The Work of Lukacs

THE WORK of the Hungarian Georg Lukacs is a major contribution to the Marxism of this century. As an independent thinker, he has at various times come under fire both from fellow communists and from anti-communists. At the age of 85 he has just completed his two-volume Aesthetics and is presently at work on his new book: Ontology.

Odd though it may seem some of his most important ideas have been attacked by Stalinist dogmatists and academic critics in the West on very similar grounds. Lukacs takes issue with the Stalin-Zhdanov notion of Marxism as a "great leap":

Thought was arranged as if there had been pre-Marxist thought, then a huge jump, and lo and behold Marxism was there. But the essential plus of Marxism is that it made everything in 2,000 years of European development its own — I did not say this, Lenin said it.

Lukacs postulates the continuity of human culture. Marxism for him developed from a culture stock which had itself been revolutionised by Aristotle, Epicurus, Bacon, Hobbes, Diderot, Goethe,
Hegel and other creators of human culture, and Lukacs himself has steadfastly continued this cultural tradition of Marxism. The differing attitudes to his work reveal the trend to polarisation within Marxism today.

This is not, of course, to suggest the acceptance of Lukacs' thought in all its articulations. Nor is the alternative an equally complete rejection; yet this dichotomous thumbs-up - thumbs-down response to Lukacs is frequent, and comes from surprisingly different kinds of people. Lukacs himself leaves no doubt about where he stands on this matter:

I would be the first to protest if my views were turned into some sort of official doctrine . . . let them recognise my position as one particular opinion within Marxism . . . which of these theories (of Marxism) will prove to be satisfactory and which won't, well, none of us know of any criterion to establish this other than mutual criticism. But there is no tribunal of last resort which can declare that X is right, nor can it possibly exist . . . We need sharp discussions, discussions which have no administrative ends.

Lukacs' contribution is to philosophy and aesthetics, and through these fields to politics. It is not really useful to speculate (as do some of the contributors to this collection of essays) about how Lukacs might have developed had the Stalinist ascendancy not excluded him from a directly party-political career. For Lukacs, as a continuer of Marx's humanism, man's human fate, the human development of the personality, are central concerns in all his work. His Marxist humanism inevitably brought him into conflict with the bureaucratic dogmatists. But it would be wrong to assume that exclusion from direct party-political activity (apart from the 1919 Hungarian revolution and his role in the Imre Nagy government of 1956) made Lukacs politically ineffective. The influence of his ideas is growing on a world-wide scale.

Lukacs' work illuminates the connection between the philosophic-humanist development of aesthetic theory and politics. One side of the medal reveals the official doctrine of "socialist realism" which reduces the human dimension by subordinating art and literature to party-political expediency. The obverse side shows Lukacs' constant preoccupation with the free and human development of the personality, with methods which may help to arouse the dormant forces in each individual to fruitful activity, to the kind of understanding of and grappling with reality which the total development of the personality requires.

In this collection the essay by Istvan Meszaros, a former assistant of Lukacs' and now Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Sussex, seeks to give a picture of Lukacs' thought from his
youth to his old age. Meszaros traces the main (Germanic) intellectual influences on Lukacs and shows that Lukacs nevertheless developed the most radical critique of German thought and literature. The notion that Lukacs, with his concern for “great realism”, is unable to appreciate lyric poetry, is shown to be false. While his contemporaries were at odds with the intricately mediated meaning of the symbolic poetry of the Hungarian poet Ady, whom they saw only as a formal-linguistic innovator, the young Lukacs was the first to focus attention on the organising core of this poetry: the elemental passion of a democratic revolutionary. In an article written when he was well past 80 years of age Lukacs describes Ady as:

the greatest lyric poet of this age, both humanly and poetically. I have no fear of being branded a chauvinist for expressing this opinion.

Lukacs believes that literature and art are formative elements for the human personality, enlarging man so that he gathers the means to master himself and his milieu. This conviction leads him into an impatience with modern experimental work, and obscures for him the new insights, the new artistic tools and techniques which have resulted from the works of the best of the moderns. These are matters of judgement which do not call into question the strengths of his aesthetic theory so much as his own use of it on occasions. In this he is not essentially different from other original thinkers who tend to see their significant new thinking as universal answers at last discovered.

It is mistaken to think that because Lukacs is a Marxist he therefore is limited to a sociological approach to the study of literature and art; or that he has a simplistic, mechanistic theory of reflection. Lukacs’ aesthetic theory of realism involves his concept of totality — the artistic portrayal of individual characters so that they embody that which is humanly and socially essential in the given historical epoch. This ideal of great realism Lukacs derives from the literature and art of three main periods — the classical Greek, the renaissance, and the thirty years that followed the French revolution. With Lukacs this does not provide an arbitrary prescription to be imposed by critics on works of art, it provides a tool which enables the critic to investigate the given work of art, its genesis, its human and social meanings.

For Lukacs the work of art is always a “world-in-itself” which becomes a “world-for-us” through its evocative impact on the recipient: but it is able to do this only because as a “being-in-itself”, it carries latent within it its quality of “being-for-us”. The artist does not attain objectivity by mechanically copying reality. If he is to attain the highest objectivity the artist has to be concentrated
as an individual into the sole task of creation, and what is needed at this point is the acutest subjectivity which can chart the movement in consciousness, his own and that which represents "the spirit of the times". Subjectivity in this sense is not identical with that of the individual artist alone, but is the concentration of the subjectivity of significant sections of the human species.

Every work of art, Lukacs says, is historical in its "just-so-ness". Each work has its own genesis in and grows out of the everyday life of the given age. With Lukacs, however, the genesis itself is merely the indispensable condition for the understanding of art and literature, it is never an explanation of art or of a specific work of art. The work of art cannot be understood without its genesis, but this genesis can only be approached and uncovered through the particular work of art itself, and not by attempting to impose some external category as a label on the particular work.

The aesthetic doctrine of Northrop Frye: "Literature makes literature which makes literature", a prevailing academic fashion in the USA, occupies the opposite pole of dogmatism to the theorists of "socialist realism". Lukacs' aesthetic is directed against both. Susan Sontag, with her stress on the need to approach works of art with open senses, sensitivity and feeling, her call to us to experience "the luminousness of the thing-in-itself", provides many stimulating insights; but her prescriptions in Against Interpretation would rob aesthetics of many of the tools of reason which Lukacs makes available. Here I do not suggest the literary historian or critic be an adherent of this or that theory (the history of literary study is also in many ways a history of intellectual and political fashion). What I suggest is understanding that one line of investigation, pursued to its end, may produce fruitful results while in no way closing the field to other lines of investigation.

Meszaros sees two fatal flaws in the work of Lukacs: first what he describes as a dualism in his philosophical position, and second, a loss of mediations in his total position. The basis for the first flaw he finds in Lukacs' statement that:

I come now to another basic ontological problem of social development, which is linked with the fact that society is an extraordinarily complicated complex of complexes, in which there are two opposite poles. On the one hand there is the totality of society, which ultimately determines the interactions of the individual complexes, and on the other there is the complex individual man, who constitutes an irreducible minimal unity within the process. In this process, man finally becomes man . . . the aspect of freedom acquires a significance which is ever greater, ever more comprehensive, embracing the whole of humanity . . . I assert, therefore, that however much all these problems have been made possible by economic factors, they can be translated into reality only through man's decisions between alternatives.
Far from being dualist, this is a philosophical reflection of the dialectical unity and conflict at work in contemporary society. This position of Lukacs contrasts with the deterministic "monism" of Louis Althusser and similar trends in Marxism. The work of Lukacs is full of combat against this economic determinist reductionism; it grows out of the real tension and conflict at the heart of modern society, and from this dialectical view of society it follows that it is real men who have to decide between real alternatives.

Nor can it be established that Lukacs lacks mediations. The argument here runs mainly on the lines of party-political mediations. Yet the experience of Lukacs in finding alternative forms of mediation is not only characteristic of him, it is a world-wide phenomenon of contemporary life. The increasing relevance of Lukacs — an example of his relevance is the book now under review — is proof of how intellectual effort, provided it has real depth, integrity and persistence, finds its own mediations, or creates such mediations. The tendency persists of seeing the problem of mediations in terms of the working class as it was fifty years ago, but that position is being radically changed under the impact of the scientific—technological revolution and the consequent changing structure of the workforce. The humanism in the aesthetic developed by Lukacs has a powerful impact in the political sphere (even if this influence is still, so to speak, subterranean). Lukacs' stress on the role of the intellectuals, far from being erroneous, is timely. There is ample evidence of this in both the socialist and capitalist countries. In this sense the work of Lukacs acts against the Soviet party practice which closed off one channel of mediation for its own independent and creative intellectuals, and by doing so impoverished Soviet politics.

This collection of essays is to be welcomed because it provides useful information on the life-work of Lukacs and critical assessments of some of his theories, but it does not succeed in giving a total picture of the man and his position. The eight essays suffer from the failings often associated with such collections: there is inevitably a certain arbitrariness in the division of the subject matter, each contributor feels obliged to elaborate his positive estimations and balance these with a piece of criticism. Apart from the somewhat piecemeal treatment of Lukacs' work this also involves undue repetition. We are fortunate that in addition to the two further books in English on Lukacs promised this year, English publishers have promised to provide us with good translations of a number of the main works of the man himself.