

## Totality and the Dialogic: Two Versions of the Novel?

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### I

In his introduction to Bakhtin's four essays on the problems of literature and esthetics, Michael Holquist observes that the essay *Epic and Novel* "will inevitably be compared" with Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*. Professor Holquist outlines the basis of such a comparison, which is indeed inviting but, I hope, not so inevitable as to be unrewarding:

Bakhtin differs from Lukács in his evaluation of the novel's fallen state: just as his concept of heteroglossia [polylingualism] is a happy reaction of the conditions otherwise so gloomily charted by Derrida's epigones as "differance," so his concept of the novel's relation to epic is an affirming version of what the pessimistic Lukács means when he says that the novel is the characteristic text of an age of "Absolute sinfulness."<sup>1</sup>

It is not my intention to take up the question of the gloominess or joyfulness of "Derrida's epigones," but to explore more fully the basis of this contrast between Bakhtin's and Lukács' poetics. What underlies Holquist's observation is Lukács' concept of "totality," and it is important to recall that for Lukács it is a category that enables the artistic transcendence of a state that he does indeed call metaphorically "absolute sinfulness" (citing Fichte), but which he more frequently calls "alienation." This term is closer to the core of his own thinking, and of course it characterises that central set of preoccupations common to the "pre-Marxist" *Theory of the Novel* and to his later "Marxist" writing, whether specifically literary or not. A full documentation of this is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is perhaps necessary to recall that his first Marxist work, *History and Class Consciousness*, stressed the primacy of

the category of totality as that by which Marx's thinking was said to transcend bourgeois thought. It is easy to understand why this should be so, since for Lukács the separation of intellectual pursuits, the multiplicity of disciplines and methods, were themselves the product of alienation in the sphere of human knowledge. Marxism is thus validated by Lukács as the meta-science that reintegrates:

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality . . . . *The primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science.* [author's emphasis]<sup>2</sup>

In his preface to the 1967 edition Lukács criticizes this very same passage as evidence of his "failure to subject the Hegelian heritage to a thorough-going materialist reinterpretation and hence to transcend and preserve it."<sup>36</sup> But he immediately adds his view (of 1967) regarding his early work's saving grace:

I would once again cite a central problem of principle. It is undoubtedly one of the great achievements of *History and Class Consciousness* to have reinstated the category of totality in the central position it had occupied throughout Marx's works and from which it had been ousted by the 'scientism' of the social-democratic opportunists. I did not know at the time that Lenin was moving in the same direction.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, what is important for this paper is that Lukács will renounce all but the centrality of totality itself, citing (strategically?) a conventionally incontrovertible authority in its support! At the same time however, Lukács criticizes his own earlier treatment of "reification" and "alienation" as synonymous. "Reification" is now called "objectification" and "every human expression including speech objectifies human thoughts and feelings, [so that] it is clear that we are dealing with a universal mode of commerce between men."<sup>5</sup> My purpose here is not to defend this concept of "objectification," but to suggest that the notion of the central necessity of transcendent totality is lessened if multiplicity is no longer the mark of alienation but of a "universal mode of commerce between men." But Lukács of course, does not reconsider the category of totality, even while rejecting so much else from his Hegelian past. Rather to that contrary, it is the concept of totality that enables him to

link Naturalism with Modernism through their mutual contrast with a Realism that is for him canonical. Naturalism is said to resemble Modernism in that both are reflections of capitalist "alienation" without the transcending totality that constitutes art. Thus the categories "progressive" and "reactionary" have in the Lukács of the Stalin period an underpinning in the older categories of "totality" and "reification." But the difference between Lukács and Zhdanovite orthodoxy is also locatable here; the bureaucracy legislated on the basis of a supposed content, using only the first two categories; Lukács resists vulgar authoritarianism by locating the authority of the transcendent unity at the level of form. Brecht, caught by the new orthodoxies, ironically observes that Lukács' "progressive" esthetics is in reality a perpetuation of the norms of the classical bourgeois novel,<sup>6</sup> and Adorno, via the concept of negative dialectics (a negating relationship between textual structure and social structure) refuses the homologous identification of the structures of literary work and society implicit in Lukács.<sup>7</sup> Both of these critiques have a value that is enhanced by their provenance from within a "Marxist" perspective. They also make clear that the significant polemic is not centred around the "progressive" and "reactionary" slogans of bureaucratic orthodoxy but around the authority accorded to totality in the less orthodox and infinitely more persuasive Lukács.

It is totality which provides the grounding for Lukács' most familiar concept of the "typical," and which enables him to develop Engels' observations on the typicality of Balzac's characters. Lukács says:

The general is thus always concrete and real because it is based on a profound understanding of what is typical in each of the characters figuring in it. . . . The Balzac characters, complete within themselves, live and act within a concrete, complexly stratified social reality and it is always the totality of the social process that is linked with the totality of character.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of totality is also what links plot to character in an artistic unity that is none other than Balzac's "method of sublimating chance" and which "differs in principle from the method used by modern authors."<sup>9</sup> Lukács' argument is that by this action of novelistic form the randomness of the real (in the Hegelian sense of the immediately given) is transcended to reveal the essential:

The problem of the essential and the inessential is another aspect of the problem of chance. From the point of view of the writer every quality of every human being is an accident and every object merely a piece of stage property, until their decisive interconnections are expressed in poetic form, by means of some action.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore also at the level of a totalising plot that "essential" history is mirrored. Totality constitutes the revelation of the essential; it is the means whereby contingency, both of event and character, ceases to be contingent. (Parenthetically one might observe that the Aristotelian conception of plot is more striking when one reflects that the emergence of the essential from within the contingent — which thereby loses its pure contingency — is precisely the ambiguity of tragedy in the related spheres of character responsibility and inevitability of event.) In this later writing Lukács tends to examine his own categories less, but beneath the shift in his style towards a greater "factuality" there is an essential continuity of thought, especially with regard to the central function of totality. Fredric Jameson also argues for this continuity, and even endorses it as a concept corresponding to "revolutionary praxis":

Thus that ideal of the concrete which was inscribed in the *Theory of the Novel* as a will to reestablish epic narration remains intact in the later theory of realism where it is shown, in the spirit of *History and Class Consciousness*, and indeed like revolutionary praxis itself, to depend on those privileged historical moments in which access to society as a totality may once again somehow be reinvented.<sup>11</sup>

My justification for attempting a critique that focuses primarily on the earlier work is that there the concept of totality is itself the principal object of theoretical attention, while the later work draws upon it without much discussion. Nevertheless, the implications have a great bearing on Lukács' later theory and critical practise. Anticipating some of my own argument at this point, I wish to show that the theory of totality functions as a *desire* for closure, which in the later Lukács takes a more self-repressive form as a concern for stability and authority (literature in the service of a pre-established history). This desire for totality can accurately be seen as a threat to the possibilities of literature as genuinely participating in dialectical change, but the desire never achieves the status of accomplished fact — despite the

“factuality” of the later critical language. The tension between totality as desire and the givenness of the fragmented world, which in the *Theory of the Novel* had constituted the ironic nature of the form itself, persists in the later work as the tension between the future, present only as ‘utopian’ desire (which is nevertheless a form-giving principle underwritten by “essential” history) and the fragmented ‘real’ of alienated existence under capitalism. While the critical vocabulary has moved away from “irony” as a key term to “utopian,” this shift takes place within a continuous set of assumptions. It would not be betraying Lukács’ later critical theory to describe the tension between the form-giving “utopian” principle and the fragmented givenness of the material of the work as essentially “ironic.” Nevertheless the underwriting of the form-giving desire by the future is a shift towards a more authoritative closure, whose importance cannot be overlooked precisely because it tends to restrict the degree of indeterminacy required by irony itself. Yet for Lukács’ theory and critical practise, the novel is always generically constituted by this ironic tension, a tension which historically places it too. Brecht’s challenge to Lukács (a defensive challenge already mentioned) focuses ironically on the historical limitation of the form that Lukács’ irony implies, but Brecht’s major challenge lay outside formal theory, in his whole practise as a dramatist and poet. The true contemporary challenge to Lukács is contained in the writings of Voloshinov and Bakhtin. The possibilities which they represented, and which were repressed, were akin to those to which Roland Barthes refers in his essay *From Work to Text*, in which the “vast stereophony” of the text has a good deal in common with Bakhtin’s polylingualism. Of course the notion of Bakhtin as the founder of theories of intertextuality has been argued in different ways by Kristeva, Todorov et al., and has become a critical commonplace. Barthes’ observation, however, does have implications that bear more precisely on the theme of this paper:

The plural or demonic texture that divides text from work can carry within it profound modifications in the act of reading and *precisely in the areas where monologism seems to be the law.* [emphasis added] . . . . the Marxist interpretation of the work, until now resolutely monistic, may be able to materialise itself even further by pluralising itself (if, of course, Marxist “institutions” allow this.<sup>12</sup>

My argument is that Bakhtin can easily be placed on the “pluralising” and consequently “materialising” side of this opposition. However, Lukács is

only partly on the "monistic" and "institutionalising" side. "Monologism seems to be the law" of Lukács' discourse, but the monologism of totality is nonetheless undermined by its dialectical dependence upon the untranscended recalcitrant material of the literary work. Even at his most interpretative, Lukács still responds to the precariousness of the totality which he finds in the work. Thus the theory itself is penetrated with the ironic tension which it reads as the basis of the novel form. An inescapable aspect of this irony is that the valorisation of formal transcendence (which can even be glossed as the will-to-form) also involves the perhaps unwilled valorisation of the resistance of the material.

## II

Although my argument is that Lukács' concept of the artistic form as transcendence of the empirically given is a form of closure (and this becomes the normative basis of his condemnation of "decadence"), nevertheless there is something else in the Balzac criticism. When he says that "Balzac depicts the last great struggle against the capitalist degradation of man, while his successors portray an already degraded capitalist world,"<sup>13</sup> he is partly validating contradictoriness itself as a positive value of Balzac's novelistic form. Of course, his theoretical commitments always drive him to present it as a contradictoriness that is transcended by the emergence of the essential totality. Nonetheless his own critical language is energised by the contradictoriness that it responds to in the Balzacian text:

Balzac builds his plots on broader foundations than any other author before or after him, but nevertheless there is nothing in them not germane to the story. The many-sided influence of multifariously determined factors is in perfect conformity with the structure of objective reality whose wealth we can never actually grasp and reflect with our ever all too abstract, all too direct, all too unilateral thinking.<sup>14</sup>

At first glance, the most obvious point here is that the novelistic form functions exactly like Marxist dialectics in *History and Class Consciousness*: central to both is the totality which allows the transcendence of appearances (equated with multiplicity) to grasp the (single) essential structure:

Thus the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectic interactions with each other. The intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality as social process*.<sup>15</sup>

On the surface this is perfectly clear; in the sphere of theory, dialectics is that which unifies the disparate and reveals the singleness of the process of reality to the understanding. It is this singleness that is truly intelligible. The form of the novel, it would seem, functions likewise; in bringing the "multifariously determined factors" within the purview of the unifying form, appearances are transcended and the essential "structure of objective reality" is encompassed. Here, then, Lukács' concept of totality would seem to be totally resistant to Barthes' suggestion that Marxist criticism could "pluralise" (and synonymously "materialise") itself.

Yet there is a certain asymmetry in the homology between Marxist theory and the alienated bourgeois art-form. In the case of the theory, human intellect is taken to be capable of transcending the condition of alienated consciousness and of grasping the objective process. (The historical possibility of the existence of this higher mode of consciousness is itself based in the material world, as it is made possible only by the formation of the proletariat. *ibid passim*). In the case of the art-form, however, human thought is presumed to remain "all too abstract, all too direct, all too unilateral" to grasp the totality. Clearly, then, the novel yields a totality that is by its very nature beyond even the theoretical totality of Marxist theory. It is a totality that can be grasped by no theory; it unites the "concrete" with the "intelligible," but of course this process lies beyond the intelligibilities of theory. One of the themes of this paper is that probably the only way to make Lukács' theory of the totality of the novel form accessible to intelligibility is to see it as *desire* for totality *which is therefore forever rooted in its non-realisation*. Thus Lukács' use of the word "totality" is made intelligible if one reads it rather as denoting a *process of totalisation*, not an achieved state. In this sense Fredric Jameson's reading in *The Political Unconscious* seems a very valuable re-reading of Lukács' concept, though I must add that he does not locate it, as I have done, in terms of desire:

Here Marxism is no doubt implied as that thinking which knows

no boundaries of this kind[i.e., ideological "strategies of containment"], and which is *infinitely totalisable* [emphasis added], but the ideological critique does not depend on some dogmatic or "positive" conception of Marxism as a system. Rather it is simply the place of an *imperative to totalise* [emphasis added] . . . . Thus understood, Lukács' critical conception of the "totality" may immediately be transformed into an instrument of narrative analysis, by way of attention to those narrative frames or containment strategies which seek to endow their objects of representation with formal unity.<sup>16</sup>

Jameson affirms that all post-structural philosophies "which explicitly repudiate such 'totalisations' in the name of difference, flux, dissemination, and heterogeneity" are thereby "second-degree or critical philosophies, which reconfirm the status of the concept of totality by their very reaction against it."<sup>17</sup> However, if "totality" really means the possibility of being "infinitely totalisable," proceeding from a desire or ultimately unfulfillable "imperative" to unify, it is difficult to see why such totality should have primacy over theories of "dissemination" etc. What remains persuasive in Jameson's assertion is not so much the assertion of *primacy* as the suggestion of a dialectical interdependence. It should be noted, moreover, that this restatement of totality as process assimilates (though Jameson might say 'subsumes') plurality into the discourse of Marxist literary criticism. I have left aside a discussion of Marxist theory as such, by arguing a distinction between Lukács' understanding of totality in Marxist theory (which asserts a certain positive theoretical grasp) and his concept of totality as a property of the novel form, which presupposes totality as that which cannot be grasped by the intellect and which can therefore only be understood as unfinalisable process.

It is unnecessary to rehearse here Lukács' well-known argument on the lost totality of the world of the epic, precariously reconquered through the form of the novel. But it is necessary to my argument to point out that this involves a theory of mediation based on form and not on language. By implication, the language of the epic escapes from the curse of mediation. As for the novel, which embraces the diversity of the fragmented world, Lukács presents this diversity in itself as the unmediated reflection of the reified world, and assigns to totality a higher state, the mediation which makes the essence accessible to (synthesising) intelligibility. Insofar as mediation is itself the sign of a "fallen" world, Lukács' nostalgia for epic immediacy could very well be interpreted as a nostalgia for the vanished illusions of bourgeois

empiricism. But another possibility also opens up in Lukács' discourse: the transcendent totality is a centred one which has displaced the *true* totality of "life" which properly speaking can have no centre, and the conception of "genre" becomes the authoritative organiser of intelligibility at the level of "essence":

This is not a value judgment but an *a priori* definition of genre: *the totality of life resists any attempt to find a transcendental centre within it and refuses any of its constituent cells the right to dominate it.* (Emphasis added) Only when a subject, far removed from all life and from the empirical which is necessarily posited together with life, becomes enthroned in the pure heights of essence, when it has become nothing but the carrier of transcendental synthesis, can it contain all the conditions for totality within its own structure and transform its own limitations into the frontiers of the world. But such a subject cannot write an epic: the epic *is* life, immanence, the empirical. Dante's *Paradiso* is closer to the *essence* of life (emphasis added) than Shakespeare's exuberant richness.<sup>18</sup>

Lukács' own discourse contains an inner drama here. In order to theorise the synthesising closure of the novel (itself posited as an ambiguous subjectivity overcoming an alienated and dispersed consciousness which is the lower Otherness of itself), Lukács has to theorise briefly an opposite, a paradoxical centreless totality which lies outside his own definitions of the intelligible. This centreless, non-intelligible totality of "life" is nevertheless absolutely necessary to the activities of synthesising form. By Lukács' own definition it cannot be theorised, but neither can it be ignored by the theory. This is because the theory considers that the purposes of its own activities are cognate with those of the artistic form itself, namely the construction of a totality in the sphere of essence. If we view this in the terms of Lukács' own theory we have a nostalgia for the real totality necessarily absent from present consciousness. But if we note the necessity of this untheorisable centreless totality to the theory itself, then Lukács' discourse appears to be locked into a permanent repression of a polymorphous openness which still finds expression through the fissures of his own theory. Thus there is a magical moment in Lukács' theorising of the novel form, when the form acquires the capacity to express a totality which lies beyond the tensions which up till that moment are said to constitute the genre:

This is the paradox of the subjectivity of the great epic, its 'throwing away in order to win': creative subjectivity becomes lyrical, *but, exceptionally, the subjectivity which simply accepts, which humbly transforms itself into a purely receptive organ of the world, can partake of the grace of having the whole revealed to it.* [Emphasis added] This is the leap that Dante made between the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia*, that Goethe made between *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister*, the leap that Cervantes made when, becoming silent himself, he let the cosmic humour of *Don Quixote* become heard; by contrast, Sterne's and Jean-Paul's ringing voices offer no more than reflexions of a world-fragment which is merely subjective and therefore limited, narrow and arbitrary.<sup>19</sup>

It is certainly true that in Bakhtin's work there is an echo of these themes in the contrast between lyrical "monologism" and novelistic "polylingualism," but in Bakhtin's case the grounding of these ideas in a theory of polylingual social discourse questions authoritative centredness in both the social and the formal artistic sphere, and links the novel form to the sociality of language.<sup>20</sup> But in terms of Lukács' theory, the capacity of the novel form to transcend its own subjective distance from the inexpressible totality is indeed a categorical "leap" that cannot be explained at all. For it is not an historical leap on the Hegelian pattern; it is accomplished by form. It is a leap that Lukács expresses in ethical terms, which we can paraphrase as an 'exceptional humility which earns the grace of total revelation.' This could also be glossed as "negative capability" without necessarily becoming more comprehensible. The leap into this negative capability still remains "exceptional," a miracle of art. Lukács calls it "exceptional" because it transcends the terms of his theory, but at the same time it is an exception which founds the genre anew, as his major examples make clear. It should be stressed that for the theory prior to this moment it is the activity of the artistic subjectivity that gives rise to the "constructed totality" of the work of art. Here however in re-achieving epic totality in the novel form, this subjectivity categorically transforms itself in a manner which the theory cannot account for. At this moment it is in reality Lukács' discourse that makes a categorical leap across an untheorised gap, in a gesture that is similar perhaps to what deconstructionists theorise as an "aporia." In order to give a theoretical account of the novel's capacity to achieve a totality which lies beyond the restricted horizon of the relationship of the subject to that totality (unknowable in itself), Lukács is driven

momentarily to undermine the category of subjectivity as severed from social totality, upon which his own theory of the novel form has rested until this moment. It is a brief but necessary admission of the limits of his own theory. Certainly, in terms of Hegel's dialectics, this move could be represented as an historical reintegration. The release from the limited horizon of imprisoning subjectivity could be thought of as the transcendence of alienation. However, Lukács' scheme is not historical in this sense but formal. It is the novel form, born of alienated subjectivity, which is also at the same moment said to be founded by a transcendence of subjectivity. What Lukács lacks is a theory that could explicitly overcome the dichotomy of subjectivity and social totality, not in the utopian past or future but in the actual discourse of the novel. Bakhtin's theory of the inner dialogue as constituting individual consciousness within the dialogic conflicts and corroborations of social discourse (and of the novel as the reflexivity of this social consciousness) offers a resolution to Lukács' dilemma. But the price to be paid would be the abandonment of the precious myth of a lost immediate totality of the epic world, whose reattainment is the goal of both history and writing. It is a significant measure of the difference between them that for Bakhtin Dostoyevsky's polylingualism becomes representative of the novel, because it marks the end of the lyrical monologism of his immediate predecessors, whereas Lukács also responds to Dostoyevsky's formal escape from the dominance of subjectivism but to draw the opposite conclusion, that Dostoyevsky wrote epics that fall outside the theory of the novel:

It is in the works of Dostoyevsky that this new world, remote from any struggle against what actually exists [!] is drawn for the first time simply as seen reality. That is why he, and the form he created, lie outside the scope of this book. Dostoyevsky did not write novels . . . . He belongs to the new world. Only formal analysis can show whether he is already the Homer or Dante of that world. . . .<sup>21</sup>

For Lukács, Dostoyevsky hovers on the brink of a new epic totality in which "man exists as man, neither as a social being nor as an isolated, unique, pure, and therefore abstract interiority."<sup>22</sup> Where Bakhtin sees this as a consequence of dialogism, for Lukács it stands rather awkwardly near the end of history, as the reconquest of epic totality beyond the form-giving dualism which constitutes the novel genre.

## III

In his relatively late essay *Epic and Novel* (1941), Bakhtin seems at first sight to operate within the same parameters as Lukács but with a reversed valorisation, as noted by Holquist.<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin observes

The epic wholeness of an individual disintegrates in a novel . . . .  
A crucial tension develops between the external and internal man,  
and as a result the subjectivity of the individual becomes an  
object of experimentation and representation.<sup>24</sup>

This problematic decentred individual is part of a historical liberation of discourse from the ideological closure of the "monological" world of the epic. If for Bakhtin "in a novel the individual acquires the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image,"<sup>25</sup> this is because Bakhtin has already extensively theorised the basis of the novel as social heteroglossia. Voloshinov's theory of the linguistic sign as penetrated with the multiple and often conflicting meanings engendered by social discourse is central to Bakhtin's critique of both systematic linguistics and the notion of autonomous subjectivity, whether at the conscious or subconscious level.<sup>26</sup> For Bakhtin the emergence of the novel is itself the sign and instrument of linguistic consciousness of the polylingual (and therefore inwardly dialogised) real world:

In the novel, literature possesses an organ for perceiving the heterodox nature of its own speech. Heteroglossia-in-itself becomes in the novel, *and thanks to the novel* (emphasis added) heteroglossia-for-itself: languages are implicated in each other and begin to exist *for* each other . . . literary language becomes a dialogue of languages that both know about and understand each other.<sup>27</sup>

The contrast with the epic world is historically based insofar as Bakhtin, like Lukács, places the epic in a pre-novelistic closed world, but it is paradigmatic too because for Bakhtin novelistic discourse is that which undoes the concern with origins and fixed teleologies, the ideological underpinnings of the epic form. For Bakhtin the formal distinction between novel and epic is the crucial point, and this obviates from the outset any notion of the novel as the formal aspiration to the integrated unity of the epic. It should be noted that the formal distinction is significantly asymmetrical: the novel is the only

genre "younger than writing and the book."<sup>28</sup> Though its polylingualism arises from the interactive conflicts of social discourse, it becomes self-reflexive through written literature. The canonical authority of genre is thus undermined through intertextuality understood here in the sense of the form of reflexive consciousness made possible by writing. Bakhtin begins his formal distinction of epic from novel by a remark which, despite its simplicity, undercuts much of Lukács' theory: the epic, he notes, was always "a poem *about* the past."<sup>29</sup> Thus he starts not from the history of the genre but from a formal observation upon the nature of its discourse. What characterizes the epic is the relationship of the speaker to his utterance, not the actual historical moment at which the utterance was made. These assumptions are much more familiar now, since Beneveniste's theories on énonciation have influenced literary criticism through Todorov, Genette et al., than at the time of Bakhtin's writing. Epic distance is therefore for Bakhtin a formal, though ideologically significant, quality of epic discourse; whereas for Lukács, whose thinking aspires to the recovery of epic presence, the distance is the mark of a gap in existence which the work of art, anticipating history, will close again. Bakhtin spells out the consequence of his rooting of epic time in the nature of epic discourse:

Whatever its origins, the epic as it has come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose constitutive feature is the transferral of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times. The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic world view, "beginning," "first," "founder," "ancestor," "that which occurred earlier" and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorised* temporal categories, and valorised to an extraordinary degree.<sup>30</sup>

For Bakhtin, the defining characteristic of the epic as a fixed genre lies in this temporal axis whereby "it is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located. This boundary, consequently, is immanent in the form of the epic itself and is felt and heard in its every word."<sup>31</sup> What is of major importance to Bakhtin is that the epic is *formally* rooted in a non-recoverable past:

The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past, but also on its own terms and by its

own standards; *it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it.* [emphasis added]<sup>32</sup>

Since the comparison is between two discourses, epic and novelistic, it is particularly interesting to note that re-thinking and re-evaluation are activities formally made possible by the advent of novelistic discourse. Bakhtin thus restates his earlier arguments on the active dialogism of the novel which breaks down the canonical authority of all generic closure. The novelistic is that form of literary discourse which valorises the dialogic relationship between reader and text, through the same relativising process that places the “depicting” language of the “formal author” on the same plane as the “depicted” language of the hero. Underlying this is the formal “revolution in the hierarchy of times” that the dialogic engagement brings about. Bakhtin’s argument is based, formally speaking, on a distinction between times as represented in the rival discourses of epic and novel. This enables him to reject the earlier debates on the origins of the epic as not pertinent to this formal question. Here one can see him as a Russian Formalist. But it is most important to note that the essence of his distinction between epic time and novelistic time is that only novelistic time is truly historical. This is because it is open, through the dialogue with the reader (which is constitutive of the novel form) to the endless process of becoming, the “unfinalisedness” which its orientation to the present engenders:

The present in its so-called “wholeness” (although it is of course never whole) is in essence and in principle inconclusive [so much for totality — JH]; by its very nature it demands continuation; it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes. . . . The temporal model of the world changes: it becomes a world *where there is no first word (no ideal word) and the final word has not been spoken.* For the first time in artistic-ideological consciousness, *time and the world become historical.* [emphases added]<sup>33</sup>

Thus for Bakhtin, as arguably for Derrida too, to undermine “historical” teleology is actually to *become historical* at the level of “artistic-ideological” discourse. Bakhtin considers how all objects represented within novelistic discourse become radically historicised in this sense:

No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present. . . . And in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability of the object is lost; its sense and significance are renewed as the context continues to unfold.<sup>34</sup>

Thus novelistic discourse has introduced re-reading into the world, and our re-reading is historical consciousness. This is where Bakhtin's "formal" distinction of novel from epic, is also historical in the same sense in which he designates the novel itself as historical. That is to say, Bakhtin's interpretive reading of epic time is not a reading from within, on the terms of the epic itself (which is what Lukács attempts); Bakhtin re-reads the epic in terms only made possible by novelistic discourse. Only thus could the epic's absolute terms be re-read as relative to patriarchal ideology and, through this critical relativisation be placed within an intelligible history. If this is so, to wish to return to the absolute time of the epic (together with the other ensuing integrations) is also to wish to escape from the openness to the future of historical time. Unlike Lukács, Bakhtin's contrast between novelistic and epic form allows epic form itself to be understood historically, in relationship to specific values, whereas Lukács places it in a categorically anterior position. Bakhtin's "novelistic" re-reading of the epic form does not mean the naive reinterpretation of all epics as though they were novels. On the contrary, it means a sharper historical awareness of the ideological implications of epic discourse; this in turn means an embattled awareness of the implications of the tendencies of a return to epic styles and epic history (i.e., non-history) within contemporary culture. At this point Bakhtin's literary scholarship denounces all the monumental certainties of his epoch, and his theory of language and literary discourse sets historical consciousness against officialised history and its most sophisticated apologists.

If epic time can be re-read from the standpoint of the novelistic, then specific epics can also be opened up to historical re-reading. A recent and brilliant example of this would be Eugene Vance's reading of the *Chanson de Roland*, in which the second half of the epic is convincingly read as the tragic critique in the age of writing of the oral, memory-based values of the Roncesvaux epic tale and its heroes.<sup>35</sup> Vance employs largely Derridean terms, but makes a certain use of the Bakhtin "dialogic" too. The remarkable achievement of this apparently "formal" reading of the epic's discourse is that it places the *Chanson de Roland* precisely at particular historical juncture (not a date)

where the impossibility of epic closure becomes the theme of this most formally perfected (one might say, most written) of the medieval epics<sup>36</sup>

But if epic discourse can be re-read in terms of its ideological and historical implications, and therefore in terms of contradictions so can epic theory. One of the themes of this paper is that Lukács is not simply the reverse of Bakhtin on the same issues. But rather that Bakhtin enables us to re-read Lukács, not only in terms of the transcendental closure to which he aspired but also in terms of Lukács' valorisation of unresolved contradiction which the totalising theory never quite represses. This ambiguous tension in Lukács' discourse itself can be illustrated in a well-known passage from the *Theory of the Novel*:

The circle within which the Greeks led their metaphysical life was smaller than ours: that is why we cannot, as part of our life place ourselves inside it. Or rather, the circle whose closed nature was the transcendental essence of their lives has, for us, been broken; *we cannot breathe in a closed world. We have invented the productivity of the spirit:* that is why the primeval images have irrevocably lost their objective self-evidence for us and *our thinking follows the endless path of an approximation that is never fully accomplished. We have invented the creation of forms:* that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete. *We have found the only true substance within ourselves . . .* that is why our essence had to become a postulate for ourselves and thus create a still deeper, still more menacing abyss, between us and our own selves. [Emphases added]<sup>37</sup>

Of course, the normal accurate reading of this passage would be to explain it in terms of the stages whereby the mind is alienated from its own products and from its essence. This reading is affirmed by Lukács' own rhetoric whereby the apparently positive terms "the productivity of the spirit," "the creation of forms," and "the only true substance" give rise to the negatives of alienation. Lukács' rhetoric would require us to accept its own movement as that of the actual (and irreversible) movement of history. The fall into history can be glossed by us now as a fall into the endless movement of signifiers, denoting the loss of an original presence: "our thinking follows the endless path of an approximation that is never fully accomplished." But the logic of the movement from plenitude to negativity is itself thrown into question, however briefly, by Lukács' own discourse: "*The circle . . . has*

been broken; we cannot breathe in a closed world." This admission is very important since it means that for man within history, or within the play of signifiers (another way of expressing the "unfinalisedness" of discourse), a totality would be the kiss of death. What is admitted here is that totality (despite the theory that desires it) has also ceased to be desirable. Totality is not only lost, but its loss (whose negativity Lukács continues officially to deplore) has itself changed into a positive term, for as long as history lasts. Bakhtin's perspective enables us to detect the "inner dialogue" of Lukács' discourse and to understand its dialectical and disruptive relationship to its own rhetorical order and its own concepts of closure. We can also understand more precisely thereby Lukács' dialogic relationship to the more official, socially approved, discourse of closure in his society. The claim of this paper then, is that to re-read Lukács in terms made possible by Bakhtin's "dialogic" theory (rather than in terms of the epic closure of his own theory) is to reveal more fully the rich unfinalisedness that vitally informs his practise despite his desire for stability. It is, in short, to do him justice.

## Notes

1. M. Holquist, Introduction to M.M. Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (Texas UP, 1981), p. xxxii.
2. G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 27.
3. G. Lukács, 1967 Introduction, *ibid.*, p. xx.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
6. B. Brecht, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. F. Jameson (London: Verso Editions, 1977), pp. 68-85.
7. T. Adorno, *ibid.*, pp. 151-76.
8. G. Lukács, "Balzac: Lost Illusions," in *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin, 1972), p. 55.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
11. F. Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton UP, 1971), pp. 204-05.
12. R. Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (London: Methuen 1980), pp. 77-78.
13. G. Lukács, "Balzac: Lost Illusions," *op cit.*, pp. 63-64.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
15. G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 13.
16. F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Cornell UP, 1981), pp. 53-54.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
18. G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 54.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.
20. I have argued this more fully in "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Critique of Systematicity,"

*Literary Theory Today* (Hong Kong UP, 1981). See also: Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (Methuen, 1979); and Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Columbia, 1980).

21. G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp. 152-53.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
23. M. Holquist, *op cit.*, p. xxxii.
24. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 37.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
26. V. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973); also see his *Freudianism* (New York, 1976).
27. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 400. 'Heteroglossia,' or 'polylingualism translates *raznorechie*' or the conceptually close 'raznoyazychie.'
28. *Epic and Novel*, p. 3.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
31. *Ibid.*, pp.15-16.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Eugene Vance, "Roland and the Poetics of Memory," in *Textual Strategies*.
36. Where there is a reference to present utterance *within epic discourse*, this functions to dissociate the finalised epic past from the momentarily foregrounded present of the narrator. For example:
  - i) Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris  
 Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit  
 litora, . . .  
 multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem  
 inferretque deos Latio (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1, i-v)
  - or
  - ii) "Deus", dist li reis, "si penuse est ma vie!"  
 Pluret des oilz, sa barbe blanche turet.  
 Ci falt la geste que Turolodus declinet. (*La Chanson de Roland*, 4,000-3)

However, as Vance has argued (note 35 *op. cit.*), the epic discourse of the *Chanson de Roland* is destabilised in the latter part which focuses on Charlemagne after the heroic epic which places Roland and epic values at the centre. Having established the importance of the "commemorative" to medieval ideological stasis, Vance shows that the *Chanson de Roland* "is not only a product but also a drama and even a tragedy of memory" (*op. cit.*, p. 379). To this we might tentatively add that even at the opening, the references to the fictional time of narration no longer function purely dissociatively but also as shifters in Jakobson's ambiguous sense:

Carles li reis, nostre emperere magnes  
 Set anz tuz plains ad estét en Espagne etc.

Thus the discourse too is perhaps ambiguously oriented towards the epic mode of narration. On the other hand, Virgil's discourse is so firmly rooted in epic time as Bakhtin defines it, that not only is the present utterance merely its agent but also even the future of the narrative is emphasised as already completed in the past. This is evident in the prophetic opening lines quoted above, but its ideological functioning is most apparent in Book VI of course:

“tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento  
 (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,  
 parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.”

Sic pater Anchises . . . (VI, 851-4)

The underworld contains the already completed future, whose significance is spelled out for the poet and for the hero by their common founding father, Anchises. This rooting of the future in the past is precisely what is meant by destiny. The important point is not that manifest destiny is exemplified in Augustus Caesar, but that epic discourse imposes a teleological closure upon history. Nothing can escape the future perfect tense. It is not a question of flattery but of ideology at the level of the discourse. It is because of the different modalities of time in the novel and the epic that Bakhtin says that prophecy is proper to the epic whereas prediction, specified as ‘an eternal re-thinking and re-evaluating’ is proper to the narrative time of the novel (*Epic and Novel*, p. 31). Furthermore, the rooting of all time in the words of the fathers can be related to social hierarchy (ibid., p. 15). To be “pius” or “filial” is to hierarchise time, to suppress the present, and therefore to preclude true historical consciousness.

37. G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp. 33-34.

