Form* and *The theory of the novel*, the main purpose of the present paper is to outline Lukács' course in his youth phase, based on his own texts and statements, aiming at questioning certain characteristics attributed to this important period of his intellectual production.

**Keywords:** Lukács' aesthetics, Romanticism, Sciences of the Spirit

Right from the start one must call the reader's attention to the fact that Lukács may be considered one of the most remarkable thinkers of contemporary Marxist culture. Such evaluation, by the way, is not only the result of his interpreters, who, in a way or another, gathered round the Hungarian thinker's works, but also of his opponents.

Here we do not intend to unravel the author's intellectual and political evolution in all its complexity, inasmuch as "Georg Lukács' intellectual evolution offers a singular image of the formation and becoming of a personality in the agitated conditions of a no less singular century, due to its complexity and the dramatic character of its history".<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, which other contemporary thinker was able to critically and deliberately, as he did for several times, give up the prestige of established works? This resignation became totally divorced from his works, and even expressed a complete lack of identity of an author, whose texts would have made, each one *per se*, the unconfessed and always longed glory in anyone's carrier, including the best and most respectable writers.

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<sup>1</sup> TERTULIAN. L'évolution de la pensée de Georg Lukács. *L'Homme et la Société*, n. 20, p. 15.

This detachment, which meant a great demand towards himself - which never became arrogance and pedantry, nor self-proclamation of merit, or into self-sufficiency, despite the enormous theoretical solitude his work was submitted to, this acute sense of responsibility of being a man and an intellectual emerged very early at his first steps.

The decision of burning all his literary writings at the age of 18 (1903) has certainly the distinctive flavor of a youth burst – some dramas à la Ibsen and Hauptmann (written in the previous three years), which he definitely judges as "terribly bad". Unusual gesture, for its very youthfulness, and especially because it resulted in "a secret criterion to establish the frontiers of literature, namely: whatever I could also write was bad. Literature begins where I have the impression of not being able to write the work in question".<sup>2</sup>

Due to these exact reasons, our purpose is much more modest: we intend here only to outline Lukács' course in his youth phase, building from his own writings and statements and aiming at questioning certain characteristics attributed to this important period of his intellectual production.

Much less dramatic than the fact reported above, though not less meaningful is the episode which involves Lukács' first book, *History of modern drama evolution*, whose first version was concluded about four years later. As a student at the School of Languages in Budapest, Lukács undertakes, from 1904 to 1909, a large project in the drama field, through the foundation of *Thalia Bühne (Thalia Gesellschaft)*, of which he was one of the directors. It is his participation in Hungarian intellectual radicalism, that identified in drama the most appropriate instrument to promote the "consciousness subversion" he aimed at. It is from this concrete effort in the artistic field, from the reflection on several dramaturgic questions, practically confronted, that emerged his work *Modern Drama*. Awarded a prize for this work in 1908, Lukács is driven to despair: "I did not consider all those people (the jury) competente to judge the subject. Therefore, awarding the prize to me meant that there should be some kind of problem in my book." It is very expressive, of the Lukácsian trace here pointed out, the fact that he confesses that "he looked for this kind of problem in vain", and that, in this case, help had come from Leo Popper, whom he considered "may be the greatest talent" he ever met in life, and of whom he also claimed to "have an infallible sense of quality". This help did not consist in the indication of what did not work in the book, but rather in what "worked well". He, then, much later, without undeserving Leo Popper's help, evaluating the work again from another analytic reference, remembered: "the philosophy implicit in my book on drama is, in fact, Simmel's philosophy,<sup>3</sup> which, in the context of the Hungarian literary history from the beginning of the century, however, meant a whole contrast with the

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<sup>2</sup> LUKÁCS. *Pensamento vivido* - Autobiografia em diálogo, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> LUKÁCS. *Pensamento vivido* - Autobiografia em diálogo, p. 36.

insufficiency of positivist variables, both of the official literary position and its opponents, among which also a subjectivist impressionism expressed itself, in its narrowness, as an aesthetic position.

In fact, what drove Lukács since the beginning was his search for an interpretation form of the literary expressions that should not simply be abstractions of their peculiar contents. Therefore, in the theoretical opposition he held and under neokantianism, he did not go beyond, at that time, the equation set in *History of the evolution of modern drama*: the pure intellectual synthesis between sociology and aesthetics, under the support and help of Simmel's thought, instead of beginning with "the real and direct relations between society and literature, as he will say in the *Preface to Art and Society*; where he also claims that "it is not surprising that from such an artificial posture they had derived abstract constructions", always unsatisfactory, even when they reach some true determination.

In short, what he then did – and the fact that "it worked well" indirectly drove him to despair, without him realizing the nature of the problem - was a brilliant exercise in the *science of spirit*. Only as illustration, it is worth quoting a passage from the *Preface* of the work: "The authentic form of the authentic artist is *a priori*: it is a constant form in view of things, a something without which he could not even perceive them. (...) We were saying: the form is the social reality, it acutely participates in the spiritual life."<sup>4</sup> With abstractionisms of this kind – taking form as a social *a priori* - , which try exactly to amalgamate aesthetics with sociology (or rather, a certain sociology), it is not impossible to succeed, but the literary specificity is left out, as well as the precise human-social content that he remodels in each effective expression. As he wanted the inverse and practised the opposite of what was intended, he had to despair despite the talent revealed in writing the book, which was recognized and laureated.

Being already integrated in the structure of his personality, the "exam of conscience" will later reach, subsequently, two famous books: *Soul and Form* (1911) and *The theory of the novel* (1914 / 15), works which reveal Lukács' moving from Kant to Hegel, reaching its highest point in the latter. This is the course that takes him, without abandoning the field of the so called *sciences of spirit* (Dilthey, Simmel, Weber), from philosophy and the early German sociology by Simmel to a form of *science of spirit* coupled with or trespassed by Hegelianism, responsible for the plot of *Soul and Form*, with stronger emphasis in *The theory of the novel*.

One must remember that these were very well succeeded works, even by the utmost exponent of the German

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<sup>4</sup> LUKÁCS. Dalla Prefazione a *Storia dello sviluppo del Drama Moderno*. In: *Scritti di Sociologia della Letteratura*, p. 77-78.

culture at the time: Thomas Mann was one of the readers who approved of *The theory of the novel*, and who previously claimed that *Soul and Form* was "the most extraordinary thing that had ever been said on this paradoxical theme"; Max Weber, in his turn, who not only, at that moment, influenced Lukács, but was also influenced by him, especially in what regards ethical questions, besides enjoying these two books, was very moved by another of Lukács' texts from that time – *On the poverty of spirit* (1911), to which he referred as "a deeply artistic essay", where, "to the creative force of love, is concealed the right of breaking the ethical norm". Max Dvorak, a Czech art historian, even considered *The theory of the novel* as the most important work in the scope of the tendency formed by the sciences of spirit.<sup>5</sup> Besides, already in the early 60s, Lucien Goldmann would say that *Soul and Form* "for several reasons marks an essential date in the history of contemporary thought. Firstly, because after several years of academic philosophy, Lukács recovers in this work the great tradition of the classical philosophy, focussing his worries on the problem of the relations between human life and absolute values." Moreover, this work is "probably responsible for the beginning in Europe of the philosophical renaissance that followed the First World War"; thus, Lukács "was the first thinker in XXth century to set the problems that dominate philosophical thought that since Hegel's death had somehow disappeared from European consciousness." Goldmann is not less approving and emphatic towards *The theory of the novel*. It is also in his introduction to *Georg Lukács' first writings* that one can read:

(...) in the *Theory of the novel* the great epic forms are studied, which, contrarily to those that he had elected before, are *realistic*, that is, they are laid, if not on one conception of reality, at least on a positive attitude towards a *possible* reality, whose possibility is based on the *existing world*. (...) Thus, in a time when the crisis of western society had become explicit to all those who, a few years earlier, had not even suspected it, Georg Lukács, who had been one of the first to find it, asserts the category of realistic hope and outlines, for this reason, the central category of his further thought which is the category of *objective possibility*.<sup>6</sup>

This success and acceptance, however, did not prevent Lukács, in his evaluations, from accusing *The theory of the novel*, precisely, of being a topic product of the sciences of spirit; and thus being compromised by its illusionist method, which worked through the intuitive establishing of unfounded abstractions, from which, by deduction, the singular phenomena were approached. The same happened with the previous step of this movement, which struggled to give its back to the speculative-abstract way of understanding and examining literary formations, and of reflecting upon the vital problems of human existence they contain.

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<sup>5</sup> TERTULIAN. L'évolution de la pensée de Georg Lukács. *L'Homme et la Société*, n. 20, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> GOLDMANN. Introduzione a *Teoria del Romanzo*, p. 25. (italics from the original text)

In *The theory of the novel*

the typology of novels was elaborated from an abstract scheme: the kind of novel where the hero's consciousness is narrower than the objective reality zone, producing the attitude of the "abstract idealism" (Don Quixote), and also that novel where the hero's consciousness, because of his interior richness, surpasses reality (the novel of disillusionment, exemplified, among others, by Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*).<sup>7</sup>

We take the opportunity to point out, so that there is no doubt about the nature of Lukacsian self-evaluations, that his dissatisfaction and complete distance from *Soul and Form* is extremely premature. There had hardly passed one year since the work was published, when he was already indifferent towards it; a feeling that he restated, throughout his life, in relation to all his "intellectual works already overcome".

It is in a letter (25/9/1912) to the writer Margarethe Susmann (von Bandemann), who three weeks before had published a review on *Soul and Form*, that we can completely appreciate Lukács' position and behavior, at such a characteristic and illustrative moment, especially because it is far from his properly Marxist flourishing by nearly twenty years.

The Hungarian thinker begins by saying, gently, that nearly all the essential points in his book had been understood and formulated strongly and safely by the reviewer, as only a few had done before; he thanks M. Susmann for having "grasped the most important moment of my course: my concept of form", and he also expresses great satisfaction for her having pointed out "the role of history, as well as the importance of the initial (*On the essence and form of the essay*) and (*Metaphysics of tragedy*) final essays in the summarized book."<sup>8</sup>

However, alike further, already at that far away moment, Lukács explicits, typically, in view of the reviewer's commentaries, a "point of disagreement", which much less censures a wrong interpretation of the book as it is, than denounces a fault in his own work. For the author of *Soul and Form*, Margarethe Susmann converts into a "characteristic trace" that which is the essay's condition", that is: "the ethics of the essay form is the despair which rises from the most ancient internal dissension of this form". In other words, "the inevitable lack of final conclusion is the despair of this book". To this admitted formal commitment of the work, Lukács opposes, at once, the following symptomatic remark, concerning the need of a conclusion: "but – at least as I feel it today – it is already aimed at some times from the distance". And he develops the

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<sup>7</sup> TERTULIAN. L'évolution de la pensée de Georg Lukács. *L'Homme et la Société*, n. 20, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> LUKÁCS. *Epistles* (1902-1917), p. 302-305.

criticism, saying that Susmann “considers this unattainable goal a 'fact' in the history of philosophy, a characteristic of our time”, replying in a harsh and emphatic way:

To me (even at the moment I wrote the initial and final essays) the goal is before me and it is perfectly attainable. However, if I did not reach it, this would not be a 'fact' to draw conclusions from about the essence of metaphysical feeling, but a sentence about myself (and only about myself), about my lack of calling towards philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, Lukács' refusal of the essay lack of conclusion is out of the question, as much as his weak pursuit for a unique and real truth, even if at that time he identified it abstractly to an absolute system, as his own words make evident:

If we refute the possibility of answering the last question, that decides everything, all our categories lose, because of this, their constitutive meaning and each statement of ours about what is beyond and outside us, remains in us, becomes reflexive; we lose our decisive responsibility for the strictness of concepts, which may really happen due to the hierarchic framing in the absolute system.<sup>10</sup>

This is, in fact, the true problem in the Lukácsian criticism to *Soul and Form*, soon after its publication: the lack of conclusion of the work determines his indifference towards it, for differently from what some of his interpreters would like to see, it is not in his spirit, not even in his most idealistic phase, to exult in the enjoyment of the impotent oscillation between “equivalent” opposers and “insurmountable” indeterminations. To him, already at that moment, the incapacity to conclude is a very uncomfortable weakness, which he confesses and longs to overcome. That is what he explains to the reviewer when she states, in the essays on *Soul and Form*, that he never stopped trying to get away from the danger of invalidating the *last question*, so that “all there is in them of apparently subjective, 'poetic', fragmentary came from the effort of trying to be univocal, incisive, responsible – without yet possessing the evident responsibility for the complete system”.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, it is obvious that it is extremely problematic to attribute to Lukács, even at the time of this work, a mere and simple *tragic pathos*, and, much more than that, to extend such state of spirit to his future works.

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<sup>9</sup> LUKÁCS. *Epistles* (1902-1917), p. 302-305.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>11</sup> *Idem.* (italics in the original)

However, to the intents and purposes of what is here shown – his precocious incompatibility with *Soul and Form* – it will be enough to finish with the last part of his letter to Margarethe Susmann:

In fact, from this book, which is probably less than a beginning, I should not expect to be understood, and certainly I could not demand it (as could an act of the spirit that is objective, conclusive). It is, in fact, full of intuitive knowledge about what will come through me, thoughts whose itinerary and end only now become clear – *when the whole and its form became to me absolutely strange*.<sup>12</sup>

The last sentence, italicized by me, was taken up by Lukács fifty five years after it was written and used to make evident that he had always been indifferent in relation to outdated works. It is included in Volume II of his *Complete Works*, precisely in the *1967 Preface*, giving it, due to the importance of the text and the imminent death of the author, greater expressiveness. What should prevail, the force of a somewhat secular, very well articulated testimony, or some rude speculative imputation, among several ones that mediocrity has gifted him?

The diagnosis he presents on *The theory of the novel*, that was mentioned previously, not only does not exclude this work from the flat area of abstractions, in the practice of literary analysis, but also even gives it exemplarity dimension in the order of this analytical debility. Or, in his own words: “*The theory of the novel* is a typical representative of the 'sciences of spirit' and it does not refer to their methodological limitations.”<sup>13</sup> Which is so much more meaningful if one does not leave aside the fact that the design of Lukácsian criticism is consistently shaded, that is, it does not fail to discern and point out valid aspects, partial achievements, brought into effect in this book as in the previous ones. This discernment, however, does not induce him, as it often happens, to weaken critical reflection and, from that, to slip into the common ditch of the relativization of merits and faults. On the contrary, it is upon the differentiated interweaving of these points that the frankness of the result stands out.

The author of *The Theory of the Novel* was looking for a general dialectic of literary genres that would be based upon the essential nature of aesthetic categories and literary forms, also in a historical level; a dialectic that would tend towards a more intimate

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<sup>12</sup> LUKÁCS. *Epistolário* (1902-1917), p. 302-305.

<sup>13</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 285.

connection between category and history than he found in Hegel; he strove towards the intellectual understanding of permanence within change and of inner change within the enduring validity of the essence. But his method remained extremely abstract in many respects, more precisely, within contexts of great importance; it was cut off from concrete socio-historical realities. For this reason (...) it too often leads the author to arbitrary intellectual constructs.<sup>14</sup>

The recognition of different shadings concerning *The theory of the novel* also reaches the extra-theoretical determinations of this book's genesis and, thus, makes its author's intellectual and experiential physiognomy, at the time when he produced the text, even more precise.

The outburst of the 1914 War and its effect on the leftist intellectuality, when it was taken over by social-democracy, is what determines the project of writing *The theory of the novel*. This book originated from a state of spirit of permanent despair before the world situation”,<sup>15</sup> says Lukács, who more than once used one of Fichte's formulas to characterize the image he had of that period: “time of accomplished sinfulness”.<sup>16</sup> This infernal view of an Europe without gaps or horizons, woven with ethically modulated pessimism, makes the Lukács of *The theory of the novel* a primitive utopian, to use an expression nearly identical to the one he used himself. So that he can claim: “*The theory of the novel* is not conservative, but destructive”.<sup>17</sup> And in a more concrete way: “ (...) methodologically, it is a book of history of the spirit. But I think that it is the only book of history of the spirit that is not rightist. From the moral point of view, I consider all that time reprehensible and, in my conception, art is good when it opposes itself to this course”.<sup>18</sup>

There are no stronger expressions than the ones used by the Hungarian philosopher to indicate the utopianism on which his reflection and practical perspective were based then: “primitive”, “extremely naïve”, “totally unfounded” are the qualifiers he uses without any embarrassment. All his hope would be turned to the innocent assumption that “the fall of the dead anti-vital categories, a fall that was identified with that of capitalism, would produce, by itself, only a natural life, worthy of man”.<sup>19</sup> It is something like an anticipation of what in the 1920's would establish itself as an idea of reaction: overcoming the world economy through social movement; and it should not be a scandal to remember that, because of its theoretical and practical characteristics, the Second International is not exempt from responsibility in what

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>15</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> LUKÁCS. *Pensamento vivido* - Autobiografía em diálogo, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 290.

<sup>18</sup> LUKÁCS. *Pensamento vivido* - Autobiografía em diálogo, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 290.



concerns the preparation of this perverse ideality. But, at the time of the composition of *The theory of the novel*, emphasis was put on the other side, and the emerging picture of that ideological nodule had not divided itself yet, so that both, picture and emphasis, belonged to the mistaken generosity of many of those who, like Lukács, adhered to the extinction of the prosaic bourgeois world. In other words, the innocent utopianism that underlies *The theory of the novel* is not a negative privilege of its author, but, in its weak figure, feeds a text that “expresses, despite everything, a spiritual tendency that, effectively, existed at the time”.<sup>20</sup>

Possessed by this mood, something nearly unbelievable today, and attached to a science of spirit formally Hegelian, over which projected Kierkegaardian elements, besides conceiving of the social reality through Sorel's eyes, this is concretely the political-theoretical polymorphism that (dis)organized Lukács mind at thirty years old. Nevertheless, even in this utopian-eclectic scandal, fulfilled and recognised, Lukács, in his reexamination, is capable of digging distinctions, properly finding the pole of positive inflection: “*The theory of the novel* remained a failed intention, be it in the proposition as well as in the execution, though in his intentions he was closer to the adequate way out than were his contemporaries.”<sup>21</sup> The character of this impulsion, which leads him closer to the adequate solution than anybody else, is registered in his own work (which makes the “intentions” something beyond simple desire or the pious vote), for it

outlines – naturally still within the limits of bourgeois literature – the theory of revolutionary novel. At that time there was nothing like this genre yet. There was a conception of novel inspired in the science of spirit, both artistically and ideologically conservative. My *Theory of the novel* was not revolutionary in the sense of the socialist revolutionarianism. However, compared to the literary science and the theory of the novel of the time, it was revolutionary.<sup>22</sup>

The difference between the two revolutionary levels is that

the time of Fichte's accomplished sinfulness means that Europe had decayed, from that pseudo-solidity in which people lived until 1914, to the level where it is today. Consequently, this time of total sinfulness fully corresponds, in the negative sense, to truth. What is missing is what Lenin developed from that, namely, that all society must be radically transformed. (...) In *The theory of the novel* this did not exist yet.<sup>23</sup>

In other deliberately incisive words: in 1915 Lukács ignored Lenin completely, and he was way behind the Marx of 1844. Strong words, moreover, that can not surprise, once the Lukacsian statements always go in

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<sup>20</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 291.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>22</sup> LUKÁCS. *Pensamento vivido* - Autobiografía em diálogo, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

this direction, like, for example, in *Lived Thought*, when, invoking as a document, the novel *The Optimistics*, by Ervin Sinkp, he states:

How confusing was the ideological relation the intellectuals of that time had with communism. To say that I belonged to the group of people who saw things with certain clarity, reveals the magnitude of such confusion. I do not intend to exult myself, I just want to sketch the general mood. The Marxist formation, even of people like me, who had read Marx, was very limited.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, incisiveness that he uses aims much more at the critical identification of that time than at the author's. In short, a time like others, which disfavor and embarrass access to lucidity; in this case, the rise to Marxian thought on the part of a talent intimately and spontaneously biased, without knowing it, towards the theses and resolutions of this tendency. This observation is not the effect of a simple generic conjecture.

In this respect, one may identify two remarkable tendencies, from the beginning that are kept throughout his youth itinerary, which shape or trespass the Lukacsian elaboration. However, incapable as they are of seeing the ways of their effective incarnation, they result, at each effort, in a perversion of themselves. The more general and deep tendency, which guides the man and the thinker, is formed by “a scornful hatred for life under capitalism, which was born in me when I was an adolescent”<sup>25</sup>; the other tendency, restricted to the theoretical scope, aims at overcoming the mere abstract production in scientific activity. Forces of impulsion, however, that disaggregate through the course they are driven to take: the visceral anti-bourgeoisism dissolves itself in ethical utopianism, and anti-abstractivism bites its own tail and reiterates the object of its own rejection.

Both in the project and the accomplishment of *The theory of the novel*, the two references and their *opposites* appear radically, each one by its weaker side empowers the weaker flank of the other: Lukács suffocates himself in the mist of his impotent antibourgeoisism, and yields, once more, to the ruses of abstractivism – of the unreasonable abstraction, corrupted, furthermore, by its imperial transfiguration -, which presents itself again, despite constant rejection, with an aura of solution bearer. The limits, therefore, merge into each other.

The fusion of contradictory tendencies is exactly the diagnosis made by Lukács concerning himself as the author of *The theory of the novel*.

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<sup>24</sup> LUKÁCS. *Pensamento vivido* - Autobiografia em diálogo, p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo (1967) a *Historia y consciência de classe*, p. XI.

Here, one must refer to the famous passage of the 1962 *Preface of The theory of the novel* where this evaluation is explicitly formulated: “Shortly, the author of *The theory of the novel* has a conception of the world based on a fusion between 'leftist' ethics and 'rightist' theory of knowledge (ontology, etc.).” Then, less than two pages further, nearly at the end of the *Preface*, he returns to it, using the even more concise expression in which it became well known: “a synthesis of left wing ethics and right wing epistemology”.<sup>26</sup>

The formula for Lukács does not intend to portray a vice or an intellectual and anemic strictly personal exoticism, but to point at an acutely fallacious position which, in Germany, was only recently adapted with *The theory of the novel*. It was a serious mistake that, in fact, spread out in the ideological production of the 1920's, not through Lukács anymore, but through several other authors. The *Preface* mentions some of them: Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno in their beginnings; and points out that the phenomenon of the “connection between the left wing ethics and the right wing epistemology” in France “was well known” and “had stood out long before than in Germany”, having “in Sartre an influent representative of this kind of attitude”.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to reproduce entirely the comment on Bloch, because it is the most complete and also because this author was a true master key for Lukács, in his formation process. In *Lived Thought*, the Hungarian thinker declares, in his last months of life:

Bloch had a strong influence on me, for with his example he convinced me that it is possible to do philosophy in the traditional way. Up to that time, I was lost among the neokantianism of my time, and then I found in Bloch the phenomenon of somebody who did philosophy as if all current philosophy did not exist, that it was possible to do philosophy like Aristotle or Hegel did.<sup>28</sup>

This recognition does not deny, nor is it contradictory with his incisive criticism towards Bloch himself in the 1962 *Preface*, nearly ten years before:

The fact that Ernst Bloch continued undeterred to cling to his synthesis of 'left' ethics and 'right' epistemology (e.g. cf. *Philosophische Grundfragen I, Zur Ontologie des Noch-Nicht-Seins*, Frankfurt 1961) does honour to his strength of character but cannot modify

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<sup>26</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoria de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 291 e 293.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 291-292.

<sup>28</sup> LUKÁCS. *Pensamento vivido* - Autobiografia em diálogo, p. 39.

the outdated nature of his theoretical position.<sup>29</sup>

In the first case, Lukács is forever thankful to Bloch for being able to disentangle himself, at a crucial moment of his youth, from the gnosiolgism of the beginning of the century. Since then, it was a lesson to all his intellectual existence: the opening of the ontological path that, despite all the vicissitudes he suffered, in the end, proved to be a definite acquisition. In the second case, he disapproves of Bloch's conventional pattern of ontological practice, which his fraternal censor tone only reinforces; his incapacity of breaking up with the limited and distorted theoretical procedures that can only move him away from the purposes shaped by the ethics he undertakes.

But what does the critical *synthesis* consist of?

The answer is, also briefly, in the same *Preface*: “a left ethics oriented towards radical revolution, coupled with a traditional and conventional exegesis of reality.”<sup>30</sup>

The study of the position is entirely distinct from the allusive nature of a mere expressive formula: his criticism hits the two poles of the amalgam – not only their synthesis – and implies in problematic complexes of ideation, namely “the set of mental activities, so contradictory both in the philosophical and in the political levels”,<sup>31</sup> that characterizes *romantic anticapitalism*.

In fact, despite its brief form, Lukács makes his analysis date back to relatively distant points, promoting the inclusion of several elements in the plot of determinations.

He begins by giving an example of the initial moment of the referred line of thought with young Carlyle, a phase in which “this was a genuine critique of the horrors and barbarities of early capitalism”, pointing out immediately after, that, in Germany, “this attitude gradually transformed itself into a form of apology for the political and social backwardness of the Hohenzollern empire.” And to emphasize the meaning of this radical change, elegantly Lukács alludes, without saying it, to Thomas Mann's German-bellucose involvement with the First World War, considering that such an important book as the *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*,

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<sup>29</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 292-293.

<sup>30</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 291-292.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 290.

published by the romanticist in 1918, may be superficially understood as a “work that belongs to the same tendency”, though Mann's evolution in the 1920s justifies the characterization that he himself offered of the text: “It is a retreating action fought in the grand manner, the last and latest stand of a German romantic bourgeois mentality, a battle fought with full awareness of its hopelessness (...) even with insight into the spiritual unhealthiness and immorality of any sympathy with that which is doomed to death (...).<sup>32</sup>

Undoubtedly, Lukács borrows the exceptional force of Mann's sentences to lash out, rigorously, at both the *romantic nostalgia*, and, equally obvious, *the German wretchedness*. In fact, he explicitly establishes an opposition between the author of *The theory of the novel* and the author of *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*. It is a matter of an extreme frontal confrontation, once it takes as a reference the intellectual importance of a rare giant of XXth century literature. It is a comparison that is not favorable to the great romanticist; on the contrary, while in the writer of the *Reflections* one still sees, in his own words, “the spiritual unhealthiness and immorality of any sympathy with that which is doomed to death”, that is, the romantic nostalgia for the “German wretchedness”, Lukács can categorically assure that “no trace of such a mood is to be found in the author of *The Theory of the Novel*”.<sup>33</sup> The Hungarian philosopher, with this intelligent turn, once more defines romanticism, and shows the ambiguity of his own intellectual definition.

Furthermore, one should take into account, if one thinks of the spirit and context of the Lukácsian distinction, that we are not only facing a common inequality between isolated individual consciousness, but that the striking opposition is formulated in connection to the discernment of also opposing modes of suffering the cultural heritage of the “German wretchedness”. On one hand, Mann, until the beginning of the 1920s, though under the form of “a last and latest retreating action of battle”, is connected to the “ideological stylization and sublimation” that, after the Prussian solution of unification, presents Germany as “destined to overcome the contradictions of modern democracy by superior unity”,<sup>34</sup> a mystified expression of his outdatedness; Lukács, on the other, in the unquestionable superiority of his attitude, presents himself, though, fragile because of the debility of what was the enlightenment's opposition to monarchy, between the unification and the end of the First War:

In so far as Wilhelminian Germany had any principled oppositional literature at all, this literature was based on the traditions of the Enlightenment (in most cases, moreover, on the most shallow epigones of that tradition) and took a globally negative view of

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<sup>32</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>33</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 290.

<sup>34</sup> LUKÁCS. *Goethe y su época*. In: *Obras completas*, v. VI, p. 57.

Heritages to which fundamental differences had not lacked importance such as the weight of the German bond, central in Mann, and the peripheral Hungarian lighter connection of intellectual import beyond Lukács, which must have benefited in the latter the understanding of the committed narrowness of European romanticism and nationalism, making him take up very early a posture of aesthetic and existential inquisition with an aristocratic bias – the olympic expectation of the downfall of the inhumanity of the capital -, but of fine and differentiated elaboration, which marks his youth, despite all his limits as well as real and loud insufficiencies.

In strictly conceptual terms, this means that the Lukacsian practice of the sciences of spirit, since the writing of *The theory of the novel*, is disconnected from any romantic *pathos* - typical or atypical. “His opposition to the barbarity of capitalism allowed no room for any sympathy such as that felt by Thomas Mann for the ‘German wretchedness’ or its surviving features in the present.”<sup>36</sup> The tribute paid to the theoretical conservatism lies in the very exercise of *Geisteswissenschaft*. Lukács is extraordinarily precise in treating the question, which is the cornerstone for the understanding of all his pre and protomarxist itinerary. His transit from Kant to Hegel, happens, as he explains in the 1962 *Preface*, “without, however, changing any aspect of my attitude towards the so-called ‘intellectual sciences’ school”<sup>37</sup> and he adds that there is historical justification for this problematic way, for it was the alternative to “the petty two-dimensionality of Neo-Kantian (or any other) positivism in the treatment both of historical characters or relations and of intellectual realities (logic, aesthetics, etc.)”. And he reinforces the argument referring to “the fascination exercised by Dilthey’s *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (Poetry and Living, Leipzig, 1905), a book which seemed in many respects to open up new ground. This new ground appeared to us then as an intellectual world of large-scale syntheses in both the theoretical and the historical fields.” It is an undoubted enthusiastic adhesion, though acritic, for, “we did not account for the fact that the new method had in fact scarcely succeeded in surmounting positivism, or that its syntheses were without objective foundation.”<sup>38</sup>

An explicative framework of this kind had already been given, nearly thirty years before, in *My Road to Marx*. It is, however, worth transcribing it entirely, not only because it is the time proof of the Lukacsian auto-diagnosis, but also because it offers support to a more integral view of the problem and of the future evolution of the author, particularly on what concerns his total refusal of Kantism; *audacity* which became, at the same time, a most relevant factor for the configuration of his works, as well as the unconfessed motive

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<sup>35</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 291.

<sup>36</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoría de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 290.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 282.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 282-283.

of certain wrath he collects, today more than ever, and that do not forgive him for having given his back to the “Copernican revolution”, which dismantled the philosophers of last century. Finally, here are the remarks he makes in 1933 concerning his remote youth:

The neo-Kantian thesis of “immanence of consciousness ” adjusted itself perfectly to my class position at the time; I did not subject it to any critical exam, but accepted it passively as a starting point of all and any position of the gnosiologic problem. In fact, I kept a constant suspicion towards the extreme subjective idealism (both of the neo-Kantian school of Marburg and of Mach's), since I did not understand how the problem of reality problem could be defined, simply considering it simply as an immanent category of consciousness. Although this did not lead me to materialistic conclusions, it ended leading me much more closer to those philosophical schools that wanted to solve this problem an irrational, relativistic and even, many times, mystic way (Windelband-Rickert, Simmel, Dilthey). (...) Following Simmel's example I, on one hand, separated, as much as possible, “sociology” from its economic foundation, conceived of in a quite abstract way, and, on the other, saw via sociologic analysis, only the initial stage of the true and real scientific research in the field of aesthetics. My essays published between 1907 and 1911 oscillated between this method and a mystic subjectivism.<sup>39</sup>

In short, the profile of theoretical conservatism is sketched and cognitive conventionalism of the sciences of spirit is made evident. However, the centralization of the denunciation over the *Geisteswissenschaften* is not equivalent to the simple critical reiteration of the same unaltered representative act; on the contrary, it is the denunciation of a matrix that is irradiated by several diversifications, integrating pluralized composed procedures.

The variant consubstantiated in *The theory of the novel*, by its Hegelian inflection, emphasizes differences and sharpens contrasts, making even more visible the high conservative tribute paid by the Lukacsian analytical procedures at that time, as it is made evident by the anticonservative tension itself, in which the author produces his thought, and that appears, circumstantially though not by chance, as a difficult and nuanced fight against neo-Kantism, contradictorily conducted inside and through the Kantian atmosphere of the sciences of spirit, of which, as has already been remarked, Lukács had not freed himself, nor will soon. In the 1962 *Preface*, the remarks concerning it are transparent. The author says:

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<sup>39</sup> LUKÁCS. Meu caminho para Marx. In: *Marx Hoje*, v. 1, p. 92-93.

We have already pointed out that the author of *The Theory of the Novel* had become a Hegelian. The other leading representatives of the 'intellectual sciences' methods based themselves on Kantian philosophy and were not free from traces of positivism; this was particularly true of Dilthey. Any attempt to overcome the flat rationalism of positivists nearly always meant a step in the direction of irrationalism; this applies especially to Simmel, but also to Dilthey himself.

Beside this, a double heterodoxy, the Hegelian follower of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the heterodoxy of his Hegelianism: "But the author of *The Theory of the Novel* was not an exclusive or orthodox Hegelian; Goethe's and Schiller's analyses, certain conceptions of late Goethe (e.g. the demonic), 'young Friedrich Schlegel's and Solger's aesthetic theories (irony as a modern method of form-giving), complement and make more concrete the general Hegelian outline." And, characterizing that, on the ground of aesthetics, the main result of the Hegelian renewal was the " historicisation of aesthetic categories", he argues very symptomatically:

Kantians such as Rickert and his school put a methodological chasm between timeless value and historical realisation of values. Dilthey himself saw the contradiction as far less extreme, but did not (in his preliminary sketches for a method of a history of philosophy) go beyond establishing a meta-historical typology of philosophies, which then achieve historical realisation in concrete variations (...).

To conclude, we focus on some decisive aspects, as has already been made evident here:

The world-view at the root of such philosophical conservatism is the historico-politically conservative attitude of the leading representatives of the 'intellectual sciences'. Intellectually this attitude goes back to Ranke and is thus in sharp contradiction to Hegel's view of the dialectical evolution of the world spirit.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> LUKÁCS. Prólogo a *La Teoria de la Novela*. In: *Obras completas*, v. I, p. 285-286.



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