



"Writing," Criticism, Lukacs, and the One

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Source: *Criticism*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Fall 1982), pp. 362-378

Published by: Wayne State University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23105085>

Accessed: 18-05-2018 08:13 UTC

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“Writing,” Criticism, Lukacs, and the One

Many of us still do not often articulate our approach to the study of literature and believe that because we do not claim to belong to this or that school of criticism our readings are “value-free” or “non-ideological.” Others believe that these views are not correct and that our methodological silence conceals a variety of quite firmly held beliefs about criticism, the most common of which is that it is a “moral act” and rightfully so. This belief has a number of sources in our culture, some peculiar to the intellectual history of the United States, some part of the general Western heritage. One of these is the Idealist tradition of Continental philosophy. This way of looking at the world, in which it is assumed that the idea, say of a desk, is more important than any particular desk, is not an easy position for most people brought up in the Anglo-American tradition to assume. We tend to value the practical, to talk, to be sure, of *practical* criticism, and to assume that we are free of the theoretical presuppositions of Idealism. Yet that very practical criticism, the concentration on the literary object, is based on Idealism and has, therefore, resulted in certain restrictions and expectations placed on the study of literature that are often overlooked. A beginning to a revival of a “science” of the study of literature must be based on a bringing into consciousness of the presuppositions such as these which underlay our studies.

The occasion for these comments is Georg Lukacs’s early essay, “On the Nature and Form of the Essay.”¹ I will argue that the familiar German and English translations of the Hungarian original omit much that is necessary to the understanding of the piece, and that a careful consideration of Lukacs’s discussion in the context of the intellectual atmosphere of the time will further our understanding both of his work and our own, as philosophical idealism was also a primary component in the intellectual atmosphere of central Europe in the quarter of a century before the First World War. We will see that the moral values of criticism advocated by Lukacs are intended as an

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¹ In Georg Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, translated from the German by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1974). Page references and translations in the text are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

approach to personal, specifically religious, Revelation. I will conclude that such purposes are at the base of much value-centered interpretation of literature, and so, by implication, much of the practical criticism which, by restricting itself to a reified aesthetic object, throws the focus of attention on the interpretive power and peculiarities of belief of the critic.

“On the Nature and Form of the Essay” was first published in the collection of essays *A lelek es a formak* (1910), translated with revisions and additions as *Die Seele und die Formen* (1911).²

The essay takes the quasi-intimate form of a prefatory letter addressed to Leo Popper, the great friend of Lukacs’s youth. It is dated “Florence, October 1910,” a month or so after the suicide of Irma Seidler (the lover of Lukacs’s friend Bela Balazs and possibly of Lukacs himself). The first paragraph of the “letter” to Popper is filled with the technical vocabulary of Noe-Kantianism:

The essays intended for inclusion in this book lie before me and I ask myself whether one is entitled to publish such works—whether such works can give rise to a new unity, a book. For the point at issue for us now is not what these essays can offer as “studies in literary history,” but whether there is something in them that makes a new literary form of its own, and whether the principle that makes them such is the same in each one. . . . The question before us is. . . . whether such a unity is possible. To what extent have the really great writings which belong to this category been given literary form, and to what extent is this form of theirs an independent one? To what extent do the standpoint of such a work and the form given to this standpoint lift it out of the sphere of science and place it at the side of the arts, yet without blurring the frontiers of either? To what extent do they endow the work with the force necessary for a conceptual re-ordering of life, and yet distinguish it from the icy, final perfection of philosophy? (1).

Far from being an organically unified work, *Soul and Form* is a collection of about one-third of Lukacs’s essays to that date. The principle of selection appears to have been to exclude those essays relating exclusively to Hungarian literature and to concentrate on articles that had originally appeared in the journal *Nyugat*. There is no evi-

² Georg Lukacs, *A lelek es a formak* (Kiserletek) (Budapest: Franklin Tarsulat Nyomda, 1910), pp. 27-29.

dence that in the years 1908 to 1910 he had intended these particular essays to be chapters within a unified work, and much that would indicate quite the opposite; that they are precisely "studies in literary history," focusing, from our point of view, on the history of Lukacs's own development as a literary critic and essayist. Lukacs, in this statement, quickly brushes aside the issue of unity as it applies to this collection: "I make no attempt to formulate it because it is not I nor my book that should be the subject under discussion here." The subject under discussion, it turns out, is the same as that in his earlier essay "Platonism, Poetry and Form" namely, the genre of the essay itself. His approach to this subject is governed by three questions: first, is there an historical genre of the essay? Secondly, is the "standpoint" of the essay that of a science or that of an art? And finally, in his own words, "Do the great essays have the force of a world forming point of view?"

The first question is philological, the second Neo-Kantian in the tradition of Dilthey, the last, Simmelian. Lukacs jumps immediately to a discussion of the second: Is the essay a work of art or is it a scientific medium? He attributes to Wilde and Kerr the popularization of

a truth that was already known to the German Romantics, a truth whose ultimate meaning the Greeks and the Romans felt, quite unconsciously, to be self-evident: that criticism is an art and not a science (1)

Lukacs here equates criticism with the essay form itself, an act which may have, from the first, predetermined his conclusions. He goes on to reason that if everyone "knows" that criticism is an art, they very clearly have not considered the questions "What is an essay?" and "What is its intended form of expression and what are the ways and means whereby this expression is accomplished?" (1-2). He sets out to define the essay or critique. In so doing he touches upon some ideas that are still timely.

It has been argued that the essay can be stylistically of equal value to a work of the imagination, and that, for this reason, it is unjust to speak of value differences at all. . . . "Whatever is well written is a work of art." Is a well-written advertisement or news item a work of art? Here I can see what so disturbs you about such a view of criticism: it is anarchy, the denial of form in order that an intellect which believes itself to be sovereign may have free play with possibilities of every kind (1-2).

Lukacs explicitly rejects the position that literary criticism is a variety of imaginative literature. Style alone, whether it is the self-consciously playful style of the Paris salon or the more ponderous imitation of that as practiced in certain lecture halls in the United States, does not constitute art. Lukacs had, by this time, matured to the point of holding that even if criticism is spoken of as an art form, it is only spoken of so in order to establish more firmly its difference from fiction.

Let us not, therefore, speak of the essay's similarities with works of literary imagination, but of what divides it from them. Let any resemblance serve here merely as a backdrop against which the differences stand out all the more sharply; . . . (2).

An essay, then, may be well-written, but it is not therefore a species of imaginative literature. It does not, on the other hand, merely give us "information, facts and 'relationships.'" We read some essays for instruction, to be sure, but others, the essays of Lessing, for instance, are read in spite of our disagreement with their content.

Science affects us by its contents, art by its forms; science offers us facts and the relationships between facts, but art offers us souls and destinies (3).

The distinction that Lukacs is drawing here is subtle and has often been misunderstood. There is science and the written expression of science, where content reigns supreme (which is not to say that scientific writing need be bad); there is art where form is the primary matter; and there is a variety of essay-writing where the surplus value, as it were, of good writing in the exposition of content remains after the value of the content itself has disappeared. The word "essay" has many meanings for Lukacs. In this particular piece he is using it to point to the literary essays of the Enlightenment. The essay in this sense, is neither concerned primarily with facts nor constituted strictly as a work of art, but insofar as it is more the latter than the former (from the point of view of our values as students of literature), it is concerned with "souls and destinies."

At the next stage of his argument Lukacs posits that there are "primitive, as yet undifferentiated epochs" in which "science and art [and religion, ethics and politics] are integrated," but that as soon as a science becomes independent, all pre-scientific thought in that realm loses its value. He is, perhaps, thinking of the relationship be-

tween alchemy and chemistry, or astrology and astronomy, or the literary criticism of the Enlightenment and modern philology.

Lukacs would agree with the Logical Positivists in thinking of mature science as consisting entirely of statements of facts, of contents. On the other hand, the mature art that emerges from the "primitive, as yet undifferentiated epochs" is for him pure form and spirit. The study of this process, whether as philology or art history, is itself a science of the arts, "but there is also an entirely different kind of expression of the human temperament, which usually takes the form of writing about the arts," which sometimes deals directly with "the same life-problems . . . raised . . . in the writings which call themselves criticism" (3). In this category are the works of Plato, of the mystics, of Montaigne, of Kierkegaard; in other words, the Platonists of Lukacs's early essay on Kassner.

We have, then, a continuum of prose writings from scientific reports (including those on literature), through literary criticism which adds aesthetic form to those contents (as in the essays of Lessing) and the non-literary essay (*belles lettres*) to imaginative literature such as "The Confession of a Beautiful Soul," or the last act of Euripides' *Heracles*. The mention of Euripides leads Lukacs to an excursus on drama: "the true dramatist . . . will see *a life* as being so rich and so intense that almost imperceptibly it becomes *life*" (4). This in turn leads him to make a general distinction between the particular and the general, between "*das Leben*" and "*das Leben*," between Realism and Nominalism, between image and significance. Lukacs claims that "for one there exists only things, for the other only the relationships between them, only concepts and values" (5). The first is represented by "imagist" poetry, the second

the writings which most resolutely reject the image, which reach out most passionately for what lies behind the image, . . . the writings of the critics, the Platonists, and the mystics (6).

Here Lukacs shifts to a definition of criticism which has nothing to do with the study of literature, which might, or might not take literary works as occasions for writing an essay, but which is primarily concerned with higher spiritual issues. Yet one must be careful not to confuse this sense of "criticism" with one denoting a science of the arts or having reference to the classical essay.

This particular kind of criticism arises from a feeling which "calls

for an art form of its own," because "everything in a work must be fashioned from the same material . . . each of its parts must be visibly ordered from a single point" (6). This is not a theory enabling studies in literary history, it is a judgment based on the aesthetic implications of Georg Simmel's doctrine of coherence. Since the concerns that are met by that doctrine are not literary but sociological, we know at this point that Lukacs has definitely left the world of conventional literary criticism and is entering that of sociology and philosophy which will be his home for much of the rest of his life. Within this Simmelian framework, the way in which art forms are distinguished is not formal. It has to do, rather, with their spiritual content, their world view.

We are speaking of the fundamental principles which separate forms from one another—of the material from which the whole is constructed, of the standpoint, the world-view which gives unity to the entire work (7).

Lukacs can, therefore, say that the essay, as an art form, is the instrument for the expression of certain kinds of experiences.

From all that has been said you will know what experiences I mean and of what kind they are. I mean intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as immediate reality, as spontaneous principle of existence; the world-view in its undisguised purity as an event in the soul, as the motive force of life (7).

These are, for the most part, Kantian concepts. Lukacs is referring, within the Critical framework, to the Critical enterprise itself: the reflection of the mind on its own processes of understanding. But Lukacs does not mention the mind. He refers, instead, to the soul. It is not yet necessary to read an adherence to revealed religion into this; the change from mind to spirit is one of emphasis. The investigation of thought has become charged with an experiential urgency. Lukacs uses his Kantian methods and phrases to attempt a solution, or an approach to a solution, not to the problem of knowledge, but to the problem of life in the modern world.

The question is posed immediately: what is life, what is man, what is destiny? But posed as a question only: for the answer here, does not supply a "solution" like one of the answers of science, or, at purer heights, those of philosophy. Rather, as in poetry of every kind, it is symbol, destiny and tragedy (7).

Lukacs goes on to generalize upon the claim that the essay is “symbol, destiny and tragedy:” “All writings represent the world in symbolic terms of destiny-relationship; everywhere, the problem of destiny determines the problem of form” (7). The way in which destiny is apparent in writings varies: “form in poetry appears always only as destiny; but in the works of the essayists form *becomes* destiny, it is the destiny creating principle” (7). But what is destiny? The closest Lukacs comes to defining this term is to write about its effects when he remarks that “destiny lifts things up outside the world of things, accentuating the essential ones and eliminating the inessential . . .” (7). One might hazard a guess that Lukacs is here working another transformation on Kantian terminology like the one involving mind and spirit noted above. “Destiny” might be the equivalent of the Kantian “concept.”

form sets limits round a substance which otherwise would dissolve like air in the All. In other words, destiny comes from the same source as everything else, it is a thing among things, whereas form—seen as some thing finished, i.e. seen from outside—defines the limits of the immaterial (7).

This may be an attempted solution to the puzzle of the origin of concepts. If the concept of, say, “cat,” is something in the world, how is it that we know a new cat to be a cat? We must have a purely mental concept, “cat,” to which we refer candidates from the world of things. But what is the origin of that mental entity? Lukacs appears to be splitting the idea of a concept, defining the worldly part of it as destiny and the purely mental part as form. As with the transformation of mind into soul, this is not merely a logical or intellectual move; rather, it is a rhetorical strategy which charges these ideas with strong emotional overtones.

Because the destiny which orders things is flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood, destiny is not to be found in the writings of the essayists (7).

The tone of this would be quite different had Lukacs used some neutral term for this aspect of concept rather than the portentous word “destiny.”

Lukacs then claims that since critics are not poets, as they do not write about things, they must write about forms and not about destiny.

This form, which springs from a symbolic contemplation of life-symbols, acquires a life of its own through the power of that experience. It becomes a world-view, a standpoint, an attitude vis a vis the life from which it sprang: a possibility of reshaping it, of creating it anew (8).

This is highly reminiscent of a moment in Simmel's dialectic: ". . . the forms stand forth as autocratic ideas and determine life and its values."³ Lukacs is very close to Simmel's theory of forms in these passages. But he still clings to Kant in accepting the reality of the world "out there," if somewhat ambivalently and in language that is none too clear.

The critic's moment of destiny, therefore, is that moment at which things become forms—the moment when all feelings and experiences on the near or the far side of form receive form, are melted down and condensed into form. It is the mystical moment of union between the outer and the inner, between soul and form (8).

What was for Kant an epistemological problem had become, for Lukacs and his generation, a spiritual, a religious issue. Lukacs's studies were moving, at this time, from Kierkegaard toward the German mystical tradition, Meister Eckhart in particular, and this essay was in part an expression of that move. Lukacs now traces the path by which the critic goes from the study of literature and the other arts, the classical location of form, in the aesthetic sense, and its contemplation, to a more general object. For the essayist needs form only as lived experience and he needs only its life, only the living soul-reality it contains. But this reality is to be found in every immediate sensual expression of life, it can be read out of and read into every such experience; . . . (8). The essayist can find in life itself the object of his study, but instead usually writes about art, since there the forms (both aesthetic and Neo-Kantian) are more obvious. The result of this displacement is irony.

And the irony I mean consists in the critic always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing books and pictures, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life—and even then not their innermost substance but only their beautiful and useless surface (9).

³ Georg Simmel, *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapital* 2nd ed., (Mun-chen & Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1922), p. 52.

This is precisely what Lukacs himself had been doing in the later essays collected in the Hungarian edition of *Soul and Form*. While seeming to discuss Beer-Hofmann, Kierkegaard or Sterne, he was actually discussing the ultimate questions. (This was a change from the earlier essays, where he was arguably just discussing Novalis or Romanticism and Stefan George, while seeming to do so.) Here it is perhaps sufficient to merely mention the drastic devaluation of the study of literature and art implicit in the passage just cited. Philosophy, for those who agree with such formulations of the essayist's task, threatens like Chronos to swallow its own children, the sciences. This position is also one that devalues Simmel's view of the importance of the arts and is one more sign of Lukacs's transformation from a world centered philosopher to a metaphysician.

Lukacs enlarges on his point through a discussion of portraiture, following his argument that art takes its motifs from life while the essayist takes his or her's from art. Lukacs claims that the painter paints a "likeness," not in the sense that the painting is really like someone, but in the sense that it creates the impression of verisimilitude to a possible person or landscape at a possible moment. Thus there could be, say, thousands of portraits of Lukacs, all essentially alike.

And that, you see, is more or less how I imagine the truth of the essay to be. . . . Therefore, two essays can never contradict one another: each creates a different world, and even when, in order to achieve a higher universality, it goes beyond that created world, it still remains inside by its tone, colour and accent, that is to say, it leaves that world only in the inessential sense (11).

This is a statement of the more extreme position with regard to the reality-endowing properties of subjective considerations. It is part of a radical theory that Lukacs proceeds to make more concrete with an example drawn from literary criticism proper: "It is simply not true that there exists an objective, external criterion of life and truth, e.g. that the truth of Grimm's, Dilthey's or Schlegel's Goethe can be tested against the "real" Goethe" (11). What is important, for Lukacs, is the degree of verisimilitude of each of these "Goethes," how life-like every one of them seems. That is, it is not a question of how adequately they can as a group be related to some inter-subjective concept of Goethe, but whether they have "that vital breath which would give them autonomous life" (12). In other words, it is a ques-

tion of how artistically they are drawn. The Impressionist critic, we remember, can do no more than: “. . . define the impression which, at a given moment, this work of art has made on us where a writer himself has put down the impression which he in turn has received from the world at a particular hour.”⁴ Lukacs has combined Impressionism with Neo-Kantianism, attempting to elevate a technique for reviewing books to the status of an epistemology.

But as soon as we might begin to believe that Lukacs is wavering in his spiritual quest and is merely calling for a more artistic Impressionism, we find that that is not at all what he is interested in. He has returned to examples drawn from the world of literary criticism only to illustrate his point that the essayist creates a world. The Impressionist literary critic is, therefore, a kind of essayist, but Lukacs believes that in addition to this, the best literary critics, the best essayists, have quite another end in view. The appreciation of literary art, or even its study, is more or less secondary. Lukacs's essayist is a mystic on the path leading toward the vision of the One. The essayist, like the mystic, might “ironically” claim otherwise, might claim, for instance, that he or she is only a humble member of the monastic community trying to follow the Rule, but it is not clean refectory floors that truly matter.

It is true that the essay strives for truth: but just as Saul went out to look for his father's she-asses and found a kingdom, so the essayist who is really capable of looking for the truth will find at the end of his road the goal he was looking for: life (12).

Lukacs's essayists are the mystics of everyday life. This might seem to be a peculiar idea until one remembers that it is precisely everyday life that is the locus of *anomie* for the bourgeois in industrial capitalism. Life, the people, these were the signifiers for the dream of happiness that animated Lukacs's contemporaries. This emphasis was clearest, in the preceding generation in the work of Tonnies, while in Lukacs's own circle, for instance, his friend Ernst Bloch devoted his entire life to the explication of the principle of hope. And so it is little wonder that *Erlebnis* stood in the place of the mystic vision for Lukacs at this time. It is one more transportation of the myth of the Golden Age, the embodiment of narcissistic nostalgia, but here the

⁴ René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950*, IV (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 22.

Kingdom of God is neither in the past nor in the future, but, once more, within ourselves.

Lukacs's special definition of the essayist brings him to make the statement that "We want poets and critics to give us life-symbols and to mould the still-living myths and legends in the form of our questions" (12). Criticism, therefore, is equated with poetry, poetry of a specific kind; the "deep" symbolic poetry of George. And then, almost immediately, Lukacs acknowledges that, on the other hand, "there is a science of the arts: there has to be one" (13). As a matter of fact, it seems that even the mystical essayists use this science: "The essay form has not yet today, travelled . . . the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics and art" (13). This qualification allows us to resolve the apparent contradictions we have so far met in this discussion regarding the essay form itself. It is an art form, as Impressionism, and it is a science, but it is most characteristically for Lukacs a sort of ethics, the path which brings us to mysticism. Such development in the genre as has taken place, Lukacs writes, took place, for the most part, at the beginning, with Plato, who

met Socrates and was able to give form to the myth of Socrates to use Socrates' destiny as a vehicle for the questions he, Plato wanted to address to life about the destiny. The life of Socrates is the typical life for the essay form as typical as hardly any other life is for any literary form—with the sole exception of Oedipus' life for tragedy. Socrates always lived in the ultimate questions; . . . (13).

Striving for the typical moment so as to grasp the essence of his idea of the essay, Lukacs finds the Socratic. (And seems to forget his technical use of "destiny," but, of course, these technical terms are meant essayistically, evocatively, and not scientifically. They come and go as terms of art because of the "primitive" "undifferentiated" nature of Lukacs's own use of the essay form at this time.)

The discussion of Socrates brings in, once more, Schiller's idea of the naive Greek life as whole and unalienated: "The Greeks felt each of the forms available to them as a reality, as a living thing and not as an abstraction" (14). While we, according to the Neo-Kantians, must cling to abstract use we cannot reach life itself. Socrates, for Lukacs (as for Nietzsche and Heidegger), marks the Fall from the Greek state of grace, he

expressed the eternal ideal of men of his kind, an ideal which neither those whose way of feeling remains tied to the purely human nor those who are poets in their innermost being will ever understand: that tragedies and comedies should be written by the same man: that "tragic" and "comic" is entirely a matter of the chosen standpoint. In saying this, the critic expressed his deepest life-sense: the primacy of the standpoint, the concept, over feeling; and in saying this he formulated the profoundest anti-Greek thought (14-15).

This version of "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" continues, or, rather, concludes from this that although Plato, as an essayist, was a critic also, he assumed that role ironically, while later critics, having no Socrates to emulate, mistook the artistic occasion for the true subject matter of the essay. As a result criticism became either scientific, clinging to writing, or it became ethereal, pure ironic *belles lettres*.

Lukacs wonders if the true form of the essay, that of Plato, Montaigne, the medieval mystics, will ever reappear. "One worries that there will always be too few men, whose conceptual experiences are strong enough for their writings to be their intellectual poems. . . ." ⁵

⁵ The following is a translation of the Hungarian text:

You see: there is "criticism" in Plato, even if this criticism is only an occasion and ironical mood, as is everything else. Critics of later epochs related only to this, talked only about literature and art, and did not meet with the Socrates in whose fate they could have encompassed everything. Because of this, criticism clung to the written word and to matter, it became scientific, yielding results and in this way, together with the death of its results, became mortal, dying. Or it became so airy, never touching the ground—not for a second—so that its final questions do not even have a chance for expression. They are ironically despised occasions, even though without them there is not a chance for expression, or are they perhaps despised because they are essential, because there are the essentials?

Will there ever be a true form from these essays, as it was with Plato of Montaigne, or with a few mystics of antiquity and the middle ages? One worries that there will always be too few men whose conceptual experiences would be strong enough for their writings to be their intellectual poems, as Schlegel said of Hemsterhuys. We know that it is not certain men who bring about a form, but the necessity of the times. Is an epoch imaginable whose deepest experiences would demand Plato's dialectic as form, as did the tragedies of great epochs? Who knows? The great critics, up until now, lived in isolation and were not understood—to the depths of their being—and our times are only able to produce Walter Paters, Kierkegaards and Kassners, hardly understanding them.

It does not matter. If I think in what a cowardly manner—now fleeing into a novel, now hidden in literary criticism—the first new voices in Schlegel and in Schleiermacher appeared, and how it already found self-consciously courageous

For, he believes, it is at least in part due to the times that these forms do not appear: “[I]s an epoch imaginable whose deepest experiences would demand Plato’s dialectic as a form[?]” Now we only have Paters, Kierkegaards, and Kassners and hardly understand them. Although these are not great essayists, they, with Weininger, Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, and Ruskin give Lukacs hope. There is also the ideal of the “feminine,” glowing “in as pure a light—as anywhere else.” Humanity has fallen to the point where the essay, which should be the expression of transcendental reality, is degraded to journalism. Lukacs hopes that it can rise again to higher goals: “[I]s it really the case that all literary writings are literature bound? . . . and is it really the case that all literary writings are literature?” He is looking for something more than literature to come out of the work of contemporary essayists. “I believe that our experiences are constantly becoming more and more conceptual.” This gives him hope for a new form to supplement the poetic, a form which would be the pure Platonic essay.

and rich forms—drawn with secure hands—in Pater’s Marius or Kierkegaard’s Johannes, then it is hardly possible to despair or doubt. And Kierkegaard and Weininger placed great new Eros-concepts alongside Plato’s (these are the great love tragedies of critics), and Schopenhauer created ahead of his time the conceptual equivalents of new poetic tragedy and musical tragedy, and Nietzsche wrote the Platonic Faust and Hamlet and Ruskin sounded his Rousseau-ian voice. And in the words of Hofmannstahl’s Lord Chandos—who wrote letters to Bacon about why he did not produce anything, why every thought dissolves into thin air—all of today’s upheavels are perhaps more clearly expressed than in any tragedy. And today’s feminine ideal glows in as pure a light as anywhere else. And who knows where Kassner’s new style—freed from all literary binds—will lead when it is ready and self-contained?

PROBLEM: And is it really the case that all literary writings are literature?

Is not Goethe’s deepest experience the division of art into imitation of nature, manner, and style; or Schiller’s experience grouping, separating, the naive from the sentimental? Or are Emerson’s light gratia and Kassner’s many, nightmare ridden human types only “literature”? I believe that our experiences are constantly becoming more and more conceptual. Today’s poetry has suffered enough from it up until now, but perhaps from this this form of experience the form of essay will be born, the supplement to the poetic form and its equivalent.

Why did I feel that I had to tell you all this, in order to justify my having collected these few “essays” and make a book of them? Perhaps because I feel that we have to give an account only of strivings; of the fact that the road is where one goes along, but of this one must give an account, both to himself and to others. And one must not be preoccupied, not even for a moment, with how far along one got on this road; only to keep on going, going, going. . . .

(Translation by Dr. Marianne Esztergar, modified by the author.)

The 1910 "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" concludes on a note of mystical striving:

Why did I feel that I had to tell you all this, in order to justify my having collected these few "experiments" and make a book of them? Perhaps because I feel that we have to give an account only of strivings; of the fact that the road is where one goes along, but of this one must give an account, both to oneself and to others. And one must not be preoccupied, not even for a moment, with how far along one got on this road; only to keep going, going, going, . . .

These were the conclusions or, perhaps, this was the point at which Lukacs had arrived, when he collected his essays for the Hungarian edition of *Soul and Form*. If there is a clear definition of the essay in this version of "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," it is extremely difficult to locate. It seems more convincing to argue that Lukacs was expressing many different ways of considering essayistic writing (as well he should, considering the mixture of approaches in *Soul and Form*) and that the one that seemed most attractive to him at this time was the last that he had produced, the essay, the practice of writing essays, as a road to a more ideal way of life. The careful introductions of German poetry and literary criticism to his Budapest audience that he had included as the earliest of the essays in *Soul and Form* had given way to a more meditative style of writing. His road, from the Impressionism to mysticism, demonstrates a clear and broad, a quite slippery path, that the Impressionist critic might follow. Such subjective literary studies are based on an equally subjectivist theory of knowledge: the belief that ideas themselves are world forming, that reality resides within ourselves. This is a comforting doctrine in a world growing steadily more uncomfortable, as the rapidly industrializing world of Central Europe had been for a generation by 1910. On the other hand, it leaves its adherents in a radically isolated position: all-powerful subjective intelligences without a God, without companions. It was not, after all, a road. It was a dead end.

When Lukacs translated the essays from the Hungarian edition of *Soul and Form* into German, he did so without making significant changes in any except "On the Nature and Form of the Essay." In this essay the German text diverges from the original at the point where post-Platonic critics are said to be underprivileged for never having met a Socrates. From there until the end of the new version

the tone of the piece has been considerably altered. The mystic exaltation of the original has been erased.

Later on, criticism became its own content; critics spoke only of poetry and art, and they never had the good fortune to meet a Socrates whose life might have served them as a springboard to the ultimate. But Socrates was the first to condemn such critics. "It seems to me," he said to Protagoras, "that to make a poem the subject of a conversation is too reminiscent of those banquets which uneducated and vulgar people give in their houses (15).

In this version Lukacs does not ask whether the essayist is bound to literature, he assumes that not to be the case. "The modern essay does not always have to speak of books or poets; . . ." and so the essayist has a great deal of freedom (15). But this freedom brings with it its own difficulties. The modern essay

stands too high, it sees and connects too many things to be the simple exposition or explanation of a work; the title of every essay is preceded in invisible letters by the words "Thoughts occasioned by . . ." (15).

This is a problem for the essayist because he or she must stand between two roles, that of the mystic and that of the student of literature: "The modern essay has lost that backdrop of life which gave Plato and the mystics their strength; nor does it any longer possess a naive faith in the value of books and what can be said about them" (15). Whereas in the preceding year Lukacs had been confident that the duty of the essayist is to record his or her strivings along the path to the Platonic ideal, the mystic vision, now he presents a different task. The essayist must accentuate the "problematic" of the essay and so free it from its scientific residue. The essayist must seek the poetic in literature.

Poetry is older and greater—a larger, more important thing—than all the works of poetry: that was once the mood with which critics approached literature, but in our time it has had to become a conscious attitude (16).

Being decadent, or merely sentimental, we must consciously seek those things which came as a matter of course to our naive ancestors. Lukacs, in some of his earlier essays such as that on Stefan George, had already written about the poetic rather than about the poem. The essay

at hand is thus evolving as a defense of Lukacs's literary practice, rather than calling for a new way of life, as the essay had in the earlier version. He now feels that the essayist should seek out the idea behind the occasional words of literary subject matter, rather than the Idea behind the world.

By what right, Lukacs now asks, does the essayist seek those poetic ideas, make those judgments? He concludes that the essayist does so in the right of a "John the Baptist" for the aesthetician. It is that "one who is always about to arrive, the one who is never quite yet there," who justifies, in retrospect, the essayist's efforts at finding that which is behind the text (16).

The essay can calmly and proudly set its fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude or impressionistic freshness; but its pure fulfillment, its most vigorous accomplishment becomes powerless once the great aesthetic comes (17).

One is somewhat surprised to find the previous year's mysticism replaced by aesthetic eschatology. Where previously the value of the essay was located in its recording of the strivings of the essayist, we now find that the essay is an approach to aesthetics. We seem, therefore, to have lost the Platonic essay, the essay as something completely apart from the study of art. Lukacs states that we must however, distinguish between what the essay does, in preparing for the great aesthetic, and what it is, longing. It is, to be sure, longing for the great aesthetic, but it is, nonetheless, also the pure expression of longing:

but this longing is more than just something waiting for fulfillment, it is a fact of the soul with a value and existence of its own: an original and deep-rooted attitude towards the whole of life, a final, irreducible category of possibilities, of experience (17).

The essay as a form gives form to longing. It is, therefore, "a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict . . . but the process of judging" (18). After working out this distinction, Lukacs can provide yet another justification for making a book of his essays. They are now unified for him by their being individual journeys along a road (once more), a road perhaps leading to the great aesthetic, but its terminus is not particularly important:

The point at issue was only the possibility, only the question of whether the road upon which this book attempts to travel

is really a road; it was not a question of who has already travelled it or how—nor, least of all, the distance this particular book has travelled along it. The critique of this book is continued, in all possible sharpness and entirety, in the very approach from which it sprang (18).

This is a repetition, in another key as it were, of the final paragraph of the original. But where in the original, the going and striving on the road was for a mystical experience or for experience itself, the journey now is toward aesthetics. It is easy to agree with Lukacs that his book is indeed an account of an aesthetic journey, that, moreover, it shows us his development as a critic over three crucial years. But somehow the original conclusion of the essay, by revealing more fully the place to which he had come in 1910, revealed more about the character of that journey. Having begun as an Impressionist introducer of German culture to the Budapest intelligentsia, he later turned into something of a mystic. The new conclusion of "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," written for a German audience, sticks more closely to literary critical consideration than did the Hungarian original; thus it served to introduce Lukacs himself to his new audience in a more familiar guise than that of a follower of Meister Eckhart seeking transcendental reality through the contemplation of the poetic rather than the Mystery of the Incarnation. Nevertheless, the original conclusion to the essay seems the truer, more revealing one, showing, as that which is repressed often shows us, the bare motive under the cultural decorations.

Can we make claims of general interest about criticism from this exposition of the spiritualist basis of the early Lukacsian theory of criticism? I believe that we can. The foregrounding of the interpretive role of the critic that Lukacs advocates, and the mystical implications of that emphasis, warn us that in general such assertions of interpretive independence may be based on the Idealist epistemology that the mind constitutes the world and so, in the final analysis, only the individual mind is important.