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Lukacs and Solzhenitsyn

SOLZHENITSYN, by George Lukacs. Translated by William David Graf. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 88 pages. $5.95; paper, $1.45.

FOR MOST of his life Georg Lukacs, the intellectual heresiarch of Communism, was unable to write freely. During the years he spent under Stalin in Russia and Rakosi in Hungary he had no freedom at all; more recently, under Kadar in Hungary, he was granted a measure of intellectual independence but only in a cautious, limited way. Lukacs made one major bolt from the bounds of political orthodoxy by joining the Nagy government of 1956, but once the Russian troops destroyed it he gradually came back into the fold. He had always to keep looking over his shoulder, sometimes literally and more often figuratively, so as to measure the latitude allowed him by the Party. Long ago he had chosen the role of the (at times) semi-dissident Communist, but never an openly oppositionist Communist and certainly not a public opponent of the party-state dictatorship.

Lukacs's reasons for this choice were clear: the locomotive of history had gone badly astray, the best passengers had been killed, the engineer had turned out to be a homicidal maniac, yet somehow that locomotive chugged in the direction of progress. To have declared himself in clear opposition to totalitarianism, he believed, would have meant to isolate himself from History. It was a choice like that of the old Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin, who in the early thirties paid a secret visit to some Mensheviks in Paris, trembling with fright and horror at the excesses of Stalin yet unable to face the prospect of exile. For Bukharin the result was death; for Lukacs a captivity sometimes grating, sometimes silken. The course they chose, whatever its political merits, was not likely to encourage moral strength or forthrightness, since "if you always look over your shoulder," as a character in Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* remarks, "how can you still remain a human being?" Not a good Communist or adept dialectician, but "a human being." That these words should now be cited with seeming approval by Lukacs, a man who knew his way around his shoulder, is a matter of high intellectual drama.

The small book Lukacs wrote about Solzhenitsyn at the very end of his life is a remarkable work, certainly far more so than the theoretical writings of his early years, which in their recent translations have given rise to a wavelet of Marxist scholasticism. In his study of Solzhenitsyn—perhaps because he found it easier or more prudent to express his deepest convictions through the mediated discourse of literary criticism than through the directness of political speech—Lukacs expresses fervently, as perhaps never before, the disgust he felt for Stalinism, at least Stalinism as the terrorist phase of the party-state dictatorship, if not as an integral sociopolitical system.

In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, writes Lukacs, *"the concentration camp is a symbol of everyday Stalinist life."* Remarkable; especially when one remembers a little wryly the rebukes from Left and Right delivered to those of us who have been saying exactly the same thing. Still more remarkable is Lukacs's reference, obviously made with an eye toward the Khrushchev and Brezhnev regimes, to "the

new era with all its changes which preserve *the essential methods of Stalinism* with only superficial modifications" (emphasis added—i.h.). Such passages, and there are a number of them, are at least as revealing of Lukacs's inner thoughts as of Solzhenitsyn's well-known books.

Lukacs's admiration for Solzhenitsyn clearly went beyond the latter's literary achievement; it had much to do with his moral stature. At a number of points Lukacs writes with approval of Solzhenitsyn's independence and courage.[1] And it is precisely here that we encounter a painful problem. For between the absolute candor of Solzhenitsyn's work and the deviousness of Lukacs's career there is a startling difference, so much so that one senses in this little book a measure of discomfort and defensiveness. A man as intelligent as Lukacs could hardly have been unaware that he kept praising Solzhenitsyn for precisely the virtues he himself had rarely shown.

Completely fascinating in this respect is Lukacs's attitude toward one of the characters in *The First Circle,* the prisoner Rubin who is portrayed by Solzhenitsyn as a very decent man but intellectually still in the grip of Communist orthodoxy. For Rubin, writes Lukacs,

> friendship . . . is an indispensable part of life, and here [in the special camp for scientists] he cannot befriend like-minded persons, while all his friends reject his views. . . . In order to be able to exist accordingly, he repeatedly recites humorous parodies of poems . . . the only effect of which is that he must subsequently be ashamed of the role he has played.

Yet what have been a good many of Lukacs's own writings during the last few decades but parodies of Marxism composed under the pressures of the Party, for which he must subsequently have felt ashamed? One source, then, of his admiration for Solzhenitsyn seems to be the Russian novelist's deliberate refusal of "tactics," the whole stale jumble of "dialectics" by which thinkers like Lukacs have persisted in justifying their submission to the dictatorship of the Party.

Precisely this uncomfortable mixture of responses may account for the fact that in discussing Solzhenitsyn's novels Lukacs turns to a theme that has long preoccupied independent critics in the West (and secretly, no doubt, in the East) but has hardly figured in Lukacs's own work. I refer to the problem of integrity, as a trait independent of and not reducible to political opinion or class status. It is the problem of how men under an absolute tyranny struggle, as Lukacs well puts it, "to preserve their own human integrity even here." And still more striking is Lukacs's remark that "in the camps"—which you will remember he has described as "a symbol of everyday Stalinist life" such as he himself experienced for years—"a refusal to compromise in all human and social essentials thus forms a prerequisite for anyone wishing to remain really human." Strong words!

Stronger still is the remark of Nerzhin, the central character of *The First Circle,* which Lukacs quotes with evident approval: there "is no better place" than prison "to understand the part of good and evil in human life." Good and evil! What is Lukacs doing with his praise of these "trans-historical," these quite undialectical, these perhaps neo-Kantian categories? Not "progressive and reactionary," but "good and evil." Something, one can only surmise, must have been fermenting in Lukacs's mind during his last years that the appearance of Solzhenitsyn's novels helped bring to fruition, something more heretical than he ever dared express in his own right.

Writing about the social world portrayed by Solzhenitsyn, Lukacs comments:

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[1] How admirable, even overwhelming, that courage is we can learn from the recently published collection of documents concerning the Solzhenitsyn "case" that has been edited by Leopold Labedz. In chronological order, these documents show the emergence of Solzhenitsyn as a new Russian writer welcomed by the more open-minded of his colleagues; then the mounting struggle between the Soviet bureaucracy and the independent-minded intellectuals over Solzhenitsyn's work; and finally the brutal clamping-down of the regime upon Solzhenitsyn and his supporters. There are two remarkable transcripts, the first of a group of Moscow writers discussing with Solzhenitsyn in 1966 his then uncompleted novel *Cancer Ward*—by and large, the discussion is serious, fraternal, in good faith; and second, of a meeting held a year later with the Secretariat of the Union of Soviet Writers—here the discussion consists of a disgraceful badgering of Solzhenitsyn by party hacks. Also included are articles by Russian writers, interviews, documents, letters, etc. An indispensible book.

See *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record,* Leopold Labedz, ed., New York: Harper & Row, 229 pp., $7.95.

> Should bureaucracy become the dominant mode of life of those participating in it, should the decisions dictated by it determine their way of life entirely, then inevitably the tactics of the apparatus, dictated by its day-to-day needs, become the ultimate judge of all decisions between good and evil.

It really begins to look as if, in the end, Lukacs was badly torn between such entirely admirable sentiments, elicited and brought to sharp articulation by Solzhenitsyn's books, and his continuing persuasion, part canniness and part habitual abjectness, that he had to remain faithful to the Party.

II

ONE REASON LUKACS ADMIRES SOLZHENITSYN the novelist is that he sees him as a realist in the nineteenth-century tradition who does not fiddle about with experimental techniques, clearly has large moral-historical scope, and puts a programmatically antimodernist critic like himself at ease. To some extent—I can't pretend to exactitude—this seems to me a misunderstanding of Solzhenitsyn's fiction, just as some years ago there was a similar misunderstanding of Pasternak's novel. Each of these writers chose to go back to the capacious forms of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, with its interweaving of themes, narrative elements, and characters, but not, I think, because of a deliberate or ideological rejection of literary modernism. Their decisions rested, instead, on moral-political grounds as these can be inferred from their novels themselves, namely, a persuasion that genuinely to return to the Tolstoyan novel, which the Stalinist dogma of "socialist realism" had celebrated in words but caricatured in performance, would constitute a revolutionary act of the spirit. It would signify a struggle for human renewal, for the reaffirmation of the image of a free man as that image can excite our minds beyond all ideological decrees. Pasternak had already been for many years a modernist poet, and Solzhenitsyn, forced by circumstances to live apart from all literary tendencies or groups, seems not to have been interested in the dispute over modernism. He had apparently reached the "instinctive" conclusion that in an authoritarian society the role of the writer is to recover fundamental supports of moral existence, direct intuitions of human fraternity, encompassing moments of truth. A writer seized by such a vision—which in some sense must be regarded as religious in urgency and depth—is not likely to think first of all about innovations of technique, though there is reason to suppose that he may nevertheless achieve them.

The first task of such a writer, as he takes upon himself the heavy and uncomfortable mantle of moral spokesman, is to remember, to record, to insist upon the sanctity of simple fact and uncontaminated memory. That is why Solzhenitsyn's apparent indifference to literary modernism which so pleases Lukacs would seem to be less a deliberate repudiation than a step beyond the circumstances that had first led to modernism. It is a step that prompted Solzhenitsyn to revive—though with significant modifications—the Tolstoyan novel, a step taken out of the conviction that in our time the

claim for freedom is inseparable from the resurrection of history. To be free means in our century, first of all, to remember.

Simply as a literary critic, Lukacs often writes well in this book. He compares *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* with by-now classical novellas by Conrad and Hemingway in order to work out a rough schema for the novella, or short novel, as a form:

> It does not claim to shape the whole of social reality, nor even to depict that whole as it appears from the vantage point of a fundamental and topical problem. Its truth rests on the fact that an individual situation—usually an extreme one [but has not modernism just entered here, through the back door?—i.h.]—is possible in a certain society at a certain level of development, and just because it is possible, is characteristic of this society and this level.

If not quite original, this is very keen. More original and illuminating is Lukacs's notion that in the twentieth century there has appeared a kind of novel that enlarges upon the central structure of the novella. Lukacs notices this, first of all, in *The Magic Mountain,* whose "compositional innovation"

> may be described . . . in a purely formal way, namely that the uniformity of the setting is made the immediate foundation of the narrative. The characters of this novel are removed from the "natural" location of their lives and movements, and are transplanted into new and artificial surroundings (here the sanatorium for consumptives). The major consequence of this is that the characters do not come into contact with each other, as so often in life and even more frequently in art, in "normal" ways . . . ; rather this "chance" common terrain of their present existence creates new fundamental forms of their human, intellectual and moral relations with each other.

What such a literary structure then does is to sustain a prolonged interval of crisis in which the characters are put to a test. In *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann enforces the test through a confrontation with the reality of the characters' own death. In *The First Circle* Solzhenitsyn has the prisoners confronted "not only by the slender hope of liberation, but by a very real threat of a more infernal region of hell" (that is, shipment to the worst camps in Siberia).

Clearly this is the kind of analysis that serious readers can respect, since it makes an effort to see works of literature in their own realm of being and ventures upon comparisons in regard to structure and technique that leap across the dull hurdles of "socialist realism." Yet it seems utterly characteristic of Lukacs that just as he shows his mind at its liveliest he should also show it still unfree. Having analyzed the relation of the structural principle in Solzhenitsyn's novels to that which he locates in the work of Mann, Lukacs must then come up with a preposterous remark that "Solzhenitsyn's works appear as a rebirth of the noble beginnings of socialist realism." But this is sheer nonsense. Whatever Solzhenitsyn's novels may be, they really have nothing in common with "socialist realism," not even with the one, rather frayed instance offered by Lukacs of its "noble beginnings," the fiction of the Soviet writer Makarenko which he overrates simply in order to show that he does, still, adhere to a version of "socialist realism." [2]

III

THE CENTRAL CRITICISM Lukacs makes of Solzhenitsyn is that the Russian novelist writes from the strong but limiting perspective of the plebeian mind, rather than from a socialist consciousness. Lukacs grants that Solzhenitsyn's criticism of Soviet society is "rooted in a genuine plebeian hatred of social privilege"; it is tied by numerous filaments of attitude to the "plebeian social view" of such Tolstoyan characters as Platon Karatayev in *War and Peace;* but it lacks, as it must, the historical perspective, the theoretical coherence that can alone be provided by the "socialist" outlook.

This point is of considerable literary and political interest, since it marks quite clearly the limits within which Lukacs, for all his on-again, off-again hatred of Stalinist society and the "new era" which "preserves the essential

[2] Not one in a hundred of Lukacs's readers are likely to have read Makarenko, and that may lend his claim plausibility. But having struggled with an English translation of Makarenko's *The Road to Life,* which Lukacs praises so highly, even to the point of linking it with *The Magic Mountain,* I can only testify that it is a characteristic exercise in agit-prop, though perhaps a shade better than most Soviet writing. Perhaps Lukacs was indulging in some sort of inside joke, with those in Eastern Europe who do know Makarenko being tipped off not to take this standard reference very seriously.

methods of Stalinism," nevertheless continues to function.

Lukacs refers to a striking phrase of Marx, the "ignorant perfection" of ordinary people, a perfection of healthy social impulse, a moral rightness that can spontaneously arise among the masses. It is "perfection" because it immediately sniffs out frauds and tyrants, but "ignorant" because it has not been raised to a level of generality or fortified with "dialectics." It remains a healthy reaction to what exists, but by itself cannot lead to action in behalf of what might be. The vocabulary of Leninism made a parallel distinction between ordinary trade-union consciousness, which the masses can reach by themselves, and revolutionary consciousness, which the vanguard party must bring to (or impose upon) the masses.

Now, historically Lukacs is being more than a little ingenuous in confining the dominant vision of Solzhenitsyn's work, as well as that in Tolstoy best represented by the character Platon Karatayev, to the level of the "plebeian." Plebeian these certainly are, as in the wonderful remark of Solzhenitsyn's character Spiridon who, when asked to describe the difference between the guilty and the innocent, answers, "Sheepdogs are right and cannibals are wrong." But in reality, as any student of Russian literature must know, the plebeian stress in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, which one hears again in Solzhenitsyn, draws upon a strand of Christian belief very powerful in Russian culture, a strand that favors egalitarianism and ascetic humility, as if to take the word of Jesus at face value. Platon Karatayev may himself be an example of "ignorant perfection," but Tolstoy's act in creating him is anything but that. It follows from a major world-view,[3] in its own way at least as comprehensive as that of Marxism. And the same might hold in regard to Solzhenitsyn's "plebeian" sentiments.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that at a time when the "socialist" vocabulary is used for oppressive ends, the "plebeian" response, even if undecorated with ideology and world views, takes on a liberating, indeed a revolutionary character. And the same, I would say, holds for certain religious responses. That Lukacs could, however, write a book about Solzhenitsyn without so much as mentioning the problem of his religious inclinations, let alone those of the Tolstoy to whom he links Solzhenitsyn, is indeed a "dialectical" feat.

Let us nevertheless stay with Lukac's argument for a moment, even granting, for the sake of that argument, the evident justice in his remark that "the inner 'ignorant perfection' of the common people is not sufficient to develop in man a positively effective and critical attitude toward the reform of his alienated society." Yet precisely these cogent words are likely to raise a tremor of distrust among readers experienced in the politics of Marxism. For Lukacs is speaking not merely in the abstract about the need for theoretical vision and generality; he writes from his own version of Marxism-Leninism, and when he contrasts Solzhenitsyn's "plebeian" limitation with the largeness of "socialist" perspective, we can't avoid translating this into a contrast between Solzhenitsyn's "moral-social criticism of Communist society from the standpoint of freedom" and Lukacs's "criticism directed toward the resurrection of the Party within the framework of orthodox belief." What then becomes evident is that Solzhenitsyn's criticism of Russian society—even if limited by the "ignorant perfection" of the "plebeian" outlook—is far deeper, far more revolutionary, and far closer to the needs of a genuine socialism than that of Lukacs. Neither the dissident nor oppositionist label really fits Solzhenitsyn. Plebeian, yes. Plebeian, in that he has become the voice of all those who silently suffered through the decades of the terror and beyond. Brushing past the cant of Lukacs's world ("the leading role of the Party," "the Leninist heritage," etc.), Solzhenitsyn embodies in his fiction that empathy with the lowly and the mute which links him both to the great masters of the nineteenth century and the still-uncreated future of free men.

[3] On the component of heretical Christianity in Tolstoy and its political significance, Trotsky's essays on Tolstoy are far more illuminating than Lukacs, perhaps because Trotsky writing under the Czar was less inhibited in expressing his views than Lukacs under the reign of the Party. If, by the way, it is Marxist literary criticism that interests some young intellectuals these days, they will find it—to the extent that it can be said to exist—far more brilliantly, clearly, and elegantly achieved in Trotsky than in Lukacs. I sometimes suspect that the current fad of Lukacs has something to do with his imposing verbal opacity.