

György Lukács. *Soul and Form*. Edited by John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis. Translated by Judith Butler. Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. ix + 252 pp. \$84.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14980-8; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-14981-5.

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A Tale of Two Books

This is a reissued translation of a 1971 reissue of Georg von Lukács's *Die Seele und die Formen/Essays*, first published in 1911. As the editors note, however, it can be considered a centennial edition, the Budapest house of Franklin-Társulat having released the Hungarian-language *A lélek és a formák. Kísérletek* in 1910. Although the German edition is, in large measure, a translation from the Hungarian, the differences are important for an understanding of the young Lukács and the evolution of his thought.

Unlike Lukács's *A modern dráma fejlődésének története* (History of the evolution of the modern drama), published in 1911, *A lélek és a formák* was a personal book inspired by a woman—Irma Seidler. Lukács met the aspiring artist at a friend's home on December 18, 1907; there ensued a whirlwind romance highlighted by a trip to Italy, chaperoned by Lukács's friend and confidant, the critic Leó Popper. Irma, we know, hoped that the romance would eventuate in marriage, but Lukács chose not to propose. In an essay on Henrik Ibsen written before he met Irma, he had identified a problem that never ceased to preoccupy him: "Eternal, irreconcilable adversaries; they who were intended for each other, the man and the woman, art and life." [1] For Lukács, Irma was "the woman" and "life"; he feared that marriage would draw him away from the work he intended to do and back into the conventional world of the bourgeoisie, a world into which he had been born but against which he

rebelled.

As Lukács later observed when referring to Thomas Mann's famous short story, "the Tonio Kröger problem ... was a major influence in determining the main lines of my early work." [2] Tonio's "problem" was the gulf that existed between art and life, between a sensitive artist and those—like Ingeborg Holm, whom he loved—who live life without reflection and soul searching. This helps to explain why Lukács devoted a *Lélek és a formák* essay to the relationship between Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen. Although he was among the first European thinkers to concern himself with the Danish forerunner of modern existentialism, his interest in Kierkegaard's decision to break his engagement to Regine stemmed from his own decision with regard to Irma.

Like the other essays in *A lélek és a formák*, Lukács regarded the chapter on Kierkegaard as an "experiment" (*kísérlet* can be translated as "essay," but it includes the broader meaning of "experiment") in self-understanding, a *means* by which to address the great questions of his own intellectual/spiritual quest. In turn, self-understanding was a first step in achieving a more profound understanding of the "forms," metaphysical essences alienated from "the chaotic multiplicity of life" (p. 44)—just as human beings (especially men and women) were alienated from one another. Forms constituted true reality, true life. An immersion in everyday life

could only lead an artist away from the forms of which his world was composed. “Kierkegaard’s heroism [and tragedy] was that he wanted to create forms from life” (p. 56).

Soul and Form is a book about the tragic alienation of form from life and of one human being from another. The Hungarian edition comprised an introduction (“Letter on the ‘Experiment’”) and seven “experiments,” five of which had originally appeared in the modernist literary review *Nyugat* (West). Following the Austrian writer Rudolf Kassner, who introduced him to Kierkegaard’s work, Lukács identified two types of artist: the creator (poet) and the critic (Platonist). Both strive for form, to move, that is, “from the accidental to the necessary” (p. 39). Only that which is necessary, that which cannot be other than it is, expresses the Being—the soul—of man. To reach the soul, everything accidental has to be stripped away, much as a sculptor chisels a block of marble until his subject’s form is revealed.

Lukács wrote his Theodor Storm experiment especially for *A lélek és a formák*. It sheds light on his critique of contemporary bourgeois life as the foundation for a decadent impressionism or “aesthetic culture.” Influenced by Richard Hamann’s *Der Impressionismus in Leben und Kunst* (1907), Lukács had come to regard the entire culture of fin-de-siècle Europe as impressionist, obsessed with individual moods and momentary impressions. In his drama book, he had written that a tragic age, like that of his own time, was “the heroic age of a class’s [in this case the bourgeoisie’s] decline, when people representing the highest capacities of a class, heroic types, perceive their typical experience, the experience symbolizing their entire lives, to be tragic collapse.”[3] Storm belonged to the still self-confident, bourgeoisie “which is so utterly different from the bourgeoisie of today” (p. 81). As a result, he did not, despite evidences of resignation, possess a tragic consciousness. Nevertheless, he was, Lukács concluded, “the last representative of the great German bourgeois literary tradition” (p. 95).

Lukács devoted further experiments to Novalis, Richard Beer-Hofmann, and Stefan George. In the first, he lamented the fact that the romantics lacked a tragic sense of life, even when, as in Novalis’s case, death was a constant companion and every effort to “bring human beings really close to one another” came to naught. Beer-Hofmann, Lukács conceded, was a Viennese aesthete, but one quite unlike Arthur Schnitzler or Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In his stories and dramas, everything that occurred was accidental, but as Lukács recognized, if every-

thing is accidental, nothing is, there being no such thing as an accident in a lawless world. It was this transformation of the accidental into the necessary that lent form to the lives of Beer-Hofmann’s characters and elevated his work beyond impressionism. “Of all today’s writers,” according to Lukács, “he is the one who is fighting the most heroic battle for form” (p. 144). The message of every one of George’s verses was that “two human beings can never become one” (p. 107). And yet he confronted life as Lukács wished to confront it, with resignation and courage.

Lukács entitled the final literary experiment in *A lélek és a formák* “Conversation Concerning Laurence Sterne.” Two young men, Vince and Máté (Vincenz and Joachim in the German edition), are engaged in an impassioned debate concerning Sterne’s merit, or lack of it. On the one hand, Vince defends the English writer’s “powerful affirmation of [everyday] life.” Máté, on the other hand, attacks Sterne’s writings. They are, he insists, “formless because they are extensible to infinity; but infinite forms do not exist” (p. 165). By their very nature, forms are closed and limited, not open, as life is, to endless possibility. The conversation takes place in the room of a young and bewildered woman who sits quietly to one side, seemingly ignored by the men. Both, however, are aware that the debate is really a subtle attempt to win the girl’s affection. Ironically, a debate that revolves around what Vince describes as “the deep alienation” that isolates Sterne’s characters serves to alienate each man from the other and both from the girl (p. 170). To a mystified Popper, Lukács explained that he intended the Sterne experiment to be a satire and criticism of the other experiments.

In general, Hungarian reviewers cast a critical eye on *A lélek és a formák*. More than one complained of its obscurity and un-Hungarian character. While acknowledging Lukács’s philosophic sophistication, for example, Mihály Babits, then Hungary’s most distinguished man of letters, judged the work to be more Viennese than Hungarian. To be ranked with the Viennese aesthetes was almost more than Lukács could bear, and he protested vigorously in a private letter to Babits and in the pages of *Nyugat*. Babits, however, had a point, and not only because the book exhibits a fascination with death reminiscent of the fin-de-siècle Viennese. By elevating “man” and “woman” to the status of irreconcilable principles, Lukács also betrayed the influence of Otto Weininger, the haunted Viennese-Jewish writer who took his own life in 1903.

The book's reception heightened Lukács's awareness of the isolated place he occupied in Hungarian intellectual life. If, he concluded, he was to find a more sympathetic readership, he would have to publish in German. Why not, then, seek a publisher for a German edition of *Soul and Form*? To that end he wrote two new "Essays" (as he now called them); both are included here. "Charles-Louis Philippe" was written in Hungarian and appeared first in the Budapest journal *Renaissance* but subsequently in *Die neue Rundschau* (The new review) under the title "On Longing and Form." In a diary entry of May 20, 1910, Lukács wrote that Philippe "will be the truest Irma-essay." [4] And so it is. In it Lukács maintained that longing is of a higher order than love. Love belongs to everyday life while longing could, and in Philippe's work did, "dissolve itself into form" (p. 127). In the French writer's *Marie Donadieu* (1904), the promiscuous Marie returns to Jean, a true lover, but it is too late, for his love has already been transformed into longing. "She had served her purpose and can go on her way." But "every word and every action in his life will be an unspoken poem to what she has given him" (pp. 118-119). In a diary entry of June 26, 1910, Lukács wrote of Irma: "It is ridiculous to talk of 'love' here; I am no longer in 'love' with her." [5]

Lukács wrote "The Metaphysics of Tragedy: Paul Ernst" in German; it is the most important essay in *Die Seele und die Formen*. Tragic drama, he insisted, is the highest form of art. Neoclassical tragedies, especially Paul Ernst's *Brunhild* (1909), could even be said to rival those of the ancient Greeks. They did so by unveiling the essence of real, as opposed to empirical, life—its form or limits; not only those limits imposed by individual destinies but also those defined by our common finitude. "For tragedy," Lukács wrote, "death—the frontier as such—is an always immanent reality, inseparably connected with every tragic event." To experience that frontier was to awaken the soul to self-consciousness. "The soul becomes conscious of itself because it is ... limited, and only because and insofar as it is limited" (p. 184). In *Brunhild*, not only do Siegfried and Brunhild (who dies by her own hand) recognize their tragic destiny, but "they salute it in respectful silence" as well (p. 188). In a Lukács diary entry of May 29, 1910, we read that "the Ernst essay will also be an Irma-essay." [6] He did not know how prophetically—and tragically—right he was.

In addition to the new essays, a reordering of the table of contents, and more descriptive titles, Lukács made a number of changes in the introductory letter to Popper, signaling that his "essay period" was at an end and that

in the future he would commit himself to systematic philosophy. He now characterized the essayist as an Arthur Schopenhauer who wrote his *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851) in anticipation (logical, not chronological) of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818-44).

Popper and two other friends translated the Hungarian essays into German, but there remained the question of the dedication. Lukács wished to offer the book to Irma, but that was a delicate matter because she had, in the aftermath of their break, married a fellow artist. He considered several carefully worded drafts, but when the book appeared the dedication read: "*Dem Andenken Irma Seidlers*" (In remembrance of Irma Seidler). On May 18, 1911, Irma jumped to her death from the Margaret Bridge that spans the Danube between Buda and Pest. The reasons for her suicide were complex, but Lukács held himself responsible and the resulting existential crisis changed his life—and work. The editors have here wisely appended "On Poverty of Spirit," the dialogue Lukács wrote in the wake of the suicide, for it witnesses a new—utopian—stage in his life.

In the dialogue, a man learns of the suicide of a woman friend. When the woman's sister seeks to console him, he tells her that his actions had been governed by the formal ethics of duty, rather than by the unconditional identification with another he calls "goodness." Goodness, he says, "amounts to being given the grace to break through the forms" (p. 204). He names three of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Christ figures—Sonia, Prince Myshkin, and Alexei Karamazov—as examples of good people. Theirs is a godly world that lies beyond the ethical world of the forms—and beyond tragedy. Unlike the detached observers of a tragic world, they were "Gnostics of deed" who followed the example of Kierkegaard's Abraham, "who left the world of tragic conflicts and heroes—the world of Agamemnon and his sacrifice" (p. 205). Abraham was "good" because he sinned, because he was willing to kill his innocent son. As a symbolic suicide (the death of his former self), Lukács has the man shoot himself, while he himself embraced goodness, "the miracle, the grace, and the salvation. The descent of the heavenly realm to the earth" (p. 205). In the future he would act to help bring about a utopia in which, as he believed, he would not merely *interpret* the soul of the other; he would *become* the other.

Die Seele und die Formen established Lukács's European reputation. As towering a figure as Mann hailed it as a work of extraordinary aesthetic sensibility and wove some of its insights into the fabric of "Death in Venice"

(1912). Nevertheless, in a September 25, 1912, letter to the critic Margarete Susman, Lukács wrote that the book had “become altogether alien to me.”[7]

It became even more alien to him after he converted to communism in 1918. And yet, the book has never ceased to attract attention. In part this is because of its author’s thoughtful reflections on a problem—alienation—that continues to haunt modern man; in part because of the influence it exerted on Mann and, if the late Lucien Goldmann was right, on existentialist philosophy. Goldmann maintained that Lukács had distinguished “authentic” from “inauthentic” existence on the basis of the former’s consciousness of the boundaries of human life, and especially of the absolute boundary set by death. It is possible to read in *Soul and Form* an anticipation of Martin Heidegger’s profound analysis of death as the ground for authentic existence in *Sein und Zeit* (Being and time) (1927).

But perhaps after all the book owes its lasting importance to the fact that it reminds us of what might have been had Lukács not sold his soul to a movement and party that demanded that he repudiate his early writings, including *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (History and class consciousness) (1923), the most brilliant—if despotic—Marxist work ever written. “Despotic” because Lukács accepted Vladimir Lenin’s argument that the proletariat, by its own effort, could develop only trade union consciousness; it could recognize the need to combine in unions in order to secure higher wages, shorter hours, and greater benefits. It could not achieve true class consciousness, by which Lukács (and Lenin) meant

recognition of its assigned historical role, which was to overthrow the class rule of the bourgeoisie and usher in a classless society. As a result the party, as the self-proclaimed *bearer* of proletarian class consciousness, had to *impute* it to the proletariat. In plain language, the party arrogated to itself the right to coerce workers for their own, and history’s, good. Whether or not coeditor Katie Terezakis approves of the “Lukácsian notion of imputed consciousness” is difficult to say (p. 220). What can be said is that her afterword and Judith Butler’s introduction will be of less interest to students of the young Lukács’s work (or for that matter, of world literature) than to aficionados of contemporary literary theory.

Notes

- [1]. György Lukács, *Ifjúkori művek (1902-1918)*, ed. Árpád Timár (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1977), 103.
- [2]. Georg Lukács, *Essays on Thomas Mann*, trans. Stanley Mitchell (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965), 10.
- [3]. György Lukács, *A modern dráma fejlődésének története* (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1911), 1:59.
- [4]. György Lukács, *Napló-Tagebuch (1910-11)*, ed. Ferenc L. Lendvai (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981), 23.
- [5]. *Ibid.*, 32.
- [6]. *Ibid.*, 27.
- [7]. Georg von Lukács, “Brief,” in *Für Margarete Susman*, ed. Manfred Schlösser (Darmstadt: Erato-Press, 1964), 304.

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