

Response

Lukács's and Bakhtin's theories of the novel could be compared in different ways. Since both define the novel against the epic, one workman-like procedure would simply be to set forth their remarks on novel and epic, together with a suitably critical commentary. Thus one could show that Lukács begins with the fiction of the Greek epic as a golden moment of wholeness, before history began, when "being and destiny, adventure and accomplishment, life and essence"¹ were one. History introduced alienation, making the epic mode impossible. In its place is the novel, born of history, suckled on alienation; less than the epic, because of its fragmentariness, but also more than the epic because of its responsiveness to historical complexity. That the novel cannot achieve epic wholeness, without the very basis of society being transformed, is a source of pessimism for Lukács; on the other hand, irony is for him the novel's one great redeeming feature. By contrast, for Bakhtin, the relationship of novel to epic is far less ambivalent. Bakhtin sees the epic as essentially one mode of discourse among others. It is a mode of discourse that is not *before* history but that *avoids* history, the constitutive feature of epic discourse being its "transferral of a represented world into the past."² The plenitude of the epic therefore stems from the fact that it treats itself as a finished-off, or dead, genre, closed within its own generic laws. This characterisation of the epic now allows Bakhtin to describe the novel as a "genre-in-the-making," committed to process and modernity: "The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it."³ There is here none of the ambiguities about the novel and modernity that cloud Lukács's final remarks on Dostoyevsky in *Theory of the Novel*. Instead of the pessimism redeemed only by irony that we find in Lukács, in Bakhtin we find *laughter* given a central role. Laughter allows the novel as a genre to question the very idea of genre, authority and monologism. As Bakhtin puts it in a memorable aphorism: "When the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline."⁴ It is possible therefore to show that while the major terms in Lukács and Bakhtin – epic,

novel, history, modernity — are similar, they are inter-related in very different ways in the arguments of these two theorists.

To table the differences and similarities between Lukács and Bakhtin is useful, but perhaps a little obvious. Jonathan Hall, in his very challenging paper, has chosen a much more interesting, if also more risky, approach. He has chosen to re-read Lukács with the help of Bakhtin; i.e., to give a strong reading, or what some critics today would call a misreading, of Lukács. In this way, he initiates a dialogue on the novel between two great critical minds that never took place, but which should have. Most of the comparisons between Lukács and Bakhtin just mentioned are present in his paper, but not in the form of two etherised patients on a table. Hall carefully establishes “totality” as the central concept in Lukács’s thinking, after which the issues are focused around this concept and around what seems at first like the rival Bakhtinian concept of the dialogic.

The conclusions that Hall arrives at are refreshingly provocative, nothing less than a carnivalization of Lukács. He argues that in Lukács totality is not so much a principle of closure as it is a desire for closure. In situating totality in desire, Hall turns totality almost into that very elusive Lacanian entity, the *objet petit a*, i.e., the lost object that is always desired but never attained. For example, he says that to make sense of Lukács’ demand for totality, we must read it as “*desire for totality which is therefore forever rooted in its non-realisation.*” In fact, Hall argues that realisation of totality would indeed be “the kiss of death” and that Lukács has a paradoxical awareness of this, which comes out again and again through “the fissures of his own theory.” Totality lost is therefore a positive state in Lukács; i.e., Lukács only succeeds when he fails. Hall therefore introduces a little heteroglossia back into Lukács’s magisterial discourse, which goes some way towards explaining Lukács’s staying power as a critic.

However, I have two problems with this paper. Firstly, it seems to me that in this challenging re-reading of Lukács, something strange happens to Bakhtin. Lukács and Bakhtin begin to switch places. While the “rich unfinalisedness” of Lukács’s practice is being demonstrated, Bakhtin’s “dialogic”, through a strange logic, becomes the law, the final word, patriarchal discourse. In this Lukács / Bakhtin double act, Bakhtin is surprisingly made to play the straight man; so straight in fact that little mention is made of Bakhtin on laughter. While Lukács is being re-read with skeptical insight, my impression is that Bakhtin is merely being proselytized; his text is not “dialogised.” Instead, there seems to be some attempt, in the scattered

references to Kristeva, Barthes and Derrida, to assimilate Bakhtin to some version of post-structuralism, which is itself a project that poses immense problems.

The only other problem I have with Hall's brilliant paper concerns his claim to have done justice to Lukács's concept of totality. Hall sees what he calls Lukács's "desire for totality" as synonymous with his "desire for closure." The question I want to raise is whether indeed in Lukács totality can be taken as synonymous with closure. Interestingly enough, Hall himself, perhaps inadvertently, introduces a powerful counter-polemicist – in Fredric Jameson. He cites Jameson's interpretation of Lukács's concept of totality and calls it surprisingly "a very valuable re-reading." This is surprising because what Jameson says about totality in Lukács, on the face of it, goes directly counter to what Hall is arguing. Jameson shows firstly that in Lukács totality is a critical and negative concept, which makes no claims to everreaching a final state of truth; and secondly, that it is used precisely as an argument *against* forms of ideological closure that Jameson calls "strategies of containment."⁵ Jameson argues, with some display of intelligence, that in Lukács totality is not closure, not even "desire for closure," but rather its opposite; and it seems to me that it is counter-claims like these that Hall will have to contend with, if he is to convince us of the justice of his reading.

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Notes

1. Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 30.
2. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 13.
3. *Ibid*, p. 7.
4. *Ibid*, p. 15.
5. See Fredric Jameson *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 52-57.

