

THE TAPE RECORDER AS TRAGIC HERO:
OBSERVATIONS ON ISTVÁN EÖRSI'S PLAY *HIS MASTER'S VOICE*

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An absurd title? Appropriately so, to head some remarks on what its author himself subtitled an "absurd documentary play"—on, we will venture, a nearly absurd subject. More on my title, and on Eörsi's subtitle, later; the "absurd" subject of the following two-act play seems hardly in need of elaborate glossing now. György Lukács (1885-1971), "one of the few philosophers produced by the Marxist movement,"¹ has been reviled, remaindered, revered; he has at one time or another formed a subject of Marxist, anti-Marxist, and non-Marxist literary and sociological debate during most of our century. And for good reason, for one can seldom be entirely wrong about someone who, like Goethe's Earth Spirit, has been quite so much in the "life floods, in the storm of actions" of his time as was Lukács. Dévotées of his work or not, we tend to be cowed a little before the man who knew Lenin, and who at least in part sat for the portrait of one of the major characters in a central work by Thomas Mann. What wonder if we cast about for bases for comparison and contrast. Remembering the centennial year, we come upon the almost grotesquely contrastive figure of Ezra Pound (1885-1972)—talented where Lukács was not, but one who, in that other sphere, is at best forgiven where Lukács is admired. Forgetting anniversaries, but still remembering major intellectuals of Lukács's generation, we come upon the Soviet journalist and novelist Ilia Ehrenburg (1891-1967), the American critic Edmund Wilson (1895-1972), and the West German philosopher and musicologist Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969). Surely all three of these writers are, in one dimension or another, of Lukács's stature; there are also some interesting parallels. Ehrenburg, a long-time resident in Western Europe, also a survivor of the purges of the 1930s, was in fact twice distinguished with the Stalin Prize (for novels); Adorno (in addition to his Marxist criticism) shares with Lukács his interest in aesthetics, especially in the aesthetics of music. Most remarkable perhaps is Wilson's now-classic study on the historical backgrounds of socialism, *To the Finland Station* (1940), not to mention his other explorations of Marxist themes and motifs in literature and literary theory (e.g., in *Axel's Castle* [1931]). Unfortunately, as Béla Királyfalvi writes: "There is no accessible evidence showing that Lukács was even familiar with Wilson's work," as he most assuredly was with Adorno's.² It is also true that Wilson's study "in the writing and acting of history," as his subtitle has it, would have been helpful

to the author of *Der junge Hegel* (1948) at best. *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, the one other major work by Lukács involved in a concentrated reexamination of modern events and thought, dates from 1923.

I. Sketch of the Oeuvre and of Its Author

All other comparisons and contrasts are dwarfed, of course, by the two obvious towering figures in Lukács's own intellectual background, Hegel and Marx, perhaps *the* two recent European thinkers who have most unambiguously devoted their lives and work to the thesis that social change is rooted in systematic philosophy. Reflecting on this as on a maxim of method, we cannot help thinking of Lukács's final ambition, namely, the writing (left incomplete) of an *Ontology of Social Being*; the fact that he regarded this project as the fulfillment of his oeuvre is here seen as crucially significant. For, as Peter Demetz, in his *Marx, Engels, and the Poets* (a book published four years before the death of the Hungarian philosopher), states: "Though still conservative in taste, the octogenarian Lukács has become more tolerant; . . . [he] looks back to the teachers of his early days with renewed sympathy. The wheel has come full circle."³ True; yet the insight that he came to share with his two greatest teachers did not combine easily or in a self-understood way with the complex and ever-evolving literary criticism and theory of which he himself became a master. It is also true that in the course of a long and fruitful career characterized by constant reversals, self-critiques, and self-adjustments,⁴ Lukács never wavered from some "teachers" of his (e.g., Goethe, Thomas Mann), while he would not to the end have anything to do with others (Nietzsche, Kafka). Other rejections form special events along his career; one textbook example is the way in which Hegel "replaces the influence of Fichte" after 1919.⁵

The early Lukács is a student and essayist in the fields of literature and sociology and, as early as 1904, the co-founder (with Sandor Hevesi and László Bánóczy) of the Thália Társaság (Thalia Troupe), the first Hungarian theater company devoted exclusively to the staging of contemporary works. (It is here that, as *His Master's Voice*, Act I, scene 3, has it, Lukács learned once and for all that "literature is that which I can no longer write." He fared better as an essayist. Early publications, articles in newspapers and in such distinguished periodicals as *Huszadik Század* (Twentieth Century) and *Nyugat* (Occident), show interest in such writers as Novalis, Stefan George, Ibsen, and Strindberg and, in *Nyugat*, Lukács becomes one of the early reviewers of Thomas Mann's second novel, *Königliche Hoheit* (1909, also the date of Lukács's review). A number of these essays are collected in Lukács's first two books, *Die Seele und die Formen* (1911, first published in Hungarian in 1910) and *Esztétikai kultúra* (Aesthetic Culture; first published in Hungarian in 1913), the latter an early volume lent distinction

principally by the essay that also gives it its title. If these precocious works are products of Lukács's "idealistic" period, as is so often asserted (play, Act I, scene 4: "back then he wasn't a Marxist yet"), the essay "Aesthetic Culture" may surely be regarded as an early statement out of nascent revolutionary insight:

Art's essence is victory over formal resistances, the bending of hostile forces under the yoke, the creation of unity out of all that pulls apart, Shaping constitutes pronouncement of the last judgment over things. . . . Forming: the maximum expenditure of effort under the possibilities of a given circumstance—this is the real ethics of forms.⁶

Complementing the early image of Lukács as critic stand two, somewhat contradictory, discoveries and contributions. On the revolutionary side we see his affinity with the work of the Hungarian poets Endre Ady (1877-1919) and Béla Balázs (1884-1949; Lukács and Balázs were also close friends); on the "history of ideas" side of his early period, Lukács's essay in memory of Wilhelm Dilthey (1911) is especially worth mention. In this piece the Hungarian critic pays tribute to the author of *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1905), that seminal work on Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, and Hölderlin, as to a philosopher *manqué* who was nevertheless a superb essayist, with a deep understanding of the workings of the creative mind.

If the tragic episode with the painter Irma Seidler (1883-1911), and its literary distillate, the essay "Von der Armut am Geiste" (1911), still intrigues critics (in Act I, scene 3 of the play, the episode is retold in some factual detail),⁷ and if it is true that already in his tender years Lukács was a prize-winning writer (in 1911 he won the Krisztina Lukacs Prize for his two-volume *A modern dráma fejlődésének története* [Developmental History of the Modern Drama]),⁸ it was some of the work of his so-called Heidelberg period (1912-1918), with various interruptions), along with the earlier *Die Seele und die Formen*, that brought Lukács a European reputation. Of commanding significance, among the works dating from before and the earlier years of World War I, is the brilliant and abstruse *Theorie des Romans* (1914-1915; published in Berlin in 1920), a work which, like the *Developmental History of the Modern Drama*, aims at a sense of the history of a genre (actually: of a pair of genres, the epic and the novel proper), at a typology, at exhaustiveness (within limits imposed by Lukács's own qualifications and rejections).⁹ Withal we must not forget, alongside the completed work, the equally brilliant *Heidelberger Ästhetik*—indeed published since his death (play, Act I, scene 5), with the manuscript being undoubtedly about 400 pages strong (Act I, scene 4), since in print the German text comes to 220.¹⁰ That monumental fragment, by Lukács's own admission, constituted the beginnings toward a systematic *Aesthetics*, a work begun as early as the winter of 1911-1912, in Florence, and continued at Heidelberg during the

years 1912-1914. "Ich denke noch immer an des wohlwollend-kritische Interesse, das Ernst Bloch, Emil Lask und vor allem Max Weber meinem Versuch gegenüber zeigten. Er ist vollständig gescheitert . . .," writes Lukács in the preface to his late work, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* (1963).¹¹ That preface dates from 1962, the same year in which Lukács also wrote a new preface to his *Theory of the Novel*, and the chronological proximity of the two prefaces is no more accident than is the fact that, in time of actual composition, the *Heidelberg Aesthetics* immediately precedes the work that he did complete. For, just as Lukács steps into the arena of Hegelian dialectics with the fragment, so does he do this in his early major work on epic genres, only perhaps even more definitively so. The *Theory of the Novel* unites, in its methodology, features of philosophic, historical, and literary-critical method, with far more awareness of the possibilities of a synthesis, in art, of thetic Subject (mind) and antithetic Object (inanimate substance) than the young critic could ever show in his earlier, Kantian and positivist, phase. From the patriarch of Hungarian Marxist philosophy, in the 1960s, these formative efforts receive their "proper" evaluation; but even there, in his 1962 preface to the *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács states that the author of that work did not succumb to the temptations of extreme historicism, as did Ranke and Spengler:

He was looking for a general dialectic of literary *genres* that was based upon the essential nature of aesthetic categories and literary forms, and aspiring to a more intimate connection between category and history than he found in Hegel himself; he strove towards intellectual comprehension of permanence within change and of inner change within the enduring validity of the essence.¹²

How Goethean that "permanence within change" (*Dauer im Wechsel*) sounds to carefully tuned-in ears today. Indeed, we need no better confirmation of our suspicion that the man and thinker who so insists on permanence and validity, on dialectically motored change while retaining a view of the whole, is of a certain background and temperament, one who will always preserve a certain set of attitudes, loyalties, specific cultural properties. Thus, while we may find Lukács's early fascination with Novalis puzzling (and, in the *Theory of the Novel*, already highly problematic), it confirms his linguistic and cultural roots, and forms but a feature of the Jewish Austro-Hungarian intellectual's abiding affection for German literature and culture. Lukács is excellent on such writers as Balzac, Cervantes, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy; he can write illuminatingly on ancient Greeks and modern Scandinavians; but to German writers—to Goethe and contemporaries, to Gottfried Keller, and to Thomas Mann—he devotes whole books, at least before he does this for other European writers and literary currents. In the sense, then, in which there is a relation of preparation and fulfillment

between the *Heidelberg Aesthetics* and the *Characteristic Nature of the Aesthetic*, this relation exists between the *Theory of the Novel* and the much later *Goethe und seine Zeit* (1947) as well. What is said in the play about its opening essay, "Minna von Barnhelm" (Act II, scene 2: "It's a beautiful piece of writing, for the experts almost a poem"), could well be asserted for all of *Goethe and His Age*. And here we must remember that we are dealing with *late* work by the master. Even if we consider that the essays themselves were completed in 1940 ("Hölderlin's *Hyperion*" had actually already appeared in 1935, in the Berlin periodical *Internationale Literatur*),¹³ we are already in the midst of what Demetz calls the "Doctrinaire Period."¹⁴ *Goethe and His Age* is a central example of Lukács's classical Marxist criticism; the "way to Marx" had long since been found (since 1918, to be exact).

That crucial turning point, the transition from Hegel to Marx, along with the decision to join the Communist Party, is what Eörsi the dramatic character insists on naming "Comrade Lukács" 's experience of "Damascus"—the "break through to people. To a sense of community" (Act I, scene 3). A few exchanges earlier, in that scene, the name of the Apostle Paul is invoked; Lukács protests: "I have never in my life so much as written down the name of the Apostle Paul." Yet—if this is true—he might well have done so. For reverberating with the rehearsal of the crucial Damascus experience, at least in the ear of this listener, is the very language of Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians; let us have it in its Lukácsian transmutation: "Though I speak with the tongues of Marx and of Engels," Although this is not an original find (the East German poet Wolf Biermann having thought of it first),¹⁵ as a pun it is handed to us on a silver platter. For, Lukács's energetic dismissal of Eörsi's religious analogy for the former's "conversion" to Marxism notwithstanding (in Act I, scene 3), there *is* a sense in which the Hungarian philosopher, this stubborn believer in the unity of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, was deeply concerned with the Pauline virtues of faith, hope, and love. Witness only the second of his three reasons for his decision to rejoin the Hungarian Communist Party in 1967.¹⁶

Well may the suggestion of a Pauline metaphor for Lukács's crises seem mildly extravagant (and this is not lost on Eörsi, the playwright); as a parallel with *all* of Lukács, the man, the writer, and the public figure, it is also insufficient. A far more satisfying metaphor for György Lukács, out of the European poetry and mythology with which he spent so much of his time, is that of Faust. Once again, we are "discovering" the already discovered. No less a writer than Thomas Mann has perceived the Hungarian thinker's Faustian potential; and while we cannot hope even to sketch here what is already very well covered in monographs,¹⁷ it seems worth while pointing out that Fritz J. Raddatz, in his brief discussion of Naphta's debt to Lukács in *Der Zauberberg*, makes a cogent point: "Es ist nicht Lukács gleich

Naphta, gewiss. Aber es ist die jesuitische Möglichkeit in der marxistischen Wirklichkeit. Naphta wohnt als Eventualität in Lukács. Das Haus, in dem Settembrinis Antipode wohnt, gehört einem Damenschneider namens Lukáček”¹⁸ Very neat, very revealing of Mann’s intentions; applicable to the myth within *Der Zauberberg*, no doubt, as it is to the myth of criticism surrounding the novel. Returning to Lukács, we find ourselves in need of carefully defining the sense in which, from that critical point on, a Mephistophelian principle had inhabited the man himself. This is not a Mephisto on the Goethean model (whom in the essays on *Faust* Lukács defines as the driving spirit of capitalism);¹⁹ Lukács’s *daimon* is also a *driving* spirit, unlike Faust’s, who would slow him down. Nor will the Lukács-Faustian *daimon* be defined as “Ein Teil von jener Kraft, / Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft”;²⁰ often enough in the course of Lukács’s long career, matters turned out just the opposite. For Lukács, a man and politician not by any means free of some strident contradictions (witness only the way in which, in 1956, he became Minister of Culture under Imre Nagy, yet voted against Hungary’s leaving the Warsaw Pact), the following despairing words by Faust seem mild: “O dass dem Menschen nichts Vollkommnes wird, / Empfind’ ich nun.”²¹ That “nun” signals the complexity of the moment, the problematic nature of response and of continuity.

But there were so many other opportunities to speak lines similar to those in the “Forest and Cavern” scene, granted only that Lukács’s *career* also shared some interesting features with that of Herrn Dr. Faust. Was Lukács too an academic who fled academia (except for a brief period after 1945)? Is lovelorn Irma Seidler, a suicide by drowning at age 28, a Margarete *manquée*? (Margarete drowns her child by Faust, and is executed for it. She is not a day over 20.) Is the “small world” the world of Florence and Heidelberg, while the “large” is that of Moscow (with Lenin and Trotskii cast in the roles of Emperor and anti-Emperor)? Does Béla Kún’s escapade with several kilograms of gold mirror the banking magic in Act I of *Faust II*? Let us not drive an analogy with some merit to extremes. Far more important is it to see that Faust too shoulders criminality in the name of “higher principles” and that Lukács, who also lived to high old age (although not, to be sure, like Faust, to 100), ends his life, like his Renaissance prototype, gloriously reclaiming land from the sea. The project—the *Ontology*—is left unfinished; so is his vision of social being in the round. Lukács, who as a thinker and literary critic has had far more of a following in the West than among the younger generation of Soviet-bloc intellectuals,²² may at any rate be thought of as agreeing, in the end, with those well-known closing lines of Faust’s: “Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Lebe, / Der täglich sie erobern muss.”²³ Ascribing this much to one who, like Faust, has if anything generated a towering mass of engaging controversy, seems only fair.

II. Eörsi's Play and Its Source

The tape recorder as tragic hero (or, if not tragic, then tragicomic; if not hero, then persona)—the mask that does not amplify, the instrument of communication and record that breaks down and behaves temperamentally at best—has its objective counterpart in the real tape recorder. As Eörsi's prefatory note states, *His Master's Voice* (original Hungarian title: *Az interjú* [The Interview]) "is based in part on that series of tape-recorded interviews which the literary historian Erzsébet Vezér and the writer István Eörsi made, from March through May of 1971, with the then already terminally ill Gyorgy Lukács." These interviews, along with other materials pertaining to taped statements by Lukács, have been published in book form. An English translation, prepared by Rodney Livingstone, was published by Verso Editions of London in 1983, and is available also in the United States, under the title Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life: An Autobiographical Sketch*.²⁴ In addition to the central tape-recorded conversations, "Record of a Life" (in four parts: 1. "Childhood and Early Career"; 2. "War and Revolution"; 3. "In Exile"; 4. "Back in Hungary"), the book contains an elaborately detailed introduction by Eörsi entitled "The Right to the Last Word," a set of autobiographical sketches by Lukács ("Gelebtes Denken: Notes towards an Autobiography") and, as an Appendix, the text of Lukács's interview with *New Left Review* (originally published in the July-August 1971 issue of that journal).²⁵ All four of the parts of the volume offer interesting insights, no less than important factual details of Lukács's life and career as reflected also in the play, and it may be of some profit to attempt a comparison of the documentary drama with its documentary source. In undertaking this comparison (which here cannot pretend to anything approaching exhaustiveness), I am guided not by the spirit, as Eörsi himself puts it, of "literal fidelity and philological pedantry,"²⁶ but solely by a desire to explore the relationship of the literary transmutation of a factual record to its documentary base. Such an exploration may well help illumine the literary artifact both as document and as poetry.

To the ends of creating an eclectic and consistent, largely personal, literary portrait of his old teacher, Eörsi "borrows" from *Record of a Life* rather abundant and for the most part immediately recognizable factual material. There, for Act I, is Lukács's bemusing (and, in spots, amusing) account of his childhood and upbringing: details such as the mother's locking young Lukács and his brother into the woodshed, and the former's "partisan warfare" (I.2; *Record*, p. 17);²⁷ on learning to greet strange guests (27); on learning to read, and on what a slow learner Lukács's brother was (29). There, to support the discussion in the play on "unsuccess," are the allusions to Lukács's early readings in Homer and Cooper (I.3; 28); there too is the reference to the Thália Society (32-33), which produced Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena*, as well as Lukács's translation of Ibsen's *Wild*

Duck (34). Lukács did write some plays, in whose manner it is not mentioned (loc. cit.). Allusion to the tragic episode with Irma Seidler (I.3) is confined, in *Record*, to her family background, to the fact that she had a great influence on Lukács's development between 1907 and 1911, and to her suicide in 1911 (36-37). The *Heidelberg Aesthetics* (whose manuscript is portrayed as found in the Lukács apartment [I.4])²⁸ is mentioned in *Record* in passing; Lukács abandoned it "because in 1917 I began to involve myself in ethical questions and lost interest in problems of aesthetics" (49). Here too we find due mention of the *Theory of the Novel* (47-49). Here, in a somewhat different wording from that in Act I, scene 5, we find Lukács's statement: "*The Theory of the Novel* defines the whole age as the age of absolute sinfulness, to use Fichte's phrase" (47). Nor have we far to seek, in *Record*, for sources of various statements and portrayals of personalities and events in the very exciting Act I, scene 5, where Lukács is coaxed into confessing his "crime" (the executions at Poroszló, in which he played a direct role [65; the episode is alluded to again in II.1]), and portrayed as quoting Judith of Apocryphal fame—not from the Book of Judith, but as *Record* informs us, from Hebbel's play *Judith* (monologue, Act III). In *Record*, the passage reads: "*If You (God) place a sin between me and my deed, who am I to quarrel with You about it, and to escape from what you impose!*" (53). The very lively and personable encounter with Yelena Grabenko in the cemetery, which occupies the latter half of Act I, scene 5, will find its relatively economical source, in *Record*, in half a page of statements by Lukács. There we learn that Lukács did think highly of her mind, and that they did meet "at an Italian seaside resort," in the company of Balázs and his wife. Here we may also confirm the impression that, like Irma Seidler, Yelena (the spelling in *Record* is Jelena) was "an extremely talented painter" (47).

No—"You can't just nibble at communism" (II.1; 63: "You cannot just sample Marxism"); if anything, this central point in Lukács's thinking is brought to the fore with even more force in Act II. In its first scene are portrayed the Moscow years: the first visit to Moscow during the Third Comintern Congress in 1921 (85); Lukács's work at the Marx-Engels Institute and his encounters with Mikhail Lifchitz and with David Riazanov (86-88); his refusal to meet Bukharin in 1930 (97); the enormous good luck Lukács had in avoiding arrest during the purges (98; here Solzhenitsyn's hero Ivan Denisovich is duly mentioned as a parallel, as in the play). Later on, in Act II, scene 3, Marian Raabe asks Lukács about his having thrown books into the Moscow River at night; as *Record* informs us, this episode is closely connected with Lukács's two-month arrest in 1941. The books were mainly by Trotskii and Bukharin, and "it was Andor Gábor [an old friend of Lukács and of Tibor Déry, who was in Moscow at the time] who forced me to destroy them" (99). Lukács was not the only person in his family to be arrested; there was Gertrud's son from her earlier marriage,

Ferkó (Ferenc Jánossy); what is said about his arrest, detention in Siberia, and freeing in Act II, scene 2 we find prefigured in *Record* (111). Since neither *Record* nor the play records all events in chronological order, we should not be too surprised to see Act II, scene 3 (the "interview" with Marian Raabe) go back to the period of postwar exile in Vienna, and to the wild episode of Béla Kún with his kilograms of gold, with which he financed his faction war against Lukács (73-76). That Kún resembled Vautrin, the criminal in Balzac, is mentioned in the play (as Yelena's perception of Kún) three times (in I.5, II.1, and II.3); *Record* contains Lukács's narrative of "the so-called gold scandal" (73).

While Imre Nagy and his 1956 cabinet are alluded to in the play only in passing (I.3), an entire scene, again set in the Berlin cabaret, does justice to the street fighting, and to Lukács's vote against Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact (II.4). Brilliantly conceived and executed, the scene nevertheless does not broach the question as to Lukács's motive for his dissenting vote. For an answer, we must consult *Record*. In the course of a longish discussion on Lukács's relations with Imre Nagy (127-31), the reason is given; our distinguished interviewee states: ". . . within the Central Committee [as of October 1956] I found myself to a certain extent in opposition to Imre Nagy. Just to mention the most important issue: when Imre Nagy withdrew from the Warsaw Pact, Zoltan Szanto and I voted against doing so. We demanded that in future, matters of such crucial importance should not be made public before they had been fully aired within the party" (129). Although Lukács, as we now know, had to pay for his vote (not nearly as heavily as others paid for theirs), he was eventually allowed to return to Budapest, to his home, to his work and, not long before the end, even to the ranks of the Party. The witty exchange between Eörsi and Lukács: "It's the Party that should have rejoined Comrade Lukács." "The time for that hasn't come yet." (II.5) occurs in that marvelous scene which I would secretly like to subtitle "Marxism in the Clouds"; the corresponding passage, narrating, to be sure, the events of 1967, comes in Eörsi's Introduction to *Record*, "The Right to the Last Word": " 'It sounds to me as if it is not so much that Comrade Lukács has rejoined the party, as that the party has rejoined Comrade Lukács!' He gave me another of his sly glances and said, 'Unfortunately it would be premature to claim as much.' " (10). By contrast, work on the (realized or only projected) *Aesthetics*, *Ethics*, and *Ontology*, mentioned early in the play (I.1), is reserved for special mention quite late in *Record* (134-35); it is with a discussion of the *Ontology* that the published autobiography concludes (141-42).

"In my case everything is a continuation of something else. I do not think that there are any non-organic elements in my development," says Lukács at an important point in the course of his interview (81; cf. I.3: "Nothing in my development has taken place anorganically").²⁹ This much granted, it may be interesting to ask what some of the elements in the

autobiography are that Eörsi does not include in the play. In the political sphere, there is nothing in the play concerning Lukács's position during Count Mihály Károlyi's Autumn Rose Revolution (54), or about the Rajk affair (113-16). No mention is made, again in the play, of Lukács's fascinating insights into important differences between Bartók and Kodály (140-41); it would, of course, require detailed critical understanding of Hungarian poetry of the early part of our century to interpret properly such a statement as this: "The gulf between Bartók and Kodály is just as fundamental as the distinction between Ady and Babits" (141). Lukács's experience of Ady, his discovery of this poet in 1906, is where some of this begins; "Ady was a revolutionary who regarded the revolution as indispensable for his own self-realization" (39). In the play, one sentence is allowed Thomas Mann (II.2), but Lukács's statement of his feelings concerning Mann's having plagiarized from *The Soul and the Forms* (for a passage in *Death in Venice*), as well as on his having used features of Lukács for the portrait of Naphta (93-94), does contribute something to an intimate personal portrait of the philosopher, besides being good reading in its own right. The same may be asserted of Lukács's abiding respect for Brecht, at least as poet and playwright (178-79; "Interview with *New Left Review*"), especially in light of the fact that these feelings were by no means mutual.³⁰ It also helps to inform oneself about the so-called "Blum Theses."³¹ I must stress that my purpose in pointing to all of this "supplementary" material is not to criticize Eörsi the playwright. *His Master's Voice* is a work of art, and art accomplishes as much by suggestion as it does by more direct methods. Nevertheless, one of this play's generic loyalties is to documentation. It itself carries within it the subtle hint that play and published autobiography are best understood when read in conjunction.

III. The Dead Come Back

If the Sphinx were to put the following riddle to a latterday Oedipus: What is it that works in the morning, is flat on its back by noon, and is dead by evening? that Oedipus may have a difficult time deciding whether he should answer man or the tape recorder. For the latter is not only one of the characters in Eörsi's play—it is one of the central characters and, as an absurdly "reeducated" dialectical Object-become-Subject, nothing less than one of the tragic dramatis personae. In this it has the sponsorship of Comrade Lukács himself, who in his interviews maintains that "in modern drama there are undoubtedly traces of an incipient revival of the tragic."³² Blind like Oedipus, unaware of the voice with which it speaks, short on memory, abused, forgotten, frequently superfluous as only the central character of an absurdist drama can be, there it lies—temperamental, uncooperative, and by play's end, quite forgotten and, in effect, dead.

In death the tape recorder is joined by the characters themselves—portraits of historical figures: Lukács; then (in the order of their appearance): Marian Raabe, “some sort of relative of Lukács’s” (I.3); Yelena Andreevna Grabenko, Lukács’s first wife; and Gertrud Bortstieber, his second wife and companion of over forty years (as we learn from the memorial dedication to *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, she preceded Lukács in death—on 28 April 1963).³³ Completing the cast is Eörsi, who, like Alfred Hitchcock or Nabokov, obliges by appearing as a character in one of his own works. Now that we have noticed his name on the program, it does not hurt to add one more predicate to the already convincing list of partial claims that the tape recorder has staked to being designated a tragic hero. It is manipulated, as are marionettes on strings, by the creator-god Eörsi, as the gods manipulate human beings and fates. But Eörsi does much more. He also manipulates his human characters: he provokes them, makes them talk, wheedles answers out of them, makes them cooperate (and thereby escape their tragic fates, the way the tape recorder cannot escape its fate) in the most difficult, quasi-unimaginable, of situations.³⁴ In so doing he also makes us, as audience, rediscover one of the fundamental aspects of the absurdity of our lives. Far more axiomatically than the ways in which our physical nature accomplishes this, we are human because we are *voices*—we must reach each other; our greatest failures are failures of communication. “Sitting here wordless,” as Marian observes on her first appearance onstage (I.3), does no good; this too is the message carried by Lukács’s insistence on starting almost every recording session with the question “What’s new?”; also by his reluctances, refusals, silences, his very cantankerousness throughout the text. In generating conversation, we generate each other and ourselves. In keeping silent, we disappear (viz. lighting effects at the beginning of either Act). Eörsi too says, in Act I, scene 3, immediately after Marian’s departure: “Comrade Lukács always had it in him to turn off the switch whenever something or someone did not interest him. . . . You simply took flight. You sat there among us, but were not present.”

As absurd as what we consist of are the absurdities of situation and of time. When Lukács, in Act I, scene 1, says: “What is missing in the absurd is reality,” he touches on the very nerve of the playwright Eörsi’s absurdist conception—irreal reality, a construct that calls attention to itself as such, is what he aims for. As long as Lukács resists the invitation to speak, as long as he insists that “Nothing is repeatable,” he is safe; he responds out of the depth of his historical sense, which tells him that history can be held together and preserved, but it cannot be empirically relived. All well and good. However, listen to this:

EÖRSI: I would very much like to talk to Comrade Lukacs once again.

LUKÁCS: That’s impossible.

EÖRSI: Let’s repeat it.

LUKÁCS: Nothing is repeatable.

EÖRSI: Let's assume, as a working hypothesis, that it's March of 1971 again.

LUKÁCS: What is it now?

That last speech signals Lukács's acceptance of the invitation of the moment; without even being aware of it, Lukács the dramatic character steps through the looking glass, into Eörsi's fantasy world, a world in which magic and the tragic join hands. For that tape recorder, tragic in its helplessness, in its role as a hinderer rather than as a promoter of these dialogues of the dead, is as we think we perceive it only in the conventional, traditional, sense of tragic structuring. Within the dimension of mimesis, of course, the machine has "lost its touch"; as a classical dramatic portrait of a real-life situation, the interview is a shambles; the plot is pure farce. Generally speaking, Comrade Lukács is quite indifferent, even contemptuous, toward the interview as such. He speaks when the tape recorder is down, will not speak when he should, refuses to respond when asked about what should be preserved on tape, and so on. One excellent example of such noncooperation comes in Act II, scene 3, where Marian asks him to repeat his statement concerning his self-critiques, now that the tape recorder is started up; as a reply, Lukács stands up and leaves the room. Whom is this "playwright" trying to kid? No wonder we need a published autobiography to help us piece it all together.

But is this really how *His Master's Voice* works? Absolutely not. It is Eörsi's achievement that he is able here to bring off stunningly innovative absurdist drama precisely in the area of the preservation of documented truth at the expense of verisimilitude. A situation in which an interviewed subject speaks when he should not, does not speak when he should (i.e., once the machine is fixed), and in which his words are yet preserved, simply does not exist in real life. Call it the Saul Steinberg effect (Maurits Escher's woodcut of the hand that draws itself also comes to mind); credit for a stage play that calls attention to itself as such while it never relinquishes its hold on the viewer (at least I was on the edge of my seat while I read and translated it) goes, if we please, to the tape recorder. I am sure I am not just playing with words when suggesting that we now go over from the word *tragic* to: *magic*, via: *mag(net)ic*. For the play's peculiar magic—the creation of situations that cannot exist and yet do, to embarrass good sense, not to mention Aristotle—may well be ascribed to that marriage of tragedy and electromagnetism which here produces that new dramatic birth, the magic theater of the absurd. The word *absurd* occurs in Eörsi's subtitle; the word *magic* does not. From one viewpoint we may also not wish to overrate the play's magical properties as brought on purely by means of our catalytic and silent tragic antagonist; the fictive Eörsi's troubles with the tape recorder may, after all, also be interpreted as a poetic translate of very real troubles the historical Eörsi has no doubt had with that machine. There are also

places in the play where the cantankerousness of a certain electrical appliance borders on slapstick (e.g., in I.1, where Lukács's voice is heard uttering incoherent fragments; stage directions read: "[Eörsi turns around. The tape recorder stops.]"). Magic is restored—and, I would submit, quite consciously so—at the place in Act II, scene 2, where the "live" Gertrud and Lukács's voice are in conversation. At one level, we seem to be expected to take the mechanical impossibility of the scene on faith. It is not only levels of time that are mixed, as Lukács fears in Act I, scene 1. Do not think of two news reporters, let us say, one in New York and one in Chicago, communicating with each other via their images on television screens.

It can be objected, of course, that what we call magic here is mere mechanics, or a dramaturgical transcription of such; the real magic of the play lies in the drama of a set of tremendously interesting encounters. With many a biographical detail suppressed, others presented in the presence of characters who were not privy to them in life (in order to test their reactions—see, again, how Gertrud reacts at the end of Act II, scene 2), the central encounter with Lukács may even be dubbed a valuable and long-awaited contribution to Lukács studies. The play does, then, have a substantive documentary side. Viewing the work as genuine drama, we see an awesome confrontation between teacher and pupil—on this level, most assuredly tragic protagonist and antagonist. Eörsi the "interviewer" does, as Lukács tells him in Act II, scene 5, approach the latter's life "with ready-made judgments." This seems clear from his very first question (I.1): "Comrade Lukács, I've been meaning to ask you for some time now: What's loyalty worth when it attaches itself to lies?" No answer. "This Turkish coffee is delicious. (Silence.)" So is the situation, *chez* the character Eörsi, yes? From that point on Eörsi is sympathetic, cruel, kind, embarrassingly probing, honest, muckraking, "more socialist than thou." In two hilariously comic scenes, he even caricatures, both Lukács's person (Berlin cabaret, I.2) and his thought (Lukács in the heights, II.5). This latter scene also has its serious side, in that most of it is taken up with self-criticism on Eörsi's part, or at least a dramatically effective simulacrum of it; like some Naphta understudy, Eörsi as it were turns the gun on himself (cf. the corresponding gesture from Lukács, following rehearsal of the Irma Seidler episode, in I.3). But in the end there can be no doubt that *His Master's Voice* is a literary portrait of a pupil's closeness to his master; we are not to reject as mere posing such words as this: "But after all I'm fond of Comrade Lukács" (II.5), nor as mere sarcasm the line: "He wanted to rescue wholeness. This is a noble ambition, befitting a philosopher" (I.1). He did; it is.

The dead come back, and in *His Master's Voice*, come alive; parallels are always available. We need but reflect for a moment on Act III of *Our Town*, portions of *Les Jeux sont faits*, all of *Under Milk Wood*. The purpose for which Eörsi's dead return is, needless to say, very different from the purposes with their dead of lyrists Wilder and Thomas, even from the purposes

and methods of Sartre. Touching hands, in the course of lyrical and proto-absurdist celebrations, are participants in historical drama, where everyone is dead—all, to my knowledge, except playwright-businessman-politician Beaumarchais, who in Augsburg attended a performance of the play in which he himself appears as one of the characters—Goethe's *Clavigo*. Even more engrossing, for the literary historian in search of parallels and backgrounds, may be the idea that in *His Master's Voice* we have once again the use of a literary figure as a figure in literature. In this Eörsi's work again keeps distinguished company; among predecessors we identify works by Goethe (*Torquato Tasso*), Büchner (*Lenz*), Thomas Mann (*Lotte in Weimar*), Broch (*Der Tod des Vergil*), Weiss (*Hölderlin*). We could add works on philosophers (Hölderlin's *Der Tod des Empedokles*), composers (Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*), even a scientist (Brecht's *Das Leben des Galilei*). And while the list could go on (since, understandably, the artist is always fascinated by his own image),³⁵ it seems most proper to venture two closing observations on Eörsi's remarkable fictional re-creation of his philosopher. One is that while it is true that this is something of a return engagement—since Thomas Mann had already attempted a re-creation of Lukács in his *Zauberberg*—Eörsi's purposes have, of and by themselves, very little to do with those of Mann; the Hungarian poet and dramatist achieves something brilliantly original, even with the lion in the path that that earlier work represents. The second remark would be that, of all the works listed above, Brecht's *Galilei* offers us strangely and productively suggestive possibilities for comparison, within the subgenre of the theater of provocation. There are the rejection of Aristotle, heresy, recantation, house arrest (in effect, in Lukács's case), even if we do not feel that we need apply to Lukács's words Andrea Sarti's "Ihre mörderische Analyse";³⁶ cynicism, which in the penultimate scene of Brecht's play dominates Galilei's thoughts on the commercial and political exploitation of the mind, comes to Lukács only once in Eörsi's play—at the beginning of Act I, scene 5 ("They want to buy me alive, like wheat").³⁷ In view of Lukács's respect for Brecht's plays and of the fact that, like *Galilei*, *His Master's Voice* is a festival of good talk, the parallel seems quite valid.

There can in the final analysis be no doubt that Eörsi has here made an affectionate, exciting, artistically as well as philologically viable contribution to the theater of our day. István Eörsi (b. 1931), who has had a longer association with György Lukács than probably any other Hungarian intellectual alive, has devoted a goodly portion of his energies to the master's achievement; his translation into Hungarian of Lukács's monumental, two-volume, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* is only the most imposing in a series of studies and creative endeavors. Whether or not, with *His Master's Voice*, Eörsi has really concluded "this private-entrance Lukács case" of his (I.2) remains to be seen; in the meantime we may well be grateful that the playwright has consented to join the scholar, the poet, and the memoirist.³⁸

NOTES

1. See Neil McInnes, "Lukács, Georg (György)," in: *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, vol. 5 (New York: Macmillan, The Free Press, 1967; rept. 1972), pp. 102-04; 102.

For encouragement as well as for assistance with data, I wish to record my grateful indebtedness to Professors Ladislav Matejka, Irving Titunik, and Ivan Sanders. Professor Sanders kindly lent me his personal copy of *Record of a Life*, thus enabling me to complete Part II of the present introductory essay.

2. The quotation is from Béla Királyfalvi, *The Aesthetics of György Lukács* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), p. 14. On Lukács's awareness of and indebtedness to Adorno, see Királyfalvi, loc. cit.; on Lukács and Adorno as Marxist critics, see Peter Demetz, *Marx, Engels, and the Poets; Origins of Marxist Literary Criticism*, trans. Jeffrey L. Sammons (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 199-227 (on Lukács), 235-36 (on Adorno).

3. Demetz, p. 200.

4. See Királyfalvi, who writes of "the changes in convictions, the revisions and rejections of earlier works, and the frequent self-criticisms that punctuate his long career" (p. 3); these moments and decisions too are what Eörsi alludes to in the introductory monologue of his play, where he outlines Lukács's "three life oeuvres," and states that Lukács stands by his last work, the Marxist aesthetics and philosophy, only.

5. See Sándor Radnóti, "Lukács and Bloch," in: *Lukács Revalued*, ed. Agnes Heller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 63-74; 74 (n. 33).

6. György Lukács, "Aesthetic Culture," the passage here translated from: Gy. L., *Ifjúkori művek (1902-1918)* (Works of His Youth [1902-1918]); *Collected Works*, ed. Arpád Tímár (Budapest: Magvető, 1977), pp. 422-434. Other bibliographical data in this paragraph follow: *Text + Kritik*, nos. 39-40 (October 1973), Georg Lukács issue, pp. 82-83.

7. For a detailed analysis of their spiritual relationship and of his debt to her, see Agnes Heller, "Georg Lukács and Irma Seidler," Heller, pp. 27-62. In note 1 (p. 61), Heller states that for documentation of her study, she has relied on "manuscripts, recovered from a Heidelberg bank safe in 1973," among them diaries, letters and drafts of letters to Irma Seidler, and Lukács's correspondence with Leo Popper from 1910-1911. Careful perusal of this sensitively written study helps us understand the long, letter-like, monologue Lukács addresses to Irma in Act I, scene 3 of Eörsi's play.

8. Cf. Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life: An Autobiographical Sketch*, ed. István Eörsi, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso Editions, 1983), p. 35.

9. For a helpful discussion of *Theorie des Romans*, see Demetz, pp. 201-05; in English, Lukács's work is available in: Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971; 6th prtg. 1983).

10. See Georg Lukács, *Heidelberger Ästhetik (1916-1918)*, ed. György Márkus and Frank Benseler; Georg Lukács, *Werke (Frühe Schriften zur Ästhetik II)*, vol. 17 (Darmstadt, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1974). The volume contains the text (pp. 9-228), a lecture, with some outlines, under the title "Das Formproblem der Malerei" (pp. 231-51), and the afterword by György Márkus (pp. 255-78). In the last-named, Lukács is quoted as saying that he "applied himself" to the task of writing the first draft of the *Heidelberg Aesthetics* in the years 1912-1914; later on the afterword, Márkus makes clear that revision and continuation of the manuscript was undertaken in the years indicated on the title page, 1916-1918.

11. As quoted in Márkus, "Nachwort," *ibid.*, p. 255.

12. See Lukács's 1962 preface, as in *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Bostock, p. 16.

13. In vol. 5, no. 6 (1935), pp. 96-110. The *Hyperion* essay was supposed to appear around 1935, as the foreword to a projected Russian Hölderlin edition (to be published by Academy Publishers, Moscow and Leningrad) which never materialized. See Maria Kohler and Alfred Kelletat (comp.), *Hölderlin-Bibliographie 1938-1950* (Veröffentlichungen des Hölderlin-Archivs, no. 1; Stuttgart; Landesbibliothek, 1955), entry no. 998 (p. 64).

14. Demetz, pp. 205-14. The years are 1918-1945.

15. See Biermann's volume of lyrics and songs, *Mit Marx- und Engelszungen* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1968). Whether this is original with Biermann I have not been able to determine, but I would not be surprised if it were not. It sounds just like the kind of political joke that gains currency among the young in socialist countries, given the right climate or provocation.

16. *Record of a Life*, p. 10: "In the second place, he had acted out of a sense of obligation towards his students. . . . [They] were for the most part condemned to silence, chiefly on account of his position; [Upon his rejoining the ranks,] they were to be offered academic posts as well as publishing opportunities."

17. See only Judith Marcus-Tar, *Thomas Mann und Georg Lukacs. Beziehung, Einfluss und "repräsentative Gesetzlichkeit,"* with a Foreword by István Hermann (Literatur und Leben, n.s., no. 24; Cologne, Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1982), especially pp. 54-157; also Georg Lukács, *Thomas Mann*, 5th prtg. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1957), which presents the reciprocal side of a mutually respectful relationship between novelist and philosopher. On Lukács and Mann, see also Part II of this essay.

18. Fritz J. Raddatz, *Georg Lukács in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Rowohlt's Monographien; Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1972), p. 66.

19. See Georg Lukács, "Faust and Mephistopheles" (part 3 of chap. 7, "Faust Studies"), in: G. L., *Goethe and His Age*, trans. Robert Anchor (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969), pp. 194-217; 198-200, 213-15, 216.

20. Goethe, *Faust*, lines 1335-36. With regard to Mann's (and our) insight concerning the Mephistophelean moorings of Lukács's soul, it is not without interest to note that, apparently without any connection with Mann whatever, and in a perfectly innocuous context, Edmund Wilson too sees fit to entitle his narrative of Karl Marx's tender years "Prometheus and Lucifer" (*To the Finland Station* [New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1953] pp. 111-19; 111).

21. *Faust*, lines 3240-41. Faust is alone, communing with nature and immersed in solitary meditation. On the one hand he is grateful to the Earth Spirit for the latter's many gifts (lines 3217-39; this is the powerful blank-verse soliloquy opening on: "Erhabner Geist, du gabst mir, gabst mir alles / Warum ich bat"); on the other, he soon again grows desperate, this time at the thought of his increasing dependence on Mephistopheles. On the quality of that dependence and some of its results, see Lukács's analysis in his essay on Faust and his evil genius (cited above, n. 19).

22. On this, see Demetz, p. 227. The monograph by Királyfalvi and the volume of essays edited by Heller are, of course, excellent recent examples of the sympathetic reception that Lukács's thought has enjoyed in the West.

23. *Faust*, lines 11575-76.

24. For full citation, see above, n. 8. Distributed in the U.S. by Schocken Books.

25. See the copyright page to the volume. From the discussion in this part it is clear that for his play *Eörsi* took material from all four of the book's main divisions.

26. See Eörsi's "Editorial Note," *Record of a Life*, p. 7. In these remarks Eörsi is defending the essential authenticity of his transcript, despite the fact that it is not the written-down version of any single interview, but rather the edited text of a number of

interviews made with Lukács during 1969 and 1971 (*ibid.*, p. 6). But, particularly since the caveat against pedantry comes from Lukács himself, I am happy to heed it with reference to the procedure I here attempt.

27. From this point on, "I.2" will mean Act I, scene 2 of *His Master's Voice; Record of a Life* will be referred to by page only and, in general discussion, by the abbreviation *Record*.

28. This is apparently correct; see Márkus's afterword to the text of the *Heidelberger Ästhetik* in vol. 17 of the Luchterhand edition, p. 256. From this it is clear, not only that voluminous manuscript material was found among Gertrud's papers, but also that already in the course of the 1960s the old gentleman remembered nothing about such. See *His Master's Voice*, Act I, scene 4.

29. Lukács's ideas on irreversibility and continuity come to mind here (cf. Act II, scene 5: "Important lives are consistent").

30. See Raddatz, p. 83. That Lukács was aware of their disagreements in the field of aesthetic theory is clear from *Record* (pp. 91-92, 178-79).

31. Text (of extracts only) in vol. 2 of the Luchterhand edition of Lukács's works, pp. 698-722; on the "Blum Theses," see Raddatz, pp. 68-70; on their background and on the circumstances surrounding them, see *Record*, pp. 72-81.

32. *Record*, p. 87. Lukács says this, interestingly enough, in the context of his praise for Durrenmatt's *Der Besuch der alten Dame*, the very play in whose afterword its author makes his famous statement on the impossibility of tragedy in our time.

33. See Raddatz, n. 103 (p. 126).

34. Compare only the circumstances under which the three women appear.

35. One excellent such act of self-mirroring in our own time is Bulgakov's *Molière*.

36. Bertolt Brecht, *Das Leben des Galilei* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 127.

37. Unless we add to this the subplot: the establishment of the Lukács Archive. Even there, there is a connection—see only Lukács's opinion of Verebes (II.3).

38. Eörsi's translation of *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* appeared, in two hefty volumes, with Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, under the title *Az esztétikum sajátossága*, presumably in the mid-1960s; I am acquainted with an unaltered reprint from 1969. Since in the introductory remarks to Act I, scene 2 of his play Eörsi states that he has written or edited a series of works on Lukács, it is a pleasure to report that I have located and identified one of the poems to which he without a doubt alludes in that monologue. It is: "Generations," bearing the dedicatory line "For György Lukács," in the translation by William Jay Smith. See *Modern Hungarian Poetry*, ed., with an Introduction, by Miklós Vajda (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977), p. 239.

Just one concluding observation (again, not with an intent to criticize): a reviewer of the play could conceivably object that personal aspects of the portraiture of the aged and run-down Lukács (e.g., clothing in disarray, references to bathroom functions), especially the stuttering in the closing scene, are a mite overdone. Cf. Stanley Koehler's interview with the aged William Carlos Williams, originally published in *The Paris Review*, no. 32 (Summer-Fall 1964), and since reprinted in: *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Third Series*, introduced by Alfred Kazin (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), pp. 5-30. There, the bit concerning the interviewee's difficulties in speaking (p. 5: "In his last years, Dr. Williams's health suffered from a series of strokes that made it difficult for him to speak") is intentionally underplayed (*ibid.*, p. 6: "The effort it took the poet to find and pronounce words can hardly be indicated here"). Despite his handicap, Dr. Williams is portrayed as speaking rather fully and coherently (pp. 7-18), and beyond a certain point, Mrs. Williams takes over (pp. 18-30). It need not be stressed that Eörsi's naturalism is hardly to be quibbled at from a poetological point of view.