

Werner Jung:

The continuation of something – Lukács' early writings

The writer Heinrich Böll frequently mentioned the fact that his work was always the continuation of something else; this is one reason why the creators of the Böll bibliography have rightly called it “Continuation”. In this way, Böll wanted to point out that all his work, literary or otherwise, have a link to previous texts, thoughts and problematic constellations. Georg Lukacs, whom Böll not only revered but also corresponded with for a short time, saw things in a similar way when he mentioned this in his unfinished autobiographical sketch, *Lived thought* (“Gelebtes Denken”), which included conversations with Istvan Eörsi in which he claims that in his case everything is a continuation of something; he even points out that in his own biography there are no inorganic elements.

This has compelled us, the editors of Georg Lukas' early writing to, to approach the presenting of his work in a strictly chronological order. Consequently, we are taking a newer style of philological editing in which the chronological development of a writer, intellectual or scientist is emphasized, instead of his or her work being grouped according to thematic groups or genres. With respect to our German edition of Lukacs' work, we have based it on the complete Hungarian works as well as on the complete bibliography (unfortunately not completed) of Lukacs' by the Japanese scholar Maruyama Keiichi. By using this procedure it will be possible to observe the thought processes of a writer, intellectual and scientist and participate in his or her intellectual “continuation”.

In the case of Georg Lukas, this means that the parallel and developing forms of varied forms of expressions find their place; in addition to discussions on books and theatre, we also find essays and lectures, even complete academic texts (such as “The historical development of modern drama”, “The theory of the novel” as well as the two so-called “Heidelberger Schriften” (Heidelberg texts) and also diverse pieces of work designed to illustrate to the young

Hungarian intellectuals of the day examples of art and culture to make clear how he positioned himself in these fields. In addition to this, this young intellectual was developing his own attitudes and on philosophical matters which was to lead him through the whole of philosophical history and its different schools. Lukacs “thinks through” a number of different positions and approaches, points out their weaknesses and aporia and is still not at all sure – at least not until he joins the Hungarian Communist party in 1918 and until the publication of his first Marxist texts, including “Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein” (*History and class consciousness*) – whether he is going to end up as an essayist (to be understood as modern method and the way forward) or as a thorough taxonomist of philosophy. Such reflections are to be found in the opening essay of his collection, “Die Seele und die Formen” (The soul and the forms) in the fictitious letter to his friend Leo Popper, where he more or less states: “The essayist is a

Schopenhauer who is writing the *Parerga* waiting for the arrival of ‘the world as will and imagination; he is the baptizer who leaves home to preach in the desert about somebody who is supposed to come and whose feet he is not worthy of kissing’. He then continues: “He is the purest type of messenger and it seems very unlikely that he, being purely dependent on himself and therefore independent from the fate of his announcement, will claim its values for himself.”

Finally, one more methodological point: “The essay is a law court, yet it is not the judgment which is the most important and valuable aspect of this, but rather the process of judging”. To prove this with one concrete example, we could point out Lukacs’ quickly changing attitude to Wilhelm Dilthey. In this context, the texts “Zur Theorie der Literaturgeschichte” (On the theory of literary history) on the one hand, and the Dilthey obituary on the other hand, can both be referred to as they are both texts which appeared at similar times in 1910 and 1911 respectively.

Still deeply influenced by the works of Henri Bergson, which is seen in various quotes and implicit comments in the form of Lukacs' basic questions on the methodology of literature, in fact to all the humanities in which he separates two methodological approaches: one which constitutes a strict literary sociological observation (clearly influenced by Georg Simmel's work) and another one which considers the needs for reflection in a poetical, esthetical way. As a consequence, he presents long-winded, strong arguments for and against these methods; however, he would quintessentially like to create a wooden iron which is namely a combination of both approaches. You would have to create, he writes, a method based on the genial assumption which allows the understanding of literary science or the humanities which Dilthey, Simmel and Bergson are able to bring together. "If we expect the history of literature from the "genial view" or from intuition to create a method, we do not wish to degrade the results of abstract and theoretically based work – here we are also looking for a synthesis, which is achievable when both methods are truly developed. We are seeking the sort of intuition which penetrates the facts and expressions with the greatest care and which fills with the only real life and truth which these things give them".

A few months later, on the occasion of Wilhelm Dilthey's passing on 1 October 1911, Lukacs writes a positively dreadful obituary for the historian and philosopher, which begins with the following sentence: "It would be an exaggeration to describe Dilthey's death as an irreplaceable loss". Lukacs mentions a few of his positive characteristics, most of which were found in history, after which he pointed out, in unrelenting fashion, Dilthey's basic weaknesses, the reason being "that he shared the fatal prejudice of our time, which was the belief in psychology as a science to solve general and philological questions". This lead to people taking the wrong turnings, he believed. He had operated, according to Lukacs, "during his whole life with the psychological term "experience" as a central category, which is a very unclear

and shaky term and is for the purpose of creating a system unsuitable. In this way, the philosopher has become an essayist and when we stand at the grave of the last and mourn in great style, we have already mourned the demise of a great philosopher and human being who was destroyed by the bad time he was born into and from which he wanted to emancipate us.”

In this way the weaknesses of Dilthey’s concept, his understanding of hermeneutics were mercilessly revealed by Lukacs as he puts his finger into the wounds; namely, the undefeated psychologism, including subjectivism, relativism and finally even irrationalism.

Lukacs’ own answer to the aporetic structure appears to prove that initially he was playing with different positions and attitudes. This we notice most clearly in “Die Seele und die Formen” and in a more radical form in “Die ästhetische Kultur”, both of which support the idea of a “certain vagueness”. In these works, the foreword is of particular importance as it is laid down in the form of a programme. Lukacs mockingly turns away from “popular, clear and easy-to-understand philosophy, because it is “fake”. Real philosophy needs to be “vague” and pretty well “incomprehensible” for the man on the street, as this sort of person, or so the Marxist Lukacs of later years might have added, always simply sees things, at first sight, in a materialistic way. Instead he formulates things in this way: “To understand philosophy, a very special inspiration from within is necessary. If you read philosophy, you will read about problems and solutions to problems where the normal man on the street sees only confusion. Such people accept things in such an unconscious and confused way that they are not even conscious of their own confusion. This is not a question of intellect or scientific talent as the most important question of philosophy, i.e., the question of being is, for example, not a scientific question at all. If the problems of philosophy are not a problem for a certain person, that person will never understand a philosophical work; indeed, he will never find out why he doesn’t understand it”.

Here we can see very clearly Lukacs' "on the one hand, on the other hand attitude": philosophy goes the whole way, in other words, into the totality of being, whereas science, with its tendency to break things down and empirically shorten things is not able to do this. However, it is not yet clear to Lukacs which direction a necessary new philosophy will need to go and which forms of expression it will need to use. We observe the thinker working, we can watch him as he works on early writing and see how he develops and works his way through the most varied number of contemporary positions- Platonism, New Platonism, Kant and Hegel, Kantianism, philosophy of life, Dilthey, Simmel and Bergson.

However, the question of whether he has found the "great liberating system" by discovering Marxism, which he murmured of in "Die Seele und die Formen", has to wait to be answered another time.

(Translated from the original German by Neil Deane)

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