

Essay, Life, Lived Experience: The Early Georg Lukács and the Situation of Literary Criticism Today

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THAT WE LIKE THE ESSAY as a genre of writing and reading belongs to our self-understood premises, as early twenty-first century intellectuals. If immediate evidence was necessary, it could be encountered in most of the texts making up the collection to which this essay belongs. For example, invoking authorities beyond any possible doubt or skepticism, like Francis Ponge and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the foundational essays of Michel de Montaigne’s find praise as a “search with no end nor resting place” in Sarah Bakewell’s contribution. What for Sophie Gee distinguishes Jonathan Swift’s worldview from that of his contemporaries is the capacity to “depict minds in disrepair” without claiming an “authority to correct internal turmoil.” Thomas Harrison explains how the essayistic form of Robert Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities* emerged from his attempt to forge a flexible bond between “the literary realm and the realm of the ethical,” while Alex Woloch describes the manner of George Orwell’s essays as “unstable, precarious, short-lived,” and Michael Wood shows that “taking ‘as if’ no less seriously than ‘is’” was decisive for the essay form as a “project” in Jorge Luis Borges’s work.

The vanishing point of all these analyses and the reason for our self-understood sympathy for the genre lies in a gesture of lightness and distance that the different varieties of the essay seem to share. A distance not only from any suggestions of orthodoxy in our post-ideological and perhaps even post-political times, but also from any spiritual position that comes with the impulse

My interest in Georg Lukács, especially in his earlier work, was first awakened by Pal Kelemen and Amalia Kerekes. Without the inspiring enthusiasm of these Hungarian friends and without a visit to the house in Budapest where Lukács spent the later years of his life, I would not have dared to (firstly speak and then) write about the topic of this essay, i.e. the essay as a genre in Lukács’s thinking and practice as an author. Thanks also to my eminent Stanford colleague (and beloved neighbor) Denise Gigante for her invitation—and, above all, for her angelical patience.



of changing and thus suspending itself. Even Gianni Vattimo's notion of "weak thinking" that produced so much resonance in an earlier post-ideological moment some thirty years ago, would paradoxically appear all-too totalizing in a present-day view. This is why we are eager to associate the essay as a form with concepts and qualities like "vitality, personality, and the concreteness of life-experience"¹ which cannot be subsumed under abstract and therefore general principles. Some of us would even go so far as to wish for the essayistic form to become omnipresent so that, paradoxically, not being principled might establish itself as an absolute principle. But profound flexibility as its core component has made the essay both a practical challenge for all "large systems that ground their truth claims in authoritative traditions and institutions" and a genre without a clear trajectory or historical evolution. Due to the same reason, the essay has also become an environment for "hectic developments towards eccentricity and intellectual isolation."²

My main question will be whether, given our obvious affinity today with the essay's intellectual potential, the genre could become the frame for a new, decidedly contemporaneous style of literary criticism. In relation to this quest, which has by now become an option discussed in different academic cultures, a specific tension from the tradition of the essay in the German-speaking world could be of particular relevance. It may not be very surprising to state that, as a form of distance and flexibility, the essay has never become quite as ubiquitous there as, for example, in English or in French culture. By contrast, if we look at those extreme cases where the essay's central potential of flexibility turns into a paradoxical principle, German language, German author names, and German debates clearly stand in the foreground. Specifically for academic literary criticism and art criticism, such positions had to provoke the protest and the resistance of a professional practice that, since the early nineteenth century, has understood itself as "scientific" (*wissenschaftlich*) in the development of the German university. I believe that this tension between the "scientific," strictly anti-essayistic conception of criticism and its "rhapsodic" opposite (the adjective "rhapsodisch" has indeed been frequently used by German enemies of the eccentric position) can turn into a clarifying and contrastive background for the discussion of different nuances, modes, and options of criticism that are less visibly polarized in their own national worlds of origin.



Reenergizing this traditional tension, Juergen Kaube, one of the most influential protagonists in the German Humanities and Arts world today,³ recently published a polemical essay (was it an ironic strategy to choose the essayistic form?) against the ongoing tendency of academic Humanists—even in Germany—to use some rhapsodic varieties of the essay tradition within

¹ See L.Cerny, "Essay," in *Historisches Woerterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 2, eds. Joachim Ritter et al. (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1972), 746–49, here 746.

² Heinz Schlaffer, "Essay," in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, vol. 1, eds. Klaus Weimar et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 523–25, here 523ff.

³ A sociologist in the Weberian tradition by training, Kaube is the editor of the weekly supplement on the Humanities and Arts ("Geisteswissenschaften") in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Germany's most intellectually influential daily newspaper. He also regularly teaches for several departments in the Humanities at the universities in Bielefeld and in Heidelberg.

their professional work.⁴ His starting point is the statistically based observation that, for presentations of their thinking in academic or non-academic space, most scholars in the Humanities, unlike the standard in the Natural Sciences or in the Social Sciences, avoid free speech and the use of power point technology. They prefer to read aloud manuscripts that they clearly did not compose with this type of delivery in mind—and which are therefore always difficult and often truly impossible to understand. Kaube interprets this habit as symptom of a particular emotional fixation among Humanists on their own texts. To write in a complex and (pretendedly) beautiful fashion, according to him, follows the urge to find a form of representation “adequate to phenomena in and by themselves”—rather than adequate for a community of colleagues and geared towards joint intellectual progress. The essay’s frequent lack of footnotes, of clearly circumscribed questions and goals, and of discussions regarding competing views, allows Kaube to draw the vitriolic conclusion that such critical essays represent a “high form of leisure within the beautiful Humanities”—and thus cannot be regarded as contributions towards the growth of knowledge within situations of shared professional labor.

In Kaube’s satirical, often hilarious and consistently aggressive description of a certain type of critical “essay,” Georg Lukács’s text “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (1911)⁵ appears as the ideal—more precisely, as the ideally negative—example of all the tendencies that the writer pinpoints as the typical “imputations” (*Zumutungen*) of the essay towards its readers: “Georg Lukács [...] published quite a complete list of all these imputations, (and) he did so in the form of an essay, that is as an imputation in and by itself.” The text in question does indeed not only contain the complete repertoire of all the features that Kaube identifies; Lukács also explicitly and repeatedly highlighted and used them as a basis for intellectual claims that seem to confirm Kaube’s worst nightmares. For what irritates the latter more than anything else is Lukács’s ambition to make the essay express reactions to aesthetic objects and philosophical points of view as “an attitude towards life” (“eine Stellungnahme dem Leben gegenueber”). In this understanding and self-understanding the essay indeed becomes an emblem of what Kaube believes academic work (as “science”) should strictly avoid, and this is the “literary intention” of academic disciplines to “go beyond the sheer growth of knowledge” that they can typically produce. But if the essay is not obliged to produce new knowledge and therefore remains outside any serious and seriously demanding conception of “science” (Lukács would certainly have agreed with these premises), why does Kaube so strongly condemn its adoption by Humanists? Why does he not simply ignore it—what is the danger that he senses as implicit to the genre, and whom does it threaten? Like most academics in the German-speaking world, Kaube seems to suggest that

⁴ “Der Essay als Freizeitform von Wissenschaft,” in *Merkur—deutsche Zeitschrift fuer europaeisches Denken* 776 (2014), 57–61.

⁵ The text was originally written in Lukács’s native Hungarian language and served as an introduction to seven other essays by him, first published in 1910 in Budapest. While there is no hope of fully reconstructing the philological details involved, it seems almost certain today that Lukács had a number of friends translate these (and at least one of two additional) essays for a German publication that appeared a year later: *Die Seele und die Formen: Essays* (Berlin: Egon Fleischel & Co, 1911). (The German title of the introductory text is “Ueber Form und Wesen des Essays.”) See Thomas von Ahn and Hans-Harald Mueller, “Georg Lukács’s ‘Ueber Wesen und Form des Essays’: Philologische und narrative Analyse einer Selbstthematisierung des Essays.” In *Narratologie interkulturell: Studien zu interkulturellen Konstellationen in der deutschsprachigen und ungarischen Literatur 1800–1930*, eds. Tom Kindt and Katalin Teller. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2005), 49–77. I will quote Lukács from the English translation of the German book version: *Soul and Form*, trans. by Anna Bostock, eds. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis, with an introduction by Judith Butler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Literary Criticism only has a right to exist (and to be financed) if it adapts itself to the rigid standards of *Wissenschaft*. In the final sentence of his polemic, however—and perhaps un-intentionally—Kaube finally seems to allow for a non-scientific understanding of Literary Criticism when he expresses the suspicion that the essayistic form of writing might precisely “destroy the very core significance of Art and Philosophy” that it claims to lay open.

Without any doubt, Juergen Kaube’s irritation and critique are justified on at least two levels. Authors like Lukács have not only all-too readily accepted the risk of a language that makes even patient efforts of reading impossible; there is indeed reason to believe that they have often cultivated and enjoyed such impenetrability as a token of esoteric sophistication.⁶ At the same time, part of the specifically humanistic genre tradition of the essay has long been accompanied by what Theodor W. Adorno described as a “well-versed” and “market-oriented superficiality.”⁷ And yet it remains unclear what, especially today, could be the “core significance” of literature, art, and philosophy whose existence Kaube seems to assume as much as “rhapsodic” authors like the young Lukács do—and that at the same time he wants to protect against his past and present antagonists. As Kaube uses the word “significance” (*Bedeutung*), I imagine that he is thinking of structures of objective knowledge which can be wrested from literary texts through historical or sociological analysis—and this may well be the limit of any academic practice worthy of being subsumed under the concept of “science,” a limit that would also help to keep whatever the “significance” of literature, art, and philosophy might be, under “scientific” control.

Such a premise, however, must exclude from the academic critical endeavor the dimension of aesthetic experience as facilitated by literary texts. Now, I am not the only scholar who argues that, since only about a decade ago, contemporary Literary Criticism has shown a tendency and perhaps even a longing to recuperate the existential—and this necessarily also means the individual and the aesthetic—dimensions of reading against more objective claims.⁸ From this angle, I suspect, it could be worthwhile to revisit the generic tradition of the essay in general and, more specifically, Lukács’s essay on the essay published in 1910 and 1911, a good half decade before intellectually converting to Marxism, which would become decisive for his work and his reputation as one of the most influential intellectuals of the past century.



We will never be able to reconstruct the individual origin of the ten essays on literary and philosophical authors from Lawrence Sterne to Stefan George that Lukács published as a German translation under the title *Die Seele und die Formen* in 1911,⁹ going back to a previous Hungarian book with only eight texts, from 1910. Prior to the first book, five of these texts had come out in

⁶ After reading Lukács’s essays in the first Hungarian manuscript version, for example, his friend Leo Popper commented with approval and enthusiasm: “That these essays are of a lyrical character will become clear to their readers by the sheer fact that they cannot understand them” (see von Ahn and Mueller, 53).

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Der Essay als Form,” in *Noten zur Literatur*, vol. 1. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1958), 9–49, especially 14ff.

⁸ For further references, see my article “Warum wir Klassiker brauchen. Ideengeschichten aus dem Kalten Krieg,” in *Zeitschrift fuer Ideengeschichte* (2010), 111–20, and “Klassiker anders, heute,” in *Kanon und Bestenlisten: Was gilt in der Kultur? Was zaehlt fuer Deutschlands Nachbarn?*, eds. Bertholt Franke et al. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck, 2012), 53–66.

⁹ This is the conclusion at which von Ahn’s and Mueller’s well-informed investigation arrives. For more details regarding the publishing history, see the survey in the same article (66) and my previous footnote 5.

an intellectual journal at Budapest, whereas the two essays that Lukács added in the translated book had previously appeared in German periodicals (one of them he had written himself in German). And all we can further and more importantly assume is that they emerged from the years before 1910, which Lukács spent in Berlin, with Georg Simmel as his most important mentor and within the intellectual environment of “Life Philosophy,” after receiving his doctorate at age twenty-one from the University of Kolozsvár in the Hungarian province. The idea of bringing the texts together in a book went back to the spring of 1909 and to Lukács’s correspondence with his friend, the even younger and already renowned art critic Leo Popper.¹⁰ Two certainties and three open problems stood at the beginning of this project: the title (“Soul and Form”) and its association with the generic form of the essay, on the side of certainties; on the other side, the question of whether the French genre-name or its Hungarian and German equivalents (*Versuch*) would be more appropriate;¹¹ the order in which to present the texts; and above all, the existential function of critical writing (as we would describe it today), whose discussion Lukács wanted to further.

A few weeks later, in correspondence between Lukács and Popper, concern arose whether he should dedicate the book to Irma Seidler, a painter from Budapest with whom, since 1908, Lukács had been in a profound love relation that probably “remained within the social conventions of their time.”¹² Irma Seidler’s attachment may have never matched the intensity of Lukács’s feelings, but she probably considered the possibility of getting married to him. Lukács himself, by contrast, was convinced that the institutional form and the everydayness of marriage would destroy the beauty and the life of true love, and therefore desperately—but unsuccessfully—tried to take distance. The essay “The Foundering of Form Against Life—Sören Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen” in *Soul and Form* was directly motivated, both in its historical empathy and in its philosophical quest, by this experience.¹³ Its impact goes through several other texts as an obsession upon the incompatibility of life with institutional structures. Then, on May 18, 1911, after getting married to another man and soon having an extramarital affair, Irma Seidler took her life in Budapest, probably due to depression. Lukács dedicated the German edition of his book to her memory,¹⁴ whereas the earlier Hungarian book version had referred to Irma Seidler with an indirect, almost distant gesture: “Into the hands of those from whom I received these texts.”¹⁵ During the months following Irma’s death he tried to work through the existential challenge, in a text later published under the title “On Poverty of Spirit—a Conversation and a Letter.”¹⁶

¹⁰ A compact selection of Popper’s writings (with an excellent epilogue) is available in the German original under the title *Schwere und Abstraktion: Versuche* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1987).

¹¹ Popper was in favor of the German translation (*Versuche*)—and it is therefore appropriate that the collection of his texts from 1987 (see footnote 10) uses this word in its title.

¹² Von Ahn and Mueller, 64.

¹³ See the emphasis on the relationship with Irma Seidler as decisive for the essays of *Seele und Form* in Judith Butler’s introduction to the English translation of *Soul and Form*, 11ff.

¹⁴ “Dem Andenken Irma Seidlers”

¹⁵ My friend Amalia Kerekes suggests that this phrase may go back to a proposal from Leo Popper that could have made the reference to Irma Seidler less oblique: “In die Haende sei dieses Buch gelegt, die mir es gaben” (“In the hands that gave it to me this book may be placed”).

¹⁶ Available as a supplement to the English translation, 210–14.



We know about Lukács's reactions to this dramatic time in his life from a series of diary notes that he started on April 25, 1910, and ended on May 24, 1911, six days after Irma Seidler's suicide.¹⁷ They show how, in the struggle between his decision to take distance and the irresistible appeal that his beloved had for him, some of the concepts and motifs of Life Philosophy made it possible to reflect upon his pain. In the process, those concepts acquired a new, often excessive emotional intensity that, without any doubt, also penetrates the essays of *Soul and Form*, in particular the introduction "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," written as "A Letter to Leo Popper." Throughout the nineteenth century, Life Philosophy had left traces in Western thinking that, rather than coming together as a coherent and well-circumscribed doctrine, produced a centrifugal plurality of responses in resistance to the normative intellectual dominance of rationality inherited from the Enlightenment and German Idealism.¹⁸ The notion of "Life"—which Lukács used synonymously with "Soul"¹⁹—became a common denominator of frequent allusions to an energy, as for example an energy in the thinking of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, that could not be contained or tamed by rationality. Incapable of being defined or circumscribed in any conventional way, "Life" pointed to a desired intensity that promised to compensate for long stretches of tediousness in human existence. Around 1900, Henri Bergson and Wilhelm Dilthey then elaborated more explicit versions of this ubiquitous concept, drawing from the semantic apparatus of academic disciplines and traditions such as History, Psychology (Dilthey) and Biology (Bergson).

It must have been clear to Lukács, from the very first words of his diary ("How strange and exciting to begin a diary (even in my current state it affects me)") that he mainly—if not exclusively—needed those notes in an attempt to come to terms with his passionate and desperate love for Irma Seidler. But to the degree that philosophy may have helped him gain some clarity in this difficult situation, its concepts and arguments also became more complex and more emotionally charged due to their contact with Lukács's lived experience. This becomes visible in his note from May 8, 1910, where he straightforwardly identifies Irma with "life":²⁰

I felt it, once again at night, Irma is life. I recalled a Margaret Island [on the Danube in Budapest] excursion. Silly little things, plays. Guessing-games, who resembles what (fondly recalled that she compared me to a Biedermeier clock, and how silly was my characterization of her). And I remember this was for the first and last time in my life. [...] Unless there is a contact, for contact is everything and everything is contact, nothing really happens. The nothingness of 'spiritual community'; and the nothingness of man in 'love'. Herein lies the productivity and freedom: to be together.... All is in vain! Only she exists. Even if I no longer 'love' her, desire

¹⁷ Regarding the intellectual and emotional life of the young Georg Lukács, above all his relationship with Irma Seidler, no other book or article that I consulted can compete with the density of historical detail and the depth of understanding offered by Thomas Harrison in *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1997), especially 88–90, 189–90.

¹⁸ See G. Pflug, "Lebensphilosophie," in *Historisches Woerterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 5, eds. Joachim Ritter et al. (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1986), 135–40.

¹⁹ In doing so, he probably relied on the tradition arising from ancient philosophy and strengthened by medieval theology that applied "anima" both to the spiritual and bodily dimensions of human life as inseparable.

²⁰ About the concept of "Life" in the early work of Lukács, see Harrison, 99–100, 194.

her, and no longer want her back. No matter. For recalling an episode with her means more than a life spent with someone else.²¹

Besides the initial equation of Irma and Life, we can recognize in these remarks the basic form of an affective and semantic dynamic that also permeates the essays of *Soul and Form*. The energy of Life, for Lukács, will only come to the fore in initial, almost ephemeral “contact” with other persons. By contrast, all institutional forms (“spiritual community”) and even all types of emotional continuity (“love”) appear to be threatening and potentially stifling to the liveliness of Life. Lukács may not only have believed during those years that remembering Irma was the exclusive way in which Life could become present for him individually; he may indeed have felt, on a more general level, that memory and “recalling” was the one truly possible form of partaking in Life at all because he believed it to be the one dimension of contact with Life capable of avoiding the stifling interference of form, that is, of institutional form and of continuity as form.

“Contact,” rather than any institutional framework, appeared as the appropriate modality of exposing oneself to Life for Lukács, because Life was supposed to be bound to the temporal dimension of the present, as an “imperceptibly short moment of transition,” according to Baudelaire’s description in *Peintre de la vie modern* (1858). On May 11, 2010, “at night,” Lukács noted: “The moment when I am truly I is truly life, the total life. And yet the ‘moods’ that permeate the ‘whole life’ are only ‘momentary’...” (29). Over thirteen months of diary entries he became increasingly obsessed with the thought of removing every possible obstacle in his relationship with Irma that could have separated or alienated him from Life in its imagined purity or fullness—and being obsessed, that is, reacting with hyperbolic words and feelings to anything that mattered to him, was the predominant mood in Lukács’s existence during that time.

On May 29, “at night, while working,” he played with a distinction between “the life” and “life,” similar to one that he had already used, in the almost opposite sense, for the introduction to *Soul and Form*. Within the diary, “life” seems to stand for “everydayness,” that is, for everything that Lukács was willing to avoid and to escape, whereas “the life” meant ecstatic immediacy:

[...] there is indeed a difference between ‘the’ life and ‘life.’ ‘The life’ washes away everything: the time, the development, the moments. And, despite everything else, ‘life’ can bring and keep together human beings, who (discounting the discountable) are empirically destined for each other. But ‘the’ life never discounts anything. It is beyond time and space. There is no forgetting, no forgiveness, no sentiment. In ‘the’ life essences make contact with essences. Therefore it is a weakness—but a necessary weakness—on my part to be able to ‘forgive’ her. (32)

Made possible by “the life,” what Lukács evokes with the formula of “essences making contact with essences” (as opposed to being “empirically destined for each other” by “life”), “naked life” so to speak, becomes central and decisive; while he seems to imply that “forgiving” Irma for abandoning him and for getting married would be a step towards a life as institutional continuity that would never be better than just livable—and thus mark a step away from Life in its absoluteness. Paradoxically, the desire for “the life,” due to the phobia of everydayness and concreteness, leads Lukács to the—practical and philosophical—conclusion that ecstatic intellectual concentration would keep him the closest to pure vitality and energy (this is a “paradoxical” conclusion

²¹ Quoted (including the remarks in square brackets) after *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Arpad Kadarkay (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 28 (the Diary is 26–41).

because, at first glance, nothing seems to be further away from Life than ecstatic intellectual concentration).

Very much in this spirit, he writes on October 1, 1910: “Not a single day should pass without reading a few pages from a great philosopher. [...] I have scattered myself, I have lived among people and involved myself in petty things. Must not do it” (37). In spite of such intentions, it is not surprising that after Irma Seidler’s death Lukács accused himself for his attitude of distance: “Perhaps I could have saved her, had I taken her hand and led her” (39). At this point, however, the motif of distance from empirical “life” to be kept as a condition for exposing oneself to the plenitude and immediacy of “the life” had long become central in Lukács’s thinking and in his emotions, as we can see in his essay on the “essay” written as an introduction to *Soul and Form*. This text will now be the point of reference in Lukács’s earlier writing for my attempt to find some inspiration for the present-day situation of Literary Studies.



Evoking Life Philosophy as a horizon and Georg Lukács’s relationship with Irma Seidler as a source of existential irritation and energy was more than just to provide a double contextualization for a reading of his text, “The Nature and Form of the Essay.” I needed to find some strong external orientation for an in-depth understanding, which this essay on the essay does not readily facilitate (and the orientation I was looking for lies in the discovery of Lukács’s relentless endeavor to find an immediate access opening the lived experience of Life—in German we could transcribe it as “Erlebnis des Lebens”). Juergen Kaube is certainly right: the almost deliberate conceptual inconsistency and the lack of an argumentative arch, both of which Lukács cultivated in his writing and liked to associate with the essay as a genre, make difficult—if not impossible—any immanent approach to secure only fragments of meaning, not to speak of intellectual positions or of an integral interpretation. Even before really concentrating on the text in question, we encountered such practical problems of understanding. In the notes from Lukács’s diary, for example, it became visible how the distinction between the concepts of “life” and “soul” remains fluid—and therefore turns into a permanent source of confusion.

Early on in the text, Lukács announces that he wants “to try to define the essay [...] by describing it as an art form” (17),²² precisely before he begins to distinguish it as a genre and intellectual gesture from art and from science.²³ The second distinction, the one between “art” and “science,” dominates Lukács’s opening pages, culminating in this sentence: “Science affects

²² The wording of the German text may suggest that this was only an initial and therefore transitory strategy: “Ich versuche den Essay so scharf wie ueberhaupt moeglich zu isolieren eben dadurch, dass ich ihn jetzt als Kunstform bezeichne.” On the final page of his text, Lukács indeed comes explicitly back to the early “definition” of the essay as an art form, and now underlines that it both is and is not an artform: “Jetzt erst klaenge es nicht widerspruchsvoll, doppelsinnig und wie eine Verlegenheit, ihn ein Kunstwerk zu nennen und doch fortwaehrend das ihn von der Kunst Unterscheidende hervorzuheben: er steht dem Leben mit der gleichen Gebaerde gegeneuber wie das Kunstwerk, doch nur die Gebaerde, die Souveranitaet dieser Stellungnahme kann die gleiche sein, sonst gibt es zwischen ihnen keine Beruehrung” (“Only now would it not be contradictory, ambiguous and false to call it a work of art and yet insist on emphasizing the thing that differentiates it from art: it faces life with the same gesture as the work of art, but only the gesture, the sovereignty of its attitude is the same; otherwise there is no correspondence between them”).

²³ Adorno in “Der Essay als Form” (12ff.) noted and criticized this inconsistency, despite his great appreciation for Lukács’s text—but without taking into account the explanation on the final page.

us by its contents, art by its forms; science offers us facts and the relationships between facts, but art offers us souls and destinies. Here the ways part; here there is no replacement and no transition" (18). Art is in contact with Life (Lukács writes: with "souls and destinies"), and art has a tendency—and a capacity—to "dissolve all its content into form." Science (*Wissenschaft*), by contrast, dissolves Life into content, that is into concepts and knowledge. To make things even more complicated—and more precise, one has to admit—Lukács reminds his readers, a few paragraphs further down, that the distance between the dimension of Life and the dimension of concepts is not really absolute. In doing so, he proposes yet another distinction between "the life" and "Life" ("d a s Leben" and "L e b e n" on the printed page of the German text), which looks similar but is semantically different from the polarity between "life" and "the life" in his diary. This time—converging with Edmund Husserl's contrast between "experience" (*Erfahrung*) and "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*)—"the life" refers to a concept drawn from Life whereas "life" stands for a state of immediacy (the English translation does well in using "life" for "das Leben" and "living" for "Leben"). Altogether, Lukács tries to show here how "life" and "living" are ultimately and inevitably concomitant within human existence: "Elements of both are contained in the lived experience of every human being, even if in always varying degrees of depth and intensity" (21).

Now, for the German academic tradition—in which the early Lukács had been intellectually socialized—*Kunst-Wissenschaft*, *Literatur-Wissenschaft*, and their discourses lie between "art" and "science" because these disciplines and their discourses approach "art" and "literature" under the conditions of "science." But after several attempts that do not seem to do justice to Lukács's decisive intuition, he finally decides to describe the critical discourse as not "scientific," that is as not dissolving art and Life into concepts, but as reaching the dimension of lived experience and, as we can safely supplement: as coming close to Life:²⁴

I mean intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as immediate reality, as spontaneous principle of existence; the world-view in its undisguised purity as an event of the soul, as the motive force of life. The question is posed immediately: What is life, what is man, what is destiny? But posed as a question only: for the answer, here, does not supply a "solution" like one of the answers of science or, at purer heights, those of philosophy. (22)

That an exercise of "intellectuality" and "conceptuality" can lead authors and readers to "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) and thus to Life is the surprising, perhaps even paradoxical claim and possibility that Lukács associates with the essay as a generic form. For instead of transposing the forms of art and literature—and that would mean the Life and the soul inherent to art and literature—into concepts and questions, as science and philosophy would do, the critical essay uses form as its own "voice":

Form *is* reality in the writings of critics; it is the voice with which they address their questions to life. That is the true and most profound reason why literature and art are the typical, natural subject-matter of criticism. For here the end-point of poetry can become a starting-point and a beginning; here form appears, even in its abstract conceptuality, as something surely and concretely real. But this is not the only typical subject-matter of the essay, not the sole one. For the essayist needs form only as lived experience and he needs only its life, only the living

²⁴ The English translation chooses "sensed experience" for "sentimentales Erlebnis" (15).

soul-reality it contains. But this reality is to be found in every immediate sensual expression of life, it can be read out of and read into every such experience. (24)

Rather than moments of convergence, fusion, and “inseparability” of soul / life and form, as Judith Butler states in her remarkable introduction to the English translation, I believe that Lukács’s main concern and, if one can say so, his main discovery, was indeed the essay’s capacity to reach Life through form as lived experience, which capacity depends on its generic potential to use form as its “voice” (in other words: on the freedom not to subordinate the urge towards a literary use of language to standards of semantic and argumentative clarity).

It is then hardly surprising that, in a beautiful and frequently quoted sentence, Lukács characterizes the intermediary—and for him so specifically productive—status of the critical essay by saying that it “strives for truth” and finds “life”: “It is true that the essay strives for truth: but just as Saul went out to look for his father’s she-asses and found a kingdom, so the essayist who is really capable of looking for the truth will find at the end of his road the goal he was looking for: life” (27).

The more difficult question, however, the question for which I do not manage to find one well circumscribed answer in Lukács’s introductory essay, lies in asking—to say it in a language different from his own—how the lived experience of Life as provided by a critical essay and the potential function of the critical essay, can become different from the function covered by art itself. Much of the text’s second part seems to struggle precisely with this problem, and Lukács may well have failed to find a solution because he so liked to indulge in the obscurity-producing openness of his own writing and thinking. Several times he seems to get stuck in trying to prove that experiencing the form of a literary text or of an artwork, as presented by a critical essay, is not more abstract (and therefore less immediate) than the experience of a form of life presented by art or literature themselves. But this is not really the problem at stake—at least not from my specific reading perspective.

The open question that one would like to see (but does not find) discussed has little to do with whether a critical essay can come as close to Life as art or literature can. Rather, it is about how the essay’s impact on the reader may be different from the impact of a literary text or an artwork. Short of finding a clear-cut solution to this problem in Lukács’s text, I would like to focus upon the recurrent motif of a specific condition of lightness that is supposed to characterize the critical essay in comparison to art and literature—Lukács refers to it with the words “humor” and “irony.” The most relevant passage begins with a statement about a function that the critical essay does not fulfill: “most people have to believe that the writings of the essayists are produced only in order to explain books and pictures, to facilitate their understanding” (25). But this, he implies, is not what the essay really does or, at least, it is not the most important function that it covers. Instead, Lukács discovers the “irony” of this genre without a stable form that lies in appearing to be so far away from what it ultimately does:

And the irony I mean consists in the critic always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life—and even then not their innermost substance but only their beautiful but useless surface. Thus each essay appears to be removed as far as possible from life, and the distance between them seems the greater, the more burningly and painfully we sense the actual closeness of the true essay of both. (25)

It might be this “irony”—i.e. the distance from Life created by the critical essay together with a “burning” closeness—that is responsible for the acts and moments of judgment offered by it as a genre. Lukács speaks of such acts and moments towards the end of his text:

[...] an original and deep-rooted attitude toward the whole of life, a final, irreducible category of possibilities of experience. Therefore it needs not only to be satisfied (and thus abolished) but also to be given form which will redeem and release its most essential and now indivisible substance into eternal value. That is what the essay does. [...] This “application” creates both that which judges and that which is judged, it encompasses a whole world in order to raise to eternity, in all its uniqueness, something that was once there. The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing is not the verdict (as it is the case with the system) but the process of judging. (33–34)

Now, I will not venture into an interpretation of these claims in order to translate Lukács’s intuitions into coherent meaning, let alone into an overarching argument. There is no doubt that its impenetrable language is the most salient weakness of his essay on the essay—and perhaps also its most eccentric strength. It could be a strength, from our present-day perspective, if we manage to see how individual essays have entered and are still entering a dimension of intellectual life where well-shaped concepts must necessarily fail—a dimension that may still be relevant for our self-understanding as humanists, perhaps even more relevant today, a good century later, than when the text was first written and read.



In its truly outstanding entry on “Georg [György] Lukács,” the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*²⁵ provides an indirect answer to our question about the difference between art and the critical essays while both are approaching Life in the modality of lived experience. The entry states that in his “Early Aesthetic Writings” Lukács was predominantly concerned with the ability of approaching “life’s intensity and potentiality,” and that he saw this potentiality threatened by phenomena belonging to the everyday, by phenomena remaining on a “purely symbolic and imaginary level”—and, also and more surprisingly, by the dimension of form. As he saw art as a dimension mainly constituted by form, any harmony between Life and form “achieved” through art would inevitably turn out to be “to the detriment” of Life’s intensity and potentiality. Due to its proverbial openness and due perhaps to using “voice” as a personal gestuality of writing (instead of generic form), this may indeed have been Lukács’s key intuition, that the critical essay might have the possibility to bypass what Judith Butler calls “the death drive of form” (12). Why, however, the doubling of form and gestuality in the critical essay (i.e. art and literature being constituted by form meet the critical essay using gestuality as its “voice” in approaching them), why this doubling of form and gestuality should be a strategy to avoid the Life-stifling effects of form will most likely remain Lukács’s secret forever.

And yet I agree with Adorno, in whose text “Der Essay als Form,” conceived and written between 1954 and 1955,²⁶ Lukács’s essay on the essay from 1910, despite occasional reservations,

²⁵ Stahl, Titus, “Georg [György] Lukács,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/lukacs>.

²⁶ According to the edition of his *Noten zur Literatur*, vol. 1, 196.

appears as the gold standard for identifying philosophical and critical functions of the genre. In a particularly impressive passage, Adorno implicitly suggests an explanation for the impenetrability of Lukács's language, by comparing the relation between the essay as a genre and its conceptual environment to that of a foreigner who tries to learn and to speak the language by which he is surrounded, without ever using a dictionary or a grammar:

In the way the essay appropriates concepts, we may best compare it to the behavior of somebody who, in a foreign country, is compelled to speak its language, instead of tinkering it together from the elements offered by a language course. Such a person will read without a dictionary. Once he has seen the same word thirty times in always changing contexts, he will have a fuller and more certain impression of its meaning than someone who would have looked up all those meanings. For dictionary references are always too narrow in comparison to the versatility of meanings depending on different contexts and too imprecise in relation to those individual nuances that the context generates in each individual case. Such "learning," however, always remains exposed to a risk of error—and so does the essay. (29)²⁷

While Adorno—who may well have competed with the early Lukács on the impenetrability of their language—does not make this premise explicit, it seems safe to assume that the "foreign language" to which the essay can expose itself and for which it tries to find tentative concepts (always with the "risk of error") is an image for situations which, different from language, do not allow for an appropriation through concepts.²⁸ Retranslated into the words of the early Lukács, we could say that, by exposing itself to Life—more precisely: to art and literature as traces of Life—the essay tries to wrest concepts from that which resists conceptualization. Like Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno also believes that the lived experience of Life's intensity can only occur in the transitory time of a moment, of a moment of epiphany in which things seem to show themselves and become fully present, a moment, also, that will well compensate for any investment and even redeem eternity. To describe this intuition, Adorno uses two sentences from Nietzsche's *Will to Power*:

Let us assume that we said "Yes" to a single moment, then we will have said "Yes" not only to ourselves but to all existence. For nothing just stands for itself, neither in us nor in the things of the world: and if our soul has only once vibrated and resonated with happiness like a chord, then all eternities were necessary to make this event possible—and all eternities were blessed, redeemed, justified and affirmed in this single moment of us saying "Yes." (49)²⁹

²⁷ My translation.

²⁸ This becomes clear only towards the end of Adorno's text where he says that the essay "wants to break open with concepts what cannot be adapted to concepts and what betrays, through the contradiction into which it gets entangled, that the pretended network of its objectivity is a purely subjective process" (48).

²⁹ Adorno quotes from: *Der Wille zur Macht*, vol. 2. *Werke*, vol. 10 (Leipzig, 1906), 206 (paragraph 1032). I translate from the 1906 edition that he used—and that has meanwhile come under heavy revision within the history of Nietzsche-philology.



Intensity, immediacy and suddenness³⁰ are probably the three dimensions today that we relate the most closely with aesthetic experience—a concept that was less frequently used a hundred years ago than now, although it could have been perfectly pertinent for Lukács’s reflections about art, literature, and the essay. At the beginning of my essay, reacting to Kaube’s critique of the essay in the name of *Wissenschaft*, I had briefly mentioned the impression that a certain return from more “socially” or “politically” motivated endeavors to a concentration on (art and literature as a potential for) aesthetic experience may have characterized the past two decades in academic criticism. This return, I think, has been motivated by a longing for intensity—which I identify as that “key significance” for literature, art, and even philosophy in our time to which Kaube was alluding without naming it. The growing desire for intensity, finally, could follow from a global everyday environment in which contingency and randomness, distance and the impression that nothing can be immediately present, have indeed become universal. If the now past world of Modernity had presented itself as a field of contingency and relativity, as a field of contingency between what appears necessary and what appears possible, this existential situation, partly but not exclusively due to innovations and changes in our technological environment,³¹ now finds itself in a process of transformation where both what used to be impossible and what used to be necessary are becoming “just possible.”³²

That such an existential situation without contours creates a desire, a nostalgic desire perhaps, to feel and to hold on to an environment of intensity—and if it were only for a moment—may suffice to explain our renewed need for aesthetic experience. But why should we use the essay—in all of its now unfolded complexity and with all of its uncertainties—as a medium to bring us closer to aesthetic experience? Why should we not simply and exclusively expose ourselves—and above all, our students—to the canon of great works of art, literature, and philosophy? And why do we not seek intensity in new challenges of our existence—besides art, literature, and philosophy?

Of course confrontation with such challenges and non-mediated contact with objects of aesthetic experience is still—and will always remain—possible. But to expose ourselves to the challenges of the present, including the thought of a possible ending of humankind as a vanishing point that has all of a sudden begun to appear realistic, may simply be too much and too overwhelming for most of us. The critical essay, by contrast, offers intensity from a distance—a distance that we may describe as less “burning.” This is quite obviously one of its virtues. But as a trace of individual resonance and reaction to aesthetic experience, it also points³³ in two other directions: to the existence of intensity as a potential and as a fact, so to speak, inviting those

³⁰ This concept is irreversibly connected to the life work of Karl Heinz Bohrer, Germany’s most sophisticated and most prolific thinker in the field of aesthetic experience. Unfortunately, only a small selection from his writing is available in English, as *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

³¹ See Robert Pogue Harrison’s blog, “The Children of Silicon Valley,” in the *New York Review of Books*, July 17, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/jul/17/children-silicon-valley>.

³² My book *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), esp. 73–79, is dedicated to a first description of this situation.

³³ In the final chapter of *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 68–87, I have tried to describe similar perspectives as “deictic” functions of criticism.

who are not familiar with it; and also to idiosyncratic ways, mostly non-rational idiosyncratic ways, of reacting to it. This longing for Life must be the ground that our present shares with the situation and the work of the young Georg Lukács, especially with his fascination for the essay as a genre; the historical difference may be that, if such desire for Life was a sign of intellectual sophistication after 1900, it appears to be part of a global condition today.

It is one thing that there can be no fully adequate concept for what was—and is—at stake here; but the pleasure that Lukács seems to have sometimes taken in not being understood is another. Ultimately he seems to conceive of the critical essay as a form of writing that brings the dimension of unspeakable intensity to which he refers as “Life” as close to language as possible. Seen from this angle, the essay cannot help being an attempt for clarity—although Lukács positions himself within a discursive tradition of Romanticism in which clarity can only be achieved by facing and by going through complexity and darkness. In addition and finally, the language of Lukács’s early texts is the language of a now remote intellectual world, a world that increasingly needs translation on several levels if we want to keep it alive and in reach, both with a historical and with an existential motivation. A