

**ESSAYS ON REALISM****Georg Lukacs****Ed by Rodney Livingstone**

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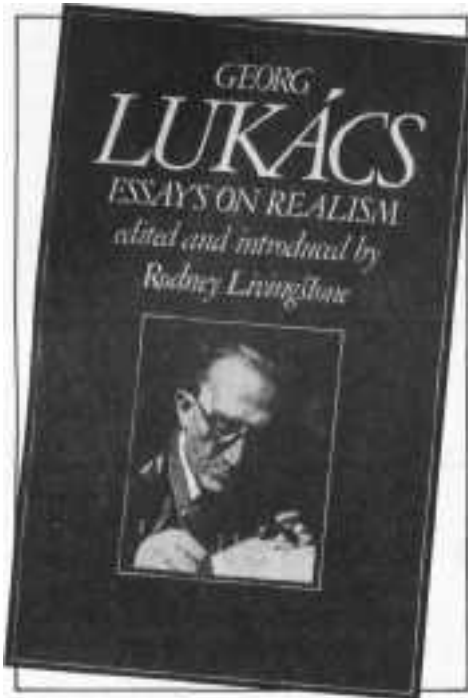
*Essays on Realism* consists of six essays written by Georg Lukacs and Anna Seghers dating from 1938/9. It thus gives us Lukacs writing at the height of his powers, during the time that he composed *The Historical Novel*, and writing, too, during a period of social and political upheaval which had a profound impact on Marxist theory. Although much of Lukacs's writing from this period has already been translated and anthologised, the reader who comes to this volume believing that he or

she has already read Lukacs's best work of the 1930s will be pleasantly surprised: these are in no sense essays of the second rank.

This is not to say, however, that there is anything strikingly new here: Lukacs's work of this decade seems to be characterised by a remarkable consistency and homogeneity. Throughout the volume we are reminded of certain fundamental postulates in Lukacs's work: the necessity for the writer to aim at a portrayal of social life in its *totality*, so as to dissolve the fetishism and reification that capitalist society thrives upon; the *formal* implications that this aim has for the writer with regard to such issues as plot, character, and narrative technique, and the necessary criticism of expressionism and modernism

that follows from a strict adherence to these postulates.

Thus in the essay 'Reportage or Portrayal?' (1932), Lukacs sees the 'reportage novel' and 'psychologism' as two sides of the same,



unsatisfactory, coin. 'Psychologism' is seen as the response of the bourgeois writer to an existing reality which appears mechanical, soulless and dominated by alien laws; the reportage novel in turn attempts to replace the triviality and escapism of psychologism with 'a purely social content'.

This technique of posing two polarised and equally unsatisfactory alternatives, so as to be able to argue for a dialectical synthesis which moves beyond both, is, as Rodney Livingstone points out in his excellent introduction to the volume, a favoured technique of Lukacs's. It allows him, as in the essay already mentioned, to move to a recurrent position: the merciless criticism of any artistic method which portrays only a part of reality:

Any partial truth that is separated from the whole and fixes rigidly on itself, while giving itself out as the whole truth, is necessarily transformed into a distortion of the truth, (p 55)

A recent critic has pointed out that Lukacs always assumes that this responsibility of presenting 'the whole' rests firmly upon each individual work; Lukacs never seems to consider the possibility that an individual literary work can perform a valuable function in illuminating an aspect of reality for a reader whose other reading and social experience can satisfactorily complement the partial nature of the view of reality given by such a work. Such 'incompleteness' is, for Lukacs, always evidence of bourgeois reification, of

the inability of the bourgeoisie to see reality whole.

It is this that leads directly to those formal assumptions of Lukacs which have met with least sympathy from later Marxists. Lukacs was aware of the dangers of reification of certain formal techniques; in *The Historical Novel* he refers to 'the misunderstanding that we intended a formal revival, an artistic imitation of the classical historical novel', adding decisively, 'That is impossible'. But on formal questions (and here his unwillingness to devote too much time to criticism of drama or poetry — or even film — rather than the novel is significant) Lukacs always seems to return to the form of the 'classical historical novel' as his ideal. This is not to say that his criticisms of certain of the formal experiments of the modernists are not sharp and effective. Rodney Livingstone argues, correctly I feel, that Lukacs's defence of the progressive potential of classical realism, and his humanist Marxist values, are of lasting importance. The following defence of 'plot and story' taken from the wide-ranging essay

'Marx and the Problem of Ideological Decay' makes a useful closing quotation from this important collection, and points to the force of Lukacs's polemic.

'If decadent literature takes ever greater pains to eliminate plot and story from the literary aesthetic as 'obsolete', this is precisely a self-defence of the decadent tendencies. For the portrayal of a story, a real plot, leads inevitably to testing feelings and experiences against the external world, weighing the living interaction with social reality and finding this light or heavy, genuine or false, whereas the psychologistic or surrealistic introspection of the decadents (whether in the manner of Bourget or of Joyce) simply offers the superficial internal life a completely unrestricted field, entirely free from any criticism. The danger that arises from this false subjectivism, the uninhibited living-out of the writer's internality, is that he stands facing a world of free experiment in which he can mingle uninhibitedly as he will', (p. 145)

Jeremy Hawthorn