

Aesthetic Culture *

[György Lukács](#)

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Editor's Introduction

"Aesthetic Culture" is one of the most important statements of György Lukács's philosophy of culture in the period prior to his departure from Hungary in 1912 to study in Heidelberg. First published in the journal *Renaissance* in 1910 and reprinted in 1913 in the essay collection to which it lent its title, "Aesthetic Culture" appeared in immediate proximity to the essays in his first major book, *The Soul and Forms*, and shares a number of concepts and concerns with that work. In Lukács's early essays, concepts from the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) fashionable at that time in the German-speaking world mingled with such heterogeneous literary sources as Christian mystical writings, German romantic criticism, the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Hauptmann's and Ibsen's naturalist drama, and the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde and D'Annunzio to lend his meditations a vague but thickly elaborated terminology of "life," "soul," "form," "mood," "solitude," "depth," "culture," "heroism," and "tragedy." At the same time, despite this idealist conceptual framework, these texts reveal surprising continuities between Lukács's pre-Marxist, ethical criticism of modernist literature and his mature, Marxist opposition of an historically grounded "critical realism" to a subjectivistic and decadent modernism. Directly attacking the aestheticist stance that Lukács thought characteristic of modern art and literature generally, "Aesthetic Culture" is an especially revealing work to compare to his later communist polemics against expressionism and the modernist novel.

Lukács's title embodies a paradox, which he unfolds in the course of the essay. At present, he argues, there is no culture, and especially no "aesthetic culture." Indeed, it is precisely the emphasis on the "aesthetic" in present-day art and life that is symptomatic of culture's definitive disappearance and, at the same time, that is inimical to any culture's forming in modern society. Wherever aesthetic culture has appeared, Lukács asserts, "there is no architecture, no tragedy, no philosophy, no monumental painting, no real epic."

The key to this paradox lies with the problem of form, which the aesthete ironically has no ability to bring into being. Instead of authentic artistic or cultural form, the aesthete emphasizes the "mood," the fleeting inner sensation that an artwork or even the outer world more generally may occasion. The task of the artist shifts from giving form to life towards a new, peculiarly "modern" imperative, that **[End Page 365]** of provoking aesthetic sensations in the inner selves of spectators and readers. Artistic forms evaporate in this hothouse atmosphere in which beautiful feelings are forced to effloresce. Genuine, unified form appears only when the artist actively struggles to overcome the powerful resistances of life to being contained within the forms of art. Aesthetic culture, however, allows the artist to piece together surfaces effortlessly, creating

pleasant appearances with nothing of the endurance that forms have against the passing of time. "The admirers of 'form,'" Lukács concludes, "killed form; the priests of *l'art pour l'art* paralyzed art." The novelty of the aesthetic sensation and the ephemerality of artwork's value are two sides of a single process in which objective substantiality of artistic form progressively gives way to the aesthetic effect's fleeting presence in the isolated soul.

Lukács suggests that *aesthetic culture*--this paradoxical absence of any genuinely formed, objectively substantive art or culture--has appeared only recently, at the end of the 19th century. At this threshold of the new century, he believed, inner experience had rapidly come to supplant form not just in art but in all spheres. Aesthetic culture emerged when the whole of life might be judged not according to any intrinsic value it might have, but rather according to a shifting "aesthetic" standard: its ability to occasion moods, to bring about pleasant or intense sensations in solitary men and women who live passively disengaged from their own lives, like a spectator might enjoy a theatrical performance from a darkened box.

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The German idealist tradition had looked to tragedy as the dialectical means by which the seeming antinomies of a character's individuality and his representation of a community could be reconciled. In this view, for example, the tragic hero was seen to render his individual freedom exemplary by accepting as his own a super-individual fate, dictated by the inscrutable decrees of the gods or by intractable laws of the archaic human community. In one of the most important essays in *The Soul and Forms*, "The Metaphysics of Tragedy," Lukács had offered his own version of reconciling conceptual antinomies tragically. Tragic fate, in the view of this essay of 1910, purifies and intensifies being, by eliminating any contingency and superfluity to that which determines the shape of a life. "For a character in tragedy," Lukács writes, "to be there at all--to exist--is to be perfect." Such moments of tragedy, he argues, are "the pure experience of the self," moments of profound authenticity, in which nothing extraneous or accidental enters into the determination of what that individual is. This perfectly individualized tragic self is, at the same time, essential, necessary, "impersonal." It is a self that has lost all merely autobiographical traits and expresses in concretely individual form that which selfhood means for a particular historical community. At the extreme of its individuality, it has become representative.

Surprisingly, then, Lukács offers a sort of implicit self-criticism of his "metaphysics of tragedy" in the nearly contemporaneous "Aesthetic Culture," which rejects tragedy on ethical grounds. In the later essay, tragedy and aestheticism are not [End Page 366] opposed, not contrasted as antithetically serious and frivolous, but rather are viewed as complementary states, inextricably intertwined. "The life of the aesthete," Lukács argues, "whether he admits or denies it consciously and heroically, or lies even to himself-- . . . takes place always and entirely in the sphere of tragedy. And in most aesthetes' writings, the truly felt and genuinely moving passages always have their source in tragedy." Yet the tragedy of the aesthetic life is ambiguous: it at once "consecrates their oeuvres as strong and full" and provides a tragic artistic background against which the aesthetes' lives appear "truly frivolous and devoid of substance." Paradoxically, the sense of necessity that accompanies tragedy serves to lift the burden of ethical decision and lend the blasé attitude of the aesthete a spurious moral pathos. "Permanent tragedy," Lukács concludes, "is the greatest frivolity."

In "Aesthetic Culture," accordingly, Lukács displaces the fullness and necessity of being from the tragic hero--who too closely resembles the aesthete to serve as a standard--to the existence of the impersonal world of forms. Just as he had earlier seen tragedy as eliminating any superfluous or contingent mode of being, reducing the hero to expressing the lineaments of his individual fate, now forms become the extreme of realized existence: "Within the life of forms, there is no 'possibility'; what cannot be realized does not even exist, and what can be realized will be realized. There is only one perdition here: not to be born. But that which has been born will live forever."

It is this "tragic" existence of *forms*, not characters or lives, that legitimates Lukács's ultimate move in dialectically negating aestheticism, while at the same time affirming it in a higher form. He suggests that aestheticism only managed to generate a false and weak "aesthetic culture"

because it detoured into tragic frivolity and failed to see the process of artistic self-formation through to its extreme dialectical turning-point. If, Lukács writes, "we wanted to sum up all our criticisms of the aesthete type in a sentence, shouldn't we say that they were not aesthetes enough, not aesthetes in a sufficiently deep and consistent way?" That is to say, rather than seeking to tap to the depths the power of artistic formation, aesthetes contented themselves with pursuing the ephemeral pleasures of the mood or sensation. In contrast to the sensitive passivity that characterizes aesthetic feelings, true formation is active force, a sort of divine violence radiating from a center of creative power: a "last judgement" that lends ultimate necessity to the soul and eliminates all superfluity from its expressions.

For the young Lukács, genuine artistic formation is possible only for the solitary man of vision. Yet Lukács's later collective concerns are not absent even from this resolutely elitist view of art and culture. For though emerging in solitude, forms have their essence in their trans-individual endurance and communicability. As Lukács puts it, the individually formed life is exemplary, "because the realization of one man makes it possible for every man." These exemplary creators of form must persist in their solitude until they lose their merely personal status and become representative. "That is why," Lukács concludes, "the tragic life and tragic isolation of this breed of men is no longer tragic. Here the tragedy of solitude is life's *a priori*, but the most important heroism, the heroism of forming oneself, grows from this solitude." The genuine artist crosses the abyss between himself and his community [End Page 367] through dialectical intensification of his tragic solitude, a movement beyond tragic isolation through its extreme affirmation.

The question of socialism, another potential bridge between the individual and the collective, appears in "Aesthetic Culture" in two separate contexts. In neither instance, however, do politics seem to offer the young Lukács a sufficiently credible answer to the problems that preoccupy him. He does, notably, raise the possibility that socialism might have the raw energy to obliterate aesthetic culture, which has become a central obstacle to cultural renewal, and at the same time furnish the constructive impulse to build a new proletarian culture on the fresh-razed ground. He goes on, however, to contrast the politically motivated anti-aestheticism of the socialists with the earlier persecution of art under Christianity. Christianity, he suggests, possessed a sacred masterpiece, the Bible, which set a divine standard against which medieval artists such as Dante, Giotto, Meister Eckhart, and Wolfram von Eschenbach had to measure their own artistic creations. Christianity had the confidence of a "real religion," which made the Christian artist's struggle to realize his works in the face of the Church's persecution a worthy and creative fight. In contrast, Lukács argues, "socialism lacks this power, which is why it is not as truly a threat to bourgeois aestheticism as it would like to be." A truly robust and inspired socialism, he implies, would be more "barbaric": more willing to break violently with bourgeois art, instead of mimicking it in a cowardly grab at respectability.

At a later point in the essay, socialism is equated with religious orthodoxy, insofar as they both lack credibility for the honest soul. Both the activism of social revolution and the quietism of religion represent for Lukács equivalent failures to face up to the absence of warrant for any principles other than those created by the resolute individual for himself. He defines socialism as a flight outward into action and religion as a complementary flight inward into quietude. Anatole France provides the exemplary case of the former, what Lukács calls the "inner debacle" of socialism, while the German Romantics' turn from enthusiasm for the French revolution to a defense of Catholic orthodoxy appears to him an equally cowardly self-betrayal dressed up as religious conversion.

Abstracting from the concrete political content of these two antithetical positions, Lukács places his accent on individual ethics. For the young Lukács, the standard of value is not to be found in a given position with objective sanction, but in the authenticity of the individual soul which stands firm, without church or party, in the face of the uncertainty and ambiguity of modern life. The modern artist--Stefan George, Paul Ernst, Charles Louis Philippe and, unsurpassedly, Fyodor Dostoyevsky--stood for Lukács as the living embodiment of an existence made authentic by an unflagging pursuit of form. In the midst of aesthetic culture, he suggests, it is only the rare artist who can abjure outward justification and turn to the process of form-creating itself as a value-making source. Only he, in the present day, can bring forth from solitude fresh and unconventional "forms" that might someday win representative status for a community still to

come.

For all the bravado of Lukács's rhetoric in approaching this bold conclusion, he nonetheless reveals his lingering unease with the dialectic he wants to claim might lead beyond aesthetic culture. The dialectical heroism through which the solitary **[End Page 368]** artist becomes exemplary remains, he notes, a speculative venture "without expectation," a leap of faith into a life given over to form. The artist's speculative pursuit of form is ultimately justified by nothing but his ethical choice to act "as if" his own form-giving existence were *already justified*. At the same time, Lukács tentatively suggests, this speculative assertion is the only hope that today's hesitant expressions might become the future's firm standards, the wobbly pillars of a new culture still to be invented amidst the shifting sands of "aesthetic culture." At worst, we might say, in inviting artists to persist in and deepen their solitary pursuit of forms, Lukács provided a rhetorically resounding, but sophistic or at best mystical legitimation of that very aesthetic ideology he sought to surpass. Ultimately, his troubled formulations gesture to a future realm of *praxis*--still largely undefined--in which the speculative transformation of forms into values can be realized. The unresolved ambiguity of Lukács's position resonates well beyond this essay and points towards his later Marxism, embraced in hope of a practical way out of the ethical problems already raised in the seemingly rarified atmosphere of "soul" and "form."

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György Lukács: "Aesthetic Culture"

*A világ kint haddal tele,
De nem abba halunk bele.*
(The world is full of armies out there,
But we won't die of that.)

--Béla Balázs

If there is culture today, it can only be aesthetic culture. If one seriously wants to know if there is any center to the mutually destructive strivings of people unaware of each other, the question can only be posed here. If one wants to criticize the "present day," the aesthete must be criticized; likewise the sophist should have been criticized in Socrates's Athens; the pope and robber baron at the height of the middle ages and the troubadour and mystic in their twilight; equally so, the petty despot and the fighting philosopher in the eighteenth century. Some, of course, see this matter differently, but their talk only supports our view. Some, when culture is the topic, talk about airplanes and railroads; about the speed of telegrams and the safety of surgical procedures. They talk about how many people could read if they wanted to read and how many people are deprived of all rights by today's "democratism" (even if they usually put it more eloquently). But we should never forget that such things are possibilities and comforts--at best, only roads to culture, only materials for the forming power of culture. If, however, culture really has an inner forming power, it can form something out of anything. Culture is the unity of life, the power of unity to intensify and enrich life. And after all, does a trip mean more to us because it took a day and not a month to get to our destination? Have our letters **[End Page 369]** become deeper and more soul-searching because the mail gets there faster? Have our reactions to life become stronger and more unified because more people are closer to more things?

To be sure, only two clear types are produced by today's world: the expert and the aesthete. They mutually exclude each other, yet each still requires the other as its complement. The expert sacrifices his whole life to make a detail of some other detail of life easier; the external things of life are his innermost life-contents, and the means of life are his exclusive goals. What about the aesthete? Does he not have exclusive access to the inner life? For him, is it not true that "incidental" details disappear into the essential and important? Does life not dwell in the soul's sphere--as Maeterlinck said--and exclusively there? It is not by chance, indeed, that the expert and the aesthete stand side by side in their mutual exclusion. For I could also describe their essence thus: expertness is the profession as *l'art pour l'art*; "getting it done" well is the only good, regardless of the substantive content. And the aesthete's life is "experience" as trade and

occupation, experience which blinds men to life. Thus a deep fellowship between the two types gives the true content of their merely apparent formal opposition. For both, means become ends in themselves; monotony in life and uniform reaction to experiences full of possibilities follow from the inner impoverishment of their purely type-characters. They lack the sensation of true richness and power in which everything refers to the center, because one knows how to relate everything to it.

Aesthetic culture. Everyone knows what it has brought, since hardly a week goes by without someone singing its praises. First they wanted to conquer life for the sake of art, to erase without trace every value alien to art, every value that once had originated in life: "there is absolutely no difference in value between a well-painted vegetable sauce and a well-painted Madonna." But this would have been only "art" (often very good art), but not yet culture. One of the most prominent of the old-style aesthetes still spoke like this: "L'homme n'est rien; l'oeuvre est tout"; it was still only about art. Art still only projected each life onto the horizon of expression; only here could it refrain from distinguishing between objects, but distinguished solely according to the potential to induce moods and the capacity for fine expression. Life itself was somewhere else, off in the distance, outside of what was important and interesting.

Every culture is the conquest of life, unifying life's utterances with such force (though never conceptually) that no matter which part of life's totality we consider, at its greatest depth we see the same. In true culture, everything becomes symbolic, because everything is only the expression--and everything is uniformly just an expression--of one crucial thing: how men react to life, how man's whole being turns towards life as a whole.

At the center of aesthetic culture stands the mood, ¹ the most frequent reaction to a work of art, if not the only response or the most profound and important one. Its essence is an accidental and unanalyzed connection (indeed, often a conscientiously non-analytical, circumstantial, and momentary one) between the spectator and the object of his gaze. Aesthetic culture was born the moment this psychic activity was extended to the totality of life, ² when the totality of life became the succession **[End Page 370]** of continuously changing moods, when objects ceased to exist because everything became merely a potential inducement to a mood. It arose when all constancy disappeared from life, because moods do not tolerate permanence and repetition; when all values vanished from life, because value is ascribed only to possibilities that occasion the mood--hence to accidental circumstances disconnected from life.

There was thus a unity to culture: the very absence of unity. Culture had its center: the complete periphery of everything. There was a symbolism to everything: that nothing is symbolic, that everything is what it seems to be in the moment of its being perceived, that there is nothing anywhere that could be more than it is. There was culture which transcended mere particularity (for it belongs to the essence of culture that it is the common treasure of mankind): that nothing could transcend the distinct moments of a particular man. There was a connection between people: complete loneliness, a complete absence of connections.

Aesthetic culture: the art of life, making art out of life. Everything is mere material in the hands of the uniquely sovereign artist. It is all one whether he paints a picture, writes a sonnet, or lives his life.

But we have seen that this is not true, that this life-art is not genuinely the art of life, an imposition of art's main forces and directions upon life. This life-art is not a work of art, but merely the relishing of life. It simply applies the principles of artistic enjoyment--or better, a fraction of them--to life.

This is the basic lie of aesthetic culture, or for a few of its serious representatives, its tragic paradox: since everything comes only from inside, this culture excludes every authentic activity of the soul. In truth, however, nothing can come from inside: the mood can be induced only by the things of the outside world, and if someone enjoys a manifestation of his own soul as a pleasant mood, he is still just passively observing something his good fortune has brought his way. Complete freedom is the most despicable bondage. "Every mood": this is the beautiful,

magnificent freedom of the soul, its domination over everything, the swallowing up of all existence into the solitary living soul. "Everything is just a mood" means that nothing can be anything more than a mood, which is the most severe bondage, the cruelest self-mutilation of the soul. Complete passivity can never be a principle of life, nor anarchy the foundation-stone for a building (it is only formally so, as death can also be life, and health also illness, according to one definition). "Aesthetic culture"--"life art"--is the transfiguration of moral decline, of the inability to create or act, of enslavement to the moment and to life-principles. It is the conscious or unconscious lie about one's complete ignorance as to how to live, how to control life and give it form. Life-art: a dilettantism toward life, absolute blindness to the real work of art and to the essence of its real matter.

This dilettantism has, however, also affected art. Aesthetic culture failed to give form to life's chance events and necessity to its trivialities, and thus to elevate life to the superhuman magnificence of the highest art. Instead, in seeking to establish the unity of life and art, it infused art with its dilettantish hedonism, dragging art down to the level of life, to the petty and weak realm of eternal fluctuation. **[End Page 371]**

For the mood is the momentary encounter of the artwork with a mere instant of the enjoyer's soul. But if something occasions the endless line of moods, that is still more and still something utterly different than the incessant, random, and disconnected succession of these moods. This "something" that appears nowhere yet is omnipresent, this something that turns art into art, into a live organism, a cosmos, the world's symbol connecting everything that by itself was dead and meaningless: precisely this had to be extinguished from art by the influence of "aesthetic culture." The admirers of "form" killed form; the priests of *l'art pour l'art* paralyzed art.

The form they produced was merely the pleasant piecing together of surfaces and not an inherent unity, that which springs from a single point or leads to one goal, like the unity of a growing plant. Real form governs things, rules over them. It subordinates everything, but the subjugated thing remains alive, as alive as that which governs. This is the life-force of form, because herein lies its ethics. Herein lies the power and mastery of form, mysterious in its essence though so obvious in its effects: with weight and unambiguous importance, it expresses the final circumstances of life achievable only here. Domination needs resistance, and things are needed for resistance, for without resistance power cannot work. Every world-sentiment that knows nothing of the resistance of reality, that does not know the immanent power of those who are outside the self, that does not grow strong in struggle with them, will never realize its strength, will never even know if it has power. But didn't the wise foresight of instinct already restrain it from an already doomed struggle? The aesthete's world-view does not know things, the obligations and bitter struggles of collaboration with them. He is condemned merely to enjoy everything, only to set pretty moments side by side, and--at best--braid them together with pleasant links into a wreath.

Aesthetic culture brings to the surface art's potential to induce effects. For it, every monumentality feels outdated. It calls tragedy untimely and unworthy of modern man, because today we "understand" everything, we "enter into the spirit" of everything, and there are no more mutually exclusive opposites. It sees every thought as an unnecessary burden, because "writing well" is the only important thing and thoughts have no importance anyway, because in any case everything is equally false and differences can exist only in the composition. It calls every regime a lie, because at every moment everyone thinks something different anyway, and it is not worth making anything more profound or looking for roots and connections when everything has only a mood value. It is unnecessary to construct or live through or think deeply about anything. So speaks the blissful manifesto of aesthetic culture. And wherever it has appeared, there is no architecture, no tragedy, no philosophy, no monumental painting, no real epic. There only exists the highly refined technique and the cleverly entangled psychology, some witty aphorisms and feather-like moods. These are, perhaps, the tools of a true art--if, indeed, it even needs all that.

This culture clinging to the moment had to lose all connection with life. Perhaps at no other time has art meant so little as it does today to those people on whom culture depends. There is something deeply professionalized about the effects of art today: writers write for writers, and painters paint for painters--or rather for would-be **[End Page 372]** writers and painters. They

hardly have a "message" (which they moreover refuse with conscious pride). Only the professionals may enjoy their values, and their main effects become the external ones. Besides, the development of culture in general, which makes use of man only partially and never touches his whole personality, tends to weaken the "human" in people more and more. Thus the vague and faint psychic needs are not able to find contact with any kind of art. Soon people come to believe that art is not really necessary, or rather (how similar bourgeois contentment is to aesthetic hedonism!) that it is only for passing a few free hours pleasantly, for a pleasing thrill or a dulling caress of their tired nerves. The most serious disdain all art, while most only "enjoy" it with grave indifference or get used to it because it "belongs to culture."

Unfortunately, the indifference and the contempt are not strong enough. In the proletariat, in socialism, is the only hope. That hope is that the barbarians come and tear apart all excessive refinements with their crude hands; that persecution might serve to sort and select (thus, Ibsen believed that Russian tyranny would foster the love of freedom); that when a culture hates and opposes art, nevertheless art grows deeper. But of course, this wouldn't have been the crucial thing, but only something secondary or accidental. Yet we might trust the force of the revolutionary spirit, which has unmasked every "ideology" and caught sight of the true motive forces everywhere, to see and feel clearly here as well. By sweeping everything peripheral away, it might lead us back to the truly essential, even if this follows a long transitional period of anti-artistic life-moods.

What we have seen so far, however, does not appear promising. Socialism, it seems, does not have the religious force of primitive Christianity, capable of fulfilling the soul. Early Christianity's persecution of art was needed for the birth of the art of Giotto and Dante, Meister Eckhart and Wolfram von Eschenbach; early Christianity created the Bible, and many centuries of artists fed on its fruits. Since it was a real religion with the force to create a Bible, it did not need art, did not desire it, did not tolerate it by its side. It wanted to rule alone over man's soul, because it could. Socialism lacks this power, which is why it is not as truly a threat to bourgeois aestheticism as it would like to be, as it knows it ought to be.

To some extent, the socialists want to create a proletarian art in the midst of bourgeois culture. But instead, they have created a weak, crude caricature of bourgeois art, no less fragile and superficial, but with none of its seductive refinements. To some extent, they too are aesthetes. They enjoy the same things and in the same way as their bourgeois counterparts; they know just as well that it is the "expression" that counts while the content is nothing; that everything is a matter of taste, of opinion, of mood, just as before. And likewise, everything is on the surface without touching the center of life even for a moment. In fact, this may be even more true of the socialists, since they actually have an object in life and a center, yet still cannot see that this center has nothing to do with that surface, that it is somehow just tacked on. They do not care, because it is nice and pleasant; it signifies their taste for culture and their lack of prejudice.

Some, of course, see the situation clearly and discuss it in harsh terms. One of these, one with the most sonorous voice and the most acute and noble vision, **[End Page 373]** writes: "When I see that art leads to the systematic idolization of sensualism, I must say that the best plan would be to blow up all the churches of the world, with their organs and pictures and everything, no matter how much the art critics and the connoisseurs of culture would lament."

But Bernard Shaw, who penned these lines, was one of Wagner's most passionate apostles.

Since there is neither a healthy persecution of art nor a serious relationship between art and life, either complete indifference or absolute tyranny characterize life's relationship to art. It would be no exaggeration to say that reality knows only these two extremes and is barely aware of the transitions between them. Art only exists because some people were born with unfortunate physical and psychological predispositions that were useless for anything in the world but art (Thomas Mann once defined the art of today--seriously and bitterly--in a similar manner). The artist: the useless man. Artistic culture: to transform being good-for-nothing into style.

The situation is, of course, tragic. The lives of the best artists, those most truly serious, both artistically and humanly (artists such as Keats, Flaubert, Ibsen) became the source of the

greatest tragedies. Still, it was impossible not to feel the tragic paradox in one form or another. The artist had to feel his own rootlessness, his incoherent and disconnected existence, and the unbearableness of such a life as his, the only content of which could be to express something, the deepest commonality with other people.

The life of the aesthete--whether he admits or denies it consciously and heroically, or lies even to himself--thus takes place always and entirely in the sphere of tragedy. And in most aesthetes' writings, the truly felt and genuinely moving passages always have their source in tragedy. This is the truly humane background to Wilde's hard-hammered aphorisms; its sad and proud concealment sheds light on Hofmannsthal's bombastic poems; and its influence surrounds Thomas Mann's drily objective and acutely visible portraits with a gentle aura.

But--as in every tragic paradox--here too virtues, strengths, sins, and weaknesses touch and are welded together. Only the tragedy of these artists' way of life somehow consecrate their oeuvres as strong and full; while the *a priori* tragedy of their art makes their lives truly frivolous and devoid of substance. I'd like to remind you of one of Ferenc Herczeg's best observations: those of Lieutenant Gyurkovics, ³ who resolves to shoot himself in the head immediately if he is suspected by the world of improper conduct. But he always does as he pleases or whatever serves his interests: morally, thus, he is nothing but incorrectness. And indeed, the heroic decision to commit suicide supports improper conduct instead of preventing it: if this and this should happen--he says--I'll shoot myself in the head anyway. But of course that will never take place. Permanent tragedy--this is the real profundity of this excellent observation--is the greatest frivolity. While waiting for the impending reckoning (which never comes), everything is permitted; at the Last Judgement everybody will be found light--and what is the difference between light and heavy in the real matters of life anyway? Since the whole of life and art is tragic, it does not matter how heavy or serious each detail is. "Nothing matters anyway" can only **[End Page 374]** be thought in the last moment of a tragedy--perhaps. But to say this and believe it to be the true essence of life--not even in that moment. Here is the eternal melody of *Lebensphilosophie*. "Nothing matters": only differences in the intensity of enjoyment are real differences. The feeling of eternal tragedy offers absolution for every frivolity.

What follows? What must come next? One thing is certain: not the utopian redemption of the world of meek dreamers. The better half of those born for art look back longingly on better times when art was different, when it created and transformed cultures, or at least believed itself to have such a mission in life.

"He believed that. . .": this is real criticism of every dilettantish cultural prophecy. Art was always only a product of cultures, though many times it was their distant herald and with stern words their true and cruel judge. The rhythm of art's words has always been dictated by the rhythm of the movement of culture. Only because art is easier to sense and because we always understand and recognize its rhythm, although this derives from the rhythm of culture, do many still believe in art's creative precedence. Once people believed in this creative precedence of art over culture and had a right to such a strong belief. This belief nourished a strength within them, and by its warmth, they ripened the fruits that made this belief just. Today, such a belief is possible only at the price of shutting one's eyes, at the cost of narrow-mindedness or conscious self-deception. Today this belief has lost all its pathos, which is why--in the most beautiful cases--the believers and soldiers of art's redemptive and culture-creating power are surrounded by the schlemiel glory of Gregers Werle. ⁴ But this knowledge is compulsory and can no longer be conjured away from our lives, even if our state of ignorance were a thousand times more productive, richer, and more splendid. If Herder, Schiller, Goethe, and all the Romantics had believed in the soul's world-moving power, and if they had sensed that they were wrong, it would have been a tragic error at most. But today, after all we know, any attempt to realize this illusion, once seemingly believable, must become comic.

Our situation: necessities greater than us have made it this way, and those stronger than us carry it toward goals defined by their inner imperatives. If it is indeed true that there are primary forces in culture that move everything else and each movement is not just the unpredictable result of complicated interactions, then those who count on them and influence their operations

though their life's work may also be granted the power to influence culture. Perhaps. But those who live in or around art, never.

Grasping such determinism, however, leads only the weak toward fatalism. Only they understand the metaphysical incompetence of the individual will as a comfortable excuse for and pleasant affirmation of their inner incompetence. For the person of action learns from that same knowledge that his own inner necessities are still necessities; he knows that even if his actions do not result in anything outwardly, they are still necessary. Recognizing that illusions are but illusions can only affect the direction of actions; it only makes one select different paths for realizing the same idea. Grasping the external correlates of the idea can never alter the intensity of the will or the inner strength of the soul. When it seems to do so, it simply covers up for a lack of inner intensity. **[End Page 375]**

The external circumstances are given. There is no genius who can shake their iron necessity. No individual culture can create a socialist one, and nothing inner can create something external. But the inner must likewise be brought into being forcibly. A flight into socialism is thus an inner debacle. "To serve progress and subordinate individual inclinations and desires" is only a slogan with a nice ring to it, only a professed or ostensibly true reason for action. When the person of aesthetic culture speaks this way, his words cover up for a baseness of spirit, just like the determinism of those who preach quietism. For they cannot bear a destiny of tragic singularity predestined for them by their souls' deepest strengths. They cannot bear it and flee, renouncing their greatest values so as to find peace somewhere. Peace and security, anywhere and at any price. Anatole France's "conversion" to socialism is just as sad a turning away from life as Friedrich Schlegel's or Clemens Brentano's escapes to the quietism of the only true faith. What change can that little external difference bring about--here the din of battle is just a lullaby--causing all pain to be forgotten? (Bernard Shaw and the names of others like him should not, of course, be mentioned in this context: they have always been socialists, born agitators.)

The situation is given, both internally and externally; thus the question "what if?" is irrelevant. One can only watch: are there indeed any other ways to resolve this dissonance? And if so, what is common to them, beyond all programs and deliberations, and resulting from similar struggles with similar intuitions? For here everyone struggles alone, and communities arise only when truly great men grasp their life-problems, "the" life-problems, at a depth where everything is already symbolic, where all differences between people based on their "individuality" have almost lost their meaning.

What is truly individual in the depths of one's soul goes beyond the mere individual: perhaps I have said everything with this statement. The biggest lie told by today's science (it is on its way out, finally) is that there are only quantitative differences between things and that similar things in similar circumstances will be truly similar to each other: one is just more, nicer, bigger than another. This is the profoundest of lies: there is no difference that is deeper and more dividing than the "almost," between getting there and almost getting there, even if they set out in the same direction. So deep is it, that the differences between two completely (or "almost") different ways of getting there might seem insignificant in comparison.

For even now a new type of "aesthete" is in the making. Nobody can change this any longer: he must live rootlessly in art, taking art as his only reality, applying everything from life to it. The whole of his life must take place in the soul's sphere, and everything must indifferently serve as mere material for the soul's sovereign power to give form. But here is the real point: must emptiness of soul, anarchy, weakness, unproductivity, barren complaints, and sorrowful prides result from this? Could one not rather build the well-founded, stone-hard castle of the soul from these elements, instead of castles in the air of vanishing moods? If everything belongs to the soul, must that weaken it? Everything that we can understand and see on its own merits must bury all struggle. Doesn't anything exist only because we want to--and can--build something from it? Are there not values and differences, **[End Page 376]** because we were forced to impose them? Necessary loneliness leads only to anarchy, and the predestined and unshakeable tragedy of life ends only in frivolous and cynical pessimism, don't they?

We have said it before: from the perspective of life, the aesthete is he who forces the laws of his

art on life. But if we wanted to sum up all our criticisms of the aesthete type in a sentence, shouldn't we say that they were not aesthetes enough, not aesthetes in a sufficiently deep and consistent way? And we have said before why: they did not apply the essence of art to life (and to art). They were shallow and frivolous at the outset, and the belated seriousness of a few can never make it serious again.

The essence of art is in formation, in surmounting resistances, in subduing enemy forces, and in creating unity from discord, from that which is external and thus eternally and deeply alien. Formation: the last judgement of things, which redeems everything redeemable and forces this redemption on everything with divine violence.

The form: the maximum effort within a given situation's possibilities. This is the true ethic of forms. The form confines externally, while making everything infinite internally. The unsayable does not exist, the old aesthete said, and this is true on an even deeper level than he knew. Within the life of the forms, there is no "possibility"; what cannot be realized does not even exist, and what can be realized will be realized. There is only one perdition here: not to be born. But that which has been born will live forever. In the systems of the old philosophers, form was the symbol of the world, the world's order, and the only human expression which could somehow signal the harmony of the cosmos. Today we can only hope for our own harmony; today the forms can only speak of our metaphysical reality and of the world's.

Yes, everything takes place in the soul's sphere, but this weakens nothing. Rather, it intimates and deepens, fights and suffers through the paradox of existence. Because everything is ours, everything belongs to the soul; every tragic event can take place only in it, and all discord becomes more painfully acute. Since everything has become internal, it is not possible to push it out anywhere or to transfer it to anyone else. And the absolution--the redeeming power of form--is at the very end of all paths and all torments, in the undemonstrable faith, alive beyond all evidence, in which the soul's divergent paths ultimately meet. They must meet, because all started from the same center. The form is the only evidence of this belief, of its sole realization, more alive than life.

I repeat: the aesthete applies the concept of form to life; aesthetic culture is the forming of the soul. Not adorning, but forming it; not stiffening it into nice situations, but clearly elaborating its truest essence out of the chaos of reality, events, and experiences; not its molding but its formation; not a final product but an endless process, where the already formed pieces of life signal the progress. The forming of the soul. The soul slumbers in that chaos we usually call man's psychic life, or more carelessly, the "soul." It always slumbers alive, but only for the visionaries is it real and vivid. It is like the statues Michelangelo saw in the marble rocks where statues already lived, although it took his superhuman effort to bring them to life, his crushing all the surrounding superfluous rock that hid them in formless chaos. Even if a man's life is not long enough to realize in flawless grandeur what has lived in him, even if at the end of his life the soul remains like a torso by Rodin, only **[End Page 377]** halfway liberated from its rock jail, true reality, tragic and metaphysical reality, can only be the statue which has always already been alive in the rock, and which the artist was once allowed to see as a pure vision and to slave after in a lifetime of hard work. There was only one true life to life.

This life is exemplary life, symbolic life--and every symbol is akin to another. This is the most deeply and truly symbolic life, the most genuinely individual life: in the statue, the soul of the marble becomes the statue, the soul of that one particular block of marble; although it is separated from its sibling marble rocks when it becomes a statue, it is born as the sibling of every statue. The soul's path is to break off everything that does not truly belong to it. It is the forming of the soul, making the soul truly individual, but this formation grows beyond the merely individual. That is why such a life is exemplary. Exemplary, because the realization of one man makes it possible for every man. Meister Eckhart says: "Where a clod of earth fell, there soil usually falls; it indicates that the place of rest of every piece of soil is on the surface of the earth. And where a spark springs from the fire, it indicates that the sky is its true resting place. Well, we have sent such a 'spark' to the sky to our Lord Jesus Christ's soul: this proves to us that every soul's resting place is in the sky and nowhere else."

That is why the tragic life and tragic isolation of this breed of men is no longer tragic. Here the tragedy of solitude is life's *a priori*, but the most important heroism, the heroism of forming oneself, grows from this solitude, just as the desire for, the possibility and reality of redemption grew from the knowledge of original sin.

It does not matter at all whether others follow this example, who and how many and in what way. Man can attain this redemption only by himself, and nothing can increase the salvation of one who has already been saved. Even if the fight for it deals some blows to others in the jungle of life, everyone must follow his own path up to the end, and one can only expect his own redemption at this path's end.

Such people do not create culture; they do not even want to create. The sanctity of their life is the absence of all illusions. They do not create culture, but live as if they lived in culture. They create no culture, but live life so as to deserve culture. Their sphere of life could be best defined by one of Kant's deepest categories, the "as if," the "als ob." This heroism without expectation sanctifies life; such heroism surrounds the life of a Hans von Marées, a Stefan George, a Paul Ernst, and a Charles Louis Philippe with the aura that can be seen around only their heads today.

And I timidly add here--the sole final chord to what has been said--the name of our greatest epic poet, of whom I was thinking constantly while writing this, the sanctified name of Dostoyevsky.

[György Lukács](#) (1885-1971), one of the great literary theorists and Marxist thinkers of this century, was the author of (among other works) *The Historical Novel and History and Class Consciousness*.

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Notes

*"Aesthetic Culture" was originally published in *Renaissance* (Budapest), 1.2 (25 May 1910): 123-136, and *Esztétikai kultúra* (Budapest: 1913), 12-30.

[1](#). I have already explicated in detail the psychic and aesthetic impacts of the mood-culture in the lecture I gave to contribute to the debate about the Kernstok-pictures. *Nguyat* [The West], 1 February 1910. Here I may only deal with its impacts and final consequences [Lukács's note in *Renaissance*].

Lukács refers in this note to his essay "The Ways Have Parted." Taking an exhibition by the "post-impressionist" painter Károly Kernstok as his occasion, Lukács launched an attack on aestheticism, which emphasized moods and sensations, and its modernistic implications in the arts: in the context of Hungarian painting, "Impressionism." He criticized the Impressionists' self-exhausting drive to novelty: "The art of surfaces could only be the art of sensations, the art of the denial of profound study, of evaluation, of making distinctions. New categories came along, paradoxical categories, values which simply by being realized had necessarily to destroy themselves--the new and interesting as values, as the only values. For if there only exist moods and sensations, only their freshness and power distinguishes them from each other. And everything new and everything interesting, in the very moment that it exists, is already less new and less interesting. And with every moment, every analogy and repetition it becomes less new and less interesting, until finally it loses all the character of a sensation; it ceases to have an

effect, it is dead, and no longer in existence." In Kernstok's paintings, Lukács saw a new art of order opposed to the anarchy of sensation and subjectivism. "The mere appearance and existence of this art," Lukács wrote, "is a declaration of war. It is a declaration of war on all Impressionism, all sensation and mood, all disorder and denial of values, every *Weltanschauung* and art which writes 'I' as its first and last word." An English translation of "The Ways Have Parted" (trans. George Cushing) is available in *The Hungarian Avant-Garde: The Eight and the Activists* (London: Hayward Gallery, Arts Council of Great Britain 1980), 106-108 [Editor's note].

[2.](#) When they turn it into an exclusive life-principle . . . [Lukács's note in *Renaissance*].

[3.](#) Character in a group of plays by the Hungarian writer, Ferenc Herczeg (1863-1954) [Editor's note].

[4.](#) Character in Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* [Editor's note].

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