

LUKÁCS, BAKHTIN  
AND THE SOCIOLOGY  
OF THE NOVEL

For the last two centuries the novel has been the predominant literary genre; but the generic identity of the novel is far from established. Attempts to define the novel have focussed on formal features of particular types of texts, with the result that definitions of “the” novel have merely canonized one or another of the innumerable novelistic manifestations—*Bildungsroman*, eighteenth-century English novels, novels of the kind George Eliot or Henry James or Marcel Proust or Feodor Dostoevsky wrote, etc. By basing themselves upon such formal attributes, such definitions exclude a vast number of potential texts on essentially normative grounds. Further, the history of the novel has outgrown and contradicted those conceptions; no sooner than a theory has been formulated, the novel itself has moved forward, adapting to changing conditions and substituting for those formal properties a set of new ones, thus rendering the theories obsolete and revealing the inadequacy of formalist categories to define the genre. This predicament is certainly not unique to the theory of the novel but rather a necessary concomitant of any theoretical project; what makes any

attempt to theorize about the novel particularly vulnerable is the genre's resistance to formalist analysis, its lack of precisely those organizing categories upon which a formalist theory of any genre can be built.

Sociological approaches to the novel are not without their own problems. In spite of the sophistication they have demonstrated in recent years, they continue, for the most part, to be bound to positivism and mechanistic determinism, looking for correspondences between the structure of the novel and the structure of society. Further, a tendency to draw upon metaphysical concepts of the romantic tradition to hypostatize a past social structure and its aesthetic forms of expression has also proved to be an obstacle in posing the problem of the novel in distinct terms.

What neither the formalist nor the dominant sociological approach has been able to offer is a theory capable of advancing our understanding of the novel, not merely in one of its principal forms, but in its uniqueness as a genre in relation to other, canonical genres, in relation to the literary system and, finally, to the cultural system as a whole. It will be argued in the present paper that the inadequacy of the existing formalist and sociological theories is largely due to their search for abstract formal and social characteristics and their refusal to view the novel as a part of the dynamics of a literary system. After a discussion of the Hegelian-Lukácsian model and Lucien Goldmann's sociological elaboration upon it, it will be argued that it is in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin that we have elements of a sociology of the novel which, though formulated like the theories of Lukács and Goldmann within the framework of a historical and materialist theory of social and cultural formations, is yet free from all Hegelian traces of the quest for an idealist essence of the novel and can offer us an understanding of the systemic function of the novel as well as account for the baffling resilience of the genre. By grounding itself in an approach which emphasises the genre's distinct relation to social reality, Bakhtin's project for a historical or sociological poetics of the novel serves to refocus attention from particular features of given texts as defining categories for the genre to a structuring impulse common to them all.

## II

Hegel's definition of the novel as "the modern bourgeois epic" (*die moderne bürgerliche Epopoe*)<sup>1</sup> has provided elements of both the liberal and some Marxist theories of the novel.

The liberal theories attribute the development of the novel to the rise of the bourgeoisie and modern capitalism and to the concomitant growth of the ideology of liberal individualism. One version of the theory, stated by George Steiner, argues that "in its moral and psychological focus, in the technology of its production and distribution, in the domestic privacy, leisure and reading habits which it required from its audience, the novel matches precisely the great age of the industrial, mercantile bourgeoisie".<sup>2</sup> Another version, elaborated in the writings of Lionel Trilling<sup>3</sup> and W.J. Harvey<sup>4</sup>, suggests a more complex link between the philosophy of liberalism and the form of the novel: the novel has, according to Harvey, as its controlling centre "the acknowledgement of the plenitude, diversity and individuality of human beings in society, together with the belief that such characteristics are good as ends in themselves" and it delights in the multiplicity of existence and allows for a plurality of beliefs and values.<sup>5</sup> The most systematic exploration of the liberal theory is to be found in Ian Watt's widely influential study, *The Rise of the Novel*, which combines the two versions by positing a causal link between the development of the middle classes and the eighteenth-century English novel, suggesting that this class correlation is embodied in what he calls the "formal realism" of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. Watt defines "formal realism" in terms of the narrative technique necessary for "a full and authentic report of human experience" in which the novelist satisfies his readers "with such detail of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of time and place of their actions".<sup>6</sup> Thus the emphasis in the eighteenth-century English novel on the detail of the story, on extensive presentation rather than elegant concentration, and on the philosophy of indivi-

<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetik*, Band II, Frankfurt, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955, p. 452.

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, London, Faber and Faber, 1966, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, New York, Doubleday, 1954.

<sup>4</sup> W.J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1963, p. 33.

dualism (the secular creed of the middle classes).

This theory of the novel as essentially a bourgeois cultural product developed in the eighteenth century and brought to completion in the nineteenth has enjoyed widespread critical support. But it is evidently based on two questionable premises. First, it assumes, in all its versions, that the emergence of the novel in the eighteenth century also completely defined the genre, and that the novel as a genre is as such indissolubly linked with the liberal ideology of individualism. Steiner writes:

Following on the epic and verse-drama, the novel has been the third principal genre of Western literature. It expressed and, in part, shaped the habits and feelings and language of the Western bourgeoisie from Richardson to Thomas Mann. In it, the dreams and nightmares of the mercantile ethic, of middle-class privacy, and of the monetary-sexual conflicts and delights of industrial society have their monument. *With the decline of these ideals and habits into a phase of crisis and partial rout, this genre is losing much of its vital bearing.* (emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

And the decline of the nineteenth-century realistic convention amounts, for Lionel Trilling, to “the death of *the* novel” (emphasis added), and he gives expression to apocalyptic gloom:

It is impossible to talk about the novel nowadays without having in our minds the question of whether or not the novel is still a living form. Twenty-five years ago T.S. Eliot said that the novel comes to an end with Flaubert and James, and at about the same time Señor Ortega said much the same thing. This opinion is now heard on all sides. It is heard in conversation rather than read in formal discourse, for to insist on the death and moribundity of a great genre is an unhappy task which the critic will naturally avoid if he can, yet the opinion is now an established one and has a very considerable authority.<sup>8</sup>

While it must be said in fairness to Ian Watt that he is concerned in his book only with the *rise* of a particular form of novel, the liberal theory has read in his discussion of the emerging genre not just its rise but its fulfillment as well. The second, interrelated

<sup>7</sup> Steiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 421-422.

<sup>8</sup> Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

premise is that the novel had almost an absolute beginning in the eighteenth century, and that there were no novels before the rise of the bourgeoisie because there were no circulation libraries and no literate middle class in need of fictional entertainment. This reductive and simplistic account of the relationship between the novel and the bourgeoisie leads the liberal theory to totally ignore the long history of prose fiction before “the rise of the novel”.

Though he linked the novel to the bourgeoisie, Hegel himself, in his all too brief treatment of the novel in the *Aesthetik*,<sup>9</sup> conceived of the relation between inner *form* and external social conditions in dialectical, not mechanical, terms. The novel, for him, contains the richness and multiplicity of a total world and an epic representation of reality, but it lacks in the original poetic state of the world from which the true epic proceeds. The organic unity of purpose and community of the epic world having been dissipated by the systematization of social and scientific law, poetic wholes having been turned into parts in need of architectural support and outside elucidation, the primitive simplicity of objects of the Homeric world having been lost in a world of manufactured goods, the novel sets out a reality already ordered into prose. Yet the novel is the bourgeois epic for Hegel only in the sense that it strives for the lost unity, for poetry in life: the novel embodies the contradiction between the poetry of the heart and the prose of circumstances. This conflict can be resolved in two ways: either the character recognizes what is genuine and substantial in the world he has rebelled against, and reconciles himself to it in reality; or he rejects the prose of life and replaces it with a new reality related to beauty and art.

It is from these insights of Hegel that Georg Lukács builds up a theory of the genre in his seminal work, *Die Theorie des Romans*.<sup>10</sup>

### III

*Die Theorie des Romans* was written in the winter of 1914-1915 in the climate of “permanent despair over the state of the world”.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

<sup>10</sup> Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans*, Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1962; *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1971.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Lukács was in “process of turning from Kant to Hegel” and in this work he quits the domain of pure forms (to which he had confined himself in his earlier work, *Die Seele und die Formen*) to relate them to the world. The work offers a historico-philosophical view of the epic and the novel, and its philosophical basis remains the attitude of romantic anti-capitalism, so widely prevalent among the German intelligentsia around the turn of the century. It explores a sense of tragic doom founded on the irreparable inhumanity of capitalist society and the absence of any way out, at least for individuals.<sup>12</sup>

*Romantic anti-capitalism* is Lukács’ own term which refers to a wide spectrum of opposition to capitalism, whose roots go back to the romantic movement, but which acquired a new impetus in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Including such disparate figures as George Simmel, Max Weber, Thomas Mann, Stefan George and Ernst Toller, this attitude attacked capitalism for a variety of reasons, including machine-production, the modern division of labour, the depersonalization of individuals, the growth of large towns and the break-up of small communities and the inexorable growth of rational calculation.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, this attitude may be distinguished from earlier critiques of capitalism by the realization that capitalism had become an irreversible process. A nostalgia for earlier, traditional communities was now accompanied by a mood of resignation, a “tragic consciousness”. Michael Löwy, in his study of the complex itinerary of the early Lukács’ thinking, shows that overall there was a “feeling of ‘spiritual impotence’ when faced with an uncultured barbarian-civilized and vulgar-materialist ‘mass society’ ”.<sup>13</sup>

The young Lukács fully shared in these attitudes, and *Die Theorie des Romans* remains a classic statement of the nostalgia for a closed, harmonious and organic community. Like *Die Seele und die Formen*, it testifies to the potency of the themes of romantic anti-capitalism. The novel is treated as the paradigmatic genre of life under capitalism.

Lukács calls his study “a historico-philosophical essay on the

<sup>12</sup> Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács—From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Camiller, London, New Left Books, 1979, pp. 16-22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.

forms of great epic literature (*ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der grossen Epik*), and the novel is seen as a form of “the great epic”; it is one objectification of the great epic, the other being, of course, epic poetry. The work falls into two parts. The first part counterposes the epic and the novel, or more precisely, the age of the epic and modern bourgeois society, in terms of the concept of *totality*, a concept which is central to Lukács’ thought in all its phases and by which he means a whole, both in art as well as life, within which everything is completed and nothing is excluded. Though Lukács is concerned with what he called a “historicizing of aesthetic categories”<sup>14</sup> and seeks to put the epic poetry of Homer—the only true epic for him—in relation to its epoch, he does not discuss the *social* conditions under which those poems were produced, and considers instead the general intellectual attitudes that he identified as typical of the age of the epic.

For Lukács, the age of the epic is typified by the fact that it does not yet have any conception of the inner world, or any conception of the soul’s search for itself. It is characterized by its “self-certainty”; life and essence are identical notions, and the relations and creations of man are just as substantial as his personality.<sup>15</sup> Modern capitalist society, at the same time as it has immensely enlarged the world of man, has also established a gulf between the self and the world, which did not exist in the Greek society of the era of the epic. The meaning of Greek life lay in its totality, which was all-inclusive, and there was nothing which ever pointed to any higher reality outside it.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, modern man, unlike the man of Homer’s epoch, is not at home in the universe; and the novel, as a literary form, is an expression of a “transcendental homelessness” (*transzendente Obdachlosigkeit*)<sup>17</sup> of an individual left on his own in his search for meaning. It is the epic of an age for which totality (and therefore, the dominant homogeneity of the world, as well as human substantiality, and the substantial relation between man and his products) has become only a problem and an aspiration. In the age of the epic such totality is given to art and does not have to be established by the art-work itself.

<sup>14</sup> Lukács, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

Lukács draws a further distinction between the “extensive totality” of life and the “intensive totality” of essence, which helps him elucidate his conception of the nature of the novel in contrast to both epic poetry and drama. While the epic and the novel give form to the extensive totality, the drama gives form to the intensive totality. As drama portrays soul in its bare essence and the chaotic nature of life is alien to it, it continues to exist in the modern capitalist society. Unlike the epic, which is concerned with immanent meaning, drama is concerned with essence which, being alien to life, has survived in the modern society. The nature of modern drama is certainly different from that of ancient drama, but the relevant point for Lukács’ argument is that the drama can still find a world which is all-embracing and self-enclosed.

As both the epic and the novel give form to extensive totality, and totality, once the meaning of Greek life, has been destroyed by the modern age, it remains only an aim and an aspiration in modern society. The novel is the epic of a society in which the extensive totality of life has ceased to be sensuously given, but it yet seeks to discover and construct a totality of life. It is still disposed toward totality. The basic intention of the novel finds its objective form in the psychology of its heroes, who are *seekers*. While the hero of the epic is the community, an organic totality, the novelistic hero is an individual estranged from the world, and in Lukács’ celebrated characterization, a *problematic individual*. What he seeks is self-knowledge, but even when it has been achieved, the division between “is” and “ought” is not transcended. All that he discovers is that the highest that life can offer is a mere glimpse of meaning, and that meaning can never wholly penetrate reality.

The second part of Lukács’ study offers a typology of novel form in terms of a fissure (*Zerrissenheit*) between the individual and the community, an insurmountable schism between the hero and the world. Lukács identifies two principal types of the novel, based upon simple division that, in the modern age, the soul may find itself either narrower or wider than the external world. By the narrowness of the soul Lukács does not mean the solitary and vulnerable existence of man in a world abandoned by God—that indeed is typical of the novel-form in general—but a certain manifestation of man’s solitude: a man so obsessed with an idea that he mistakes it to be the only reality. Though reality does not



correspond to his notion of it, he feels neither doubt nor despair, and his life as portrayed in the novel is simply one of action, a series of adventures that he himself has chosen.

Lukács takes *Don Quixote* to be the paradigmatic example of this kind of novel. Beginning with a consideration of the novels of chivalry which Cervantes was parodying and the medieval epics of chivalry from which these novels had descended, Lukács argues that though Don Quixote's ideal is very clear to him, it is wholly lacking in any relation to reality. The world has become meaningless and man has become a solitary individual, and the only possibility of finding any meaning is within his own soul. In an age in which religion is already dying and there is a great confusion of values, Lukács takes Cervantes to be showing that heroism must become grotesque and faith must appear to be madness.

With the world growing more and more prosaic, the narrowed soul has either to give up all relation to life or cease to be rooted in the world of ideals. The novel-form, after *Don Quixote*, loses all visible relation to the world of ideals. It becomes a purely psychological phenomenon and the central character of the novel becomes negative. This negativity, however, requires a positive counterpart which, in the case of Dickens, means surrounding the hero's compromise with bourgeois society with the lustre of poetry, and which, in the case of Balzac, is provided by the purely human external world.

The other main type of novel that Lukács recognises, that in which the soul is wider than the external world, is the novel of disillusioned romanticism. Being more or less self-sufficient, the soul, in this type of the novel, regards itself as the only true reality. There is a tendency towards passivity, as the soul does not have to translate itself into action, and the hero in this type of novel is distinguished not by what he does but by what he experiences. But in this encounter with reality, it soon becomes evident that he must fail in his endeavours, thus leading to disillusionment.

After analysing these two types of novel, Lukács discusses the works of Goethe and Tolstoy. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is seen as an attempted synthesis of the two main types, and Tolstoy is seen as occupying a dual position. Viewed in respect of its form, Tolstoy's work appears to be the conclusion of European romanticism, but in some great moments of his work there is a

reality revealed to man which, if extended to form a totality, could have produced a revived form of epic. Such a totality, however, cannot be created because the novel is bound to a specific era of divided reality.

The novel is thus a problematic genre for Lukács in a double sense: first, it expresses the problematic character of both the structures and the man of its age; and secondly, and as a result, its mode of expression, its whole construction is fully in conformity with unaccomplished (unaccomplishable, according to Lukács) tasks or problems. The form of the novel, then, becomes a function of the triangular relationship between man, world and values, and *Die Theorie des Romans* is limited to the analysis of the novel form as a significant essence which it scarcely relates to the historical conditions in which a particular form appeared and developed. A few passages allude, not to real history, but to a transcendental process of Becoming to which would correspond an essential succession of “forms”: epic, tragedy, philosophy, novel. Furthermore, considering the novel as a structural degradation of the epic, and viewing its different forms as atemporal essences which could appear in any period of historical development, Lukács does not rule out the possibility of the reappearance of the epic, possibly with the novels of Dostoevsky, with a reference to whom the study concludes.<sup>18</sup>

As Ferenc Feher has pointed out in a rigorous critique of the scale of values and the philosophy of history implicit in this theory of the novel,<sup>19</sup> to claim that the novel is problematic implies that we have a criterion of what is non-problematic, and the common model among all historical observers and hostile critics of the novel (Goethe, Schiller, Hegel and Lukács) is the idealization of the unmediated, communal, organic and homogeneous world as the source of the “perfect” nature, the epic. Feher demystifies this model by pointing out that those “ideal” societies were closed social structures based not only on slave economy but also on a rigid, elitist and hierarchical set of social values, and that the epic heroes were only stereotypes, acting out divinely preordained roles in an unchanging society. The novel, on the other hand, with all its “formlessness”, “prosaic” nature and lack of fixed rules contains

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>19</sup> Ferenc Feher, “Is the Novel Problematic?” *Telos*, No. 15, 1973, p. 48.

all the categories derived from capitalism, the first social formation based on “purely social” and no longer “natural” life-forms. Far from representing “the melancholy of the adult state” (*die Melancholie des Erwachsenseins*), the modern novel portrays the true humanization of man and society, its “formlessness” and “prosaic” character corresponding structurally to the formless and chaotic progress through which the bourgeois society has emerged. The form of the novel, argues Feher, could not have come into being without the appearance of the categories of “purely social” society, and the birth of this society is an enrichment and progress, despite the unequal evolution that it produces.

*Die Theorie des Romans* is one of Lukács’ pre-Marxist works and he rejected the “ethically-tinged pessimism” which informs it when he became a Marxist, but the narrative categories enunciated in this Hegelian work remain central to his later writings on the novel as well. For the Marxist theorist of *Essays über Realismus* and the studies of Balzac and Tolstoy, the greatest artists are those who can recapture and recreate a harmonious totality of human life.<sup>20</sup> He draws together into a complex totality the general and the particular, the social and the individual, the conceptual and the sensuous, that are torn apart by capitalist “alienation” and projects a rich, many-sided image of human wholeness. Naming such art “realism”, Lukács takes it to include the Greeks and Shakespeare as well as Balzac and France in the early nineteenth century. A realist work embodies and unfolds what for Marxism is most “typical” about a particular phase of history, those historically significant and progressive forces that constitute the inner dynamic of society—in this case, the struggle between classes as already known within the terms of Marxist theory.

The dominant concern of Lukács’ writings on the novel, in the Marxist phase, is with the social determination of their philosophical content; as a genre, the novel remains a degraded epic in search of a lost totality. As in the earlier, pre-Marxist *Theorie*, the concept of “form” refers not to the distinctive narrative structure of the literary text but to the structure of “world-view” which is said to inform its social vision. Confounding the philosophical with the

<sup>20</sup> Lukács’ later views on the novel are stated in several works written in the thirties and the forties, but perhaps most succinctly in “Essay on the Novel”, *International Literature*, No. 5 1936, and “Narrate or Describe?” in Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, trans. A.D. Kahn, New York, Grosser and Dunlap, 1970.

literary and reading the literary text as a philosopher in pursuit of philosophical contents that could be discovered within and abstracted from them, Lukács completely disregards the formal differences between different modes of writing—poetic, philosophical, dramatic, novelistic, etc.—and seems to regard them as mere “surface” differences. While hardly any Marxist would reproach Lukács for placing the struggle between classes at the centre of his preoccupations, the question, as Jacques Leenhardt points out,

is rather that of knowing how a textual practice, the novel, is inscribed in the process of this struggle. In other words, the question one should ask is regarding the relation of the textuality of the novel to the historical process, and not immediately the relation of the novelistic character to the struggle between classes.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, Lukács is unable to recognize the novel as a distinct form of writing which is defined by its function within the literary system and in the historical process and not by any philosophical attitude towards the world, and to view the nineteenth-century novel as merely one convention of writing which does not have to be accorded any epistemological priority over other forms of writing. A major consequence of this disability of Lukács’ theory of the novel is his complete rejection of practically all twentieth-century novels and indeed every manifestation of literary modernism as an undifferentiated mass of “decadent” writing, with the solitary exception of the work of Thomas Mann, the last great “critical realist” of the bourgeois literary tradition.

#### IV

*Die Theorie des Romans*, like the other early writings of Lukács, has had a profound influence on the works of the major aestheticians of Western Marxism. Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Storyteller” (1936), cites with approval the notion of the novel as a “form of transcendental homelessness” and contrasts the anonymous village storyteller with the alienated novelist of modern times. The

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Leenhardt, “Roman et Société: Discours et action dans la théorie lukacsienne du roman”, in *Semiotics and Dialectics: Ideology and the Text*, ed. Peter V. Zima, Amsterdam, John Benjamins B.V., 1981, p. 369.

nostalgia for the agrarian, artisan, organic community of the past keeps surfacing again and again: “a great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen” and “if peasants and craftsmen were the past masters of storytelling, the medieval artisan class was its university.”<sup>22</sup> The rise of the novel reflects, for Benjamin, the demise of the old community and the concomitant growth of middle-class solitude. And Theodor Adorno, despite his studied pessimism and suspicion of all forms of romanticism, could not escape that positive valorization of the non-industrial, non-alienated past to which Lukács had given such powerful expression. *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, written jointly by Max Horkheimer and Adorno, is a notable statement of similar outlook, as is Adorno’s well-known essay on the loss of perspective in the contemporary novel.<sup>23</sup> Adorno’s—and the Frankfurt School’s—disagreement with several of Lukács’ ideas was both real and significant, but they still share a pessimism about modernism and, more significantly, do so from a similar philosophico-historical standpoint. The novel is, for Adorno, a “negative” epic.

It is in Lucien Goldmann’s *Pour une sociologie du roman*, however, that the influence of Lukács theory is most clearly evident, and the limitations of its categories most obvious.<sup>24</sup> Goldmann attempts to relate the Hegelian-Lukácsian model to specific social structures, thus lending the model sociological dimension, and argues that the bourgeois novel is more and more dominated by the dualism of the values of “authentic” life and, within this split, the “prose” of daily life is always to be found in the sphere of inauthenticity. The tension generated between idealistic values and the mundane world creates different types of novel, but all of them are characterized by the concept of the problematic hero.

Goldmann suggests that the novel of the problematic hero is closely related to the concept of “exchange-value” within capitalist society. As capitalism defines the relations between men strictly in terms of their labour power, which itself is regarded solely as

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968, pp. 83-111.

<sup>23</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1958-1965; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, New York, The Seabury Press, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1964; *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London, Tavistock, 1975.

commodity, the value of human labour and thus of humanity is equivalent to “exchange-value” determined by the economic market-place. The relations between men are, therefore, debased, inauthentic, mediated by a “thing”, a commodity. It is for this reason that the realist novel finds the depiction of authentic values increasingly problematical.

Goldmann proposes a “structural homology” between the economic structure of capitalism and the form of the novel. “In market-gear societies the collective consciousness progressively loses all sense of active reality and tends to become a simple *reflection* of economic life” (emphasis added).<sup>25</sup> Arguing for a causal link between the novel and the society *as a whole* in which the mediation between the immediately economic and the cultural has disappeared, Goldmann describes three broad historical periods: the first, corresponding to the growth of monopolies and colonial expansion (1880-1914), is reflected in the decline of the hero within the novel; between 1918 and 1939, the period of “crisis capitalism”, the hero more or less disappears from the novel, a process which “consumer capitalism”, from 1945 onwards, completes.

Many objections can be made to Goldmann’s sociology of the novel. One could note how Goldmann enlarges Marx’s notion of *economic* value into that of value *in general* and assumes that use-value becomes authentic and exchange-value inauthentic. There is no concept of superstructure, as Goldmann is unable to find any mediation between the novel and modern society. It is also significant that *Pour une sociologie du roman* marks a departure from Goldmann’s own earlier theoretical position as formulated in *Le Dieu Caché* (1955). While in this work, Goldmann envisages literary and philosophical production as organically tied to the elaboration of a class consciousness which leads him to an analysis of social classes and groups capable of producing concretely this consciousness, in his study of the modern novel he brackets the concept of class consciousness through the notion of “structural homology.” The mediation between the economic structure and cultural products which is class consciousness is abandoned in favour of a unitary structure of consciousness. The concept of reification is given a static interpretation, and there is a radical

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

pessimism with regard to any possibility of critical consciousness in a society dominated at the economic level by capitalist auto-regulation and at the cultural level by mass culture.

If the young, pre-Marxist Lukács saw the novel as a problematic genre in a climate of romantic anti-capitalism, it is not difficult to see how Goldmann's view of the modern novel is also after all a product of the ideological conjuncture of the early nineteen-sixties.<sup>26</sup> The theory of the total disappearance of critical consciousness in advanced capitalist societies flourished during the sixties among most of the Marxists of the humanist tradition, though its chief proponents were, of course, the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School. Beginning with a recognition of the "administered" character of modern capitalist society, the penetrating effects of reification on consciousness and daily life, and the changed character and function of the traditional working class, these theorists argued that along with a rationalization of market processes has come a rationalization in *all* spheres of social and cultural life, smothering the last remnants of individual autonomy and creativity. There is a whole philosophy of history implied in this theory, which suggests a historical transformation in which a hitherto meaningful struggle between social classes is replaced by a far more mechanical mode of existence imposed by capitalism on *all* classes indifferently. It was not until 1966 that Goldmann found any signs of the reappearance of a critical consciousness in any contemporary cultural product.<sup>27</sup>

However, if Goldmann was unable to find any mediation between the *nouveau roman* and reality, Jacques Leenhardt, in a political reading of Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*,<sup>28</sup> offers a convincing analysis of the text by grounding it in an analysis that deals with the partial or sectorial consciousness developed by social classes. *La Jalousie* thus appears to be a historical book, a colonial novel, written in relation to the ideological horizon of a specific historical moment. Not that the novel is committed with respect to historical and political problematics, but the historical moment is everywhere present as an *anterior referent*. What Leenhardt's

<sup>26</sup> This point is suggested by Jacques Leenhardt in an interview published in *Diacritics*, September 1977, and also in "Lecture critique de la théorie goldmannienne du roman", in *Sociocritique*, ed. Claude Duchet, Paris, Editions Nathan, 1979.

<sup>27</sup> Goldmann, "The Theatre of Genet", *The Drama Review*, No. 12, 1968.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman*, Paris, Editions Minuit, 1973.

reading of the text demonstrates is that Robbe-Grillet cannot write without relating to the specific ideological moment. Leenhardt is able to do this by developing and extending Goldmann's work by shifting the focus from the object to the method of the textual production of that object, the manner in which the object is described and situated in the narration, thus opening up the structure of a narrative to sociological analysis.

In his last years, Goldmann is reported to have been working on an extension of his category of "coherence", which at times seemed to operate as a Kantian form in practice, to include the work of Bakhtin to which he had been introduced by one of his students, Julia Kristeva.<sup>29</sup>

V

Bakhtin's essays on the novel, written during the nineteen-thirties, when Lukács and Mikhail Lifshitz were together constructing a Hegelian-Marxist theory of literature, constitute an attempt to break away from the Hegelian-Lukácsian theory of the novel.<sup>30</sup> They offer an alternative explanation for the genesis and rise of the novel, seeing the novel not as a ramification of the epic but, on the contrary, its antithesis, as an anti-generic, constantly innovative force within the literary and cultural system. If Lukács and his followers had seen the novel as an expression of decline, it is a measure of the originality of Bakhtin that he finds in the novel not any manifestation of decline but rather the liberation of discourse from the fetters of authority. In fact, he conceives the distinguishing feature of novels to be a fundamental opposition to precisely all that is privileged, formalized and fixed.

Bakhtin's theoretical project of outlining a sociological poetics of the novel is an attempt to answer the question: how does one square a conviction of the relative autonomy of the literary function with the evident fact of its constant interaction with other social structures? Or, how can one speak of literary history, of systemic changes in literary formations, if one is not simply to

<sup>29</sup> This is reported by William Boelhower in a review article, "Towards a Sociology of the Novel", *The Minnesota Review*, Spring 1976.

<sup>30</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.



speak of a series of synchronic slices but of literature as a historical category? Bakhtin proposes a theory of literary discourse that places the determinative effect of ideological struggle at its centre, not merely from outside but with direct bearing on its intrinsic structural elements. There takes place in his writings a dialogue between the concerns of Marxism and those of Russian Formalism. If he is opposed to the Formalists' reification of the text and their flagrant disregard for specific historical contexts,<sup>31</sup> his project also involves the most profound and elaborate critique of the dominant tradition in Marxist literary theory, the "reflection" theory of art whose full thrust was revived after the consolidation of the "Lukács-Lifshitz" line in the early thirties.

Bakhtin and his associates (Medvedev and Volosinov) believed that the main problem facing Marxist cultural and literary analysis was the problem of specification. While the bases for the study of ideological and literary production were already firmly grounded in the theory of historical materialism, the problem of specifying the properties of each of these domains, the elucidation of that which distinguishes one from the others, remained unexplored.<sup>32</sup> This had led to a disjuncture between the holistic theory that is historical materialism and concrete analysis of specific products; the text was either divested of its specificity or had its specificity isolated from all social context and treated on its own. Bakhtin, therefore, proposed a *sociological poetics* which, while being unremittingly historical, would yet *specify* the material, forms and goals belonging to each of the domains of ideological production, particularly literature:

...each area has its own language, its own forms and devices for that language, and its own specific laws for the ideological refraction of common reality. It is absolutely not the way of Marxism to level these differences or to ignore the essential plurality of the languages of ideology.

The specificity of art, science, ethics, or religion should not obscure their ideological unity as superstructures of a common base, or the fact that they follow the same sociological laws of development. But this specificity should not be effaced by the general formulation of these laws.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> P.N. Medvedev/M.M. Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

Since the Formalists had come forward precisely as “specifiers”, concerned with the “literariness” of a literary work, Bakhtin subjects their theory to a rigorous critique and also elaborates, in the process, the Marxist view that what makes literary study necessarily sociological is literature’s inalienable *social* quality. Since “everything ideological is between us, and not within us”,<sup>34</sup> every area of ideological production is a social phenomenon, and it was precisely this social dimension of ideological products that other approaches and methods—including Formalism, of course—had failed to recognize. If the Formalists, in spite of their sophistication and rigour, misconceived and misrepresented the object of their study, it was essentially because they refused to see that literature can be studied only as a historical category.

The social nature of literature, according to Bakhtin, has also been misrepresented by the sociological view which analyzed it only in terms of its social content and relationship, as a *direct* reflection of social life and ideological systems. This approach to literature involved a naive identification of literature with “real life” or society and totally disregards the specific, distinctive properties of a literary work itself; it has survived in a certain influential school of Marxist literary theory in the form of a mechanical base-superstructure model. Bakhtin argues, on the other hand, that literature not only participates in the social processes, it is itself a social entity and must be seen as such.

Literature is one of the independent parts of the surrounding ideological reality, occupying a special place in it in the form of definite, organized philological works which have their own specific structures. The literary structure, like every ideological structure, refracts the generating socio-economic reality, and does so in its own way. But, at the same time, in its “content”, literature reflects and refracts the reflections and refractions of other ideological spheres (ethics, epistemology, political doctrines, religion, etc.). That is, in its “content” literature reflects the whole of the ideological horizon of which it is itself a part.<sup>35</sup>

The content of literature reflects the ideological purview, i.e., other non-artistic ideological formations (ethical, epistemological, etc.). But, in reflecting these other signs, literature creates new forms,

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

new signs of ideological intercourse. And these signs are works of art, which become a real part of the social reality surrounding man. Reflecting something external to themselves, literary works are at the same time in themselves valuable and unique phenomena of the ideological environment. Their role cannot be reduced to the merely auxiliary one of reflecting other ideologemes. Literary works have their own independent ideological role and their own type of refraction of socio-economic existence.<sup>36</sup>

Central to Bakhtin's theory, then, is the conception of literature as a system, a system, moreover, which reveals itself only when it is viewed as an ongoing cognitive enterprise. His basic question, which is at the heart of all his work, is not so much what a literary text is, but rather how could it be various things: in other words, how does a text *mean*? If the Formalists were concerned primarily with the morphological aspects of analysis, Bakhtin's distinctiveness may be grasped in his attempt to move beyond and integrate such analysis in his concern for a given text's *semantics*. Though highly critical of Saussurean abstraction of the synchronic system,<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin was influenced by the demonstration that language as such contained no meaning in itself, that meaning (value) was rather a function of extra-linguistic factors that derived from the whole culture, and argued that the meaning of any work was to be found in how it was understood. How it was perceived would be determined by its status in the various systems, each with its sub-language or discourse (e.g. political, religious, etc.), of which any culture is constituted, as well as its status in the hierarchy of those systems. At various times, then, a text would have different meanings: St. Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, was part of the religious system of the crumbling Roman world of the fifth century A.D., but since, it has passed into the literary system of European culture. Furthermore, the literary system of Rome had quite a different place in the strata of systems comprising fifth-century culture from that which it occupies in the hierarchy of systems which make up the culture of contemporary Europe. Bakhtin held that it is crucial to see the totality constituting a given text's context, as in the world of understanding there are, on principle, no separate acts and no unique works.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, New York, Seminar Press, 1973.

Bakhtin's theory of the literary system has its basis in the concept of *discourse*, a dynamic conception of language which is sensitive to the fact that no word can be understood in itself, but must be put into a situation—not only linguistic, but historical and cultural—if its meaning is to be grasped, and that meaning will not be singular, but as plural as its possible contexts. This emphasis on relationship over individual parts became, to be sure, a fundamental tenet of later French Structuralism, but without Bakhtin's openness to the historical dimension of any text. Because any discourse is social and historical, no amount of analysis in reference to the "language system" can explain what makes any apparently "identical" utterance or the "same" statement (as opposed to the "sentences") differ in meaning when they are made to two different social groups. Every utterance is an "objective social enthymeme" that depends on an unstated set of social premises. From the recognition of this socio-ideological dimension of language, Bakhtin can claim that language is the most subtle index of social and historical change. Language is emphatically *not* a single, coherent system, separate from cultural and ideological flux; on the contrary, Bakhtin argues, at any given moment it consists of the "jargons", dialects or sub-languages of regional and social sub-groups, whose words carry their own specific "evaluations" to members of those groups (and to others, whose use of a recognizably foreign word renders it—and with it, the attitudes of its normal speakers—an object of attention). Language, according to Bakhtin, is always *Languages*; it is defined by its multi-speechedness. The literary language canonized at any given moment is a jargon or sub-language like any other, used in a particular milieu and in a specific speaker-listener relationship; its very primacy today is a social fact about it, and social changes that affect the "speeches" that compose the multi-speechedness of language will indirectly affect that privileged form of "speech" as well. Thus, for Bakhtin, language is at its core socio-historical, not a system that happens to be handed down from generation to generation, but one that endures as a continuous process of *becoming*, essentially in motion, in the context of struggle in culture and society.

It is Bakhtin's insistence on the primacy of speech and the multi-speechedness of language which leads him to formulate a distinctive theory of the novel and its extra-literary significance.

For Bakhtin, the novel is the representation of the life of the utterance, of discourse. It depicts the drama of discourses conflicting with discourses, of their struggle to assimilate, argue with, parody, stylize, corroborate, make conditional, report, frame, or deliberately ignore each other. The novel is the meta-linguistic genre *par excellence*. In its pages, we encounter the interaction between “languages” and “speeches” of varied social groups; it is characterized by varied-speechedness. Like words in life, words in the novel are conscious of the “linguistic background” of the culture they assume, of the dialogue that has already considered the object they speak about, and of the possible future words that will take them as objects as well. The novel is thus the most self-conscious of the hermeneutics of everyday social life.

Language is not simply the novelist’s means of representing the world; it is also the world he represents. Every novelistic text is but a system of languages. Characters exist so that words can be spoken; every character in a novel is an ideologue, bringing to the text his own evaluation of the social reality. Bakhtin argues that for the novelistic genre what is characteristic is not the image of man in himself, but precisely the image of language. But language, in order to become an artistic image, must be the utterance of speaking lips, joined to the image of the speaking person. Far from turning the novel into a mere formalistic exercise, Bakhtin treats the novel as thoroughly ideological, as pervaded to its core with social and ideological conflict: because language is. The contrast with the Structuralist theories of the narrative is instructive.

Bakhtin’s earliest formulation of the importance of discourse was expressed in general terms, but it was the specific application of these principles to the novels of Dostoevsky which had the most influence.<sup>38</sup> In this work, Bakhtin conceives the relationship between the author and his characters in almost political terms. Most authors are autocrats who insist that each of their protagonists obey the rules necessary to articulate the author’s over-all design. Such books are said to be *monologic*. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, is viewed as a democrat of the text, who allows not only certain major protagonists but all the characters to have their say. His genius consists in the degree to which he nevertheless maintained a

<sup>38</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. R.W. Rotsel, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Ardis, 1973.

pattern in his novels, a design that resulted from the orchestration of different voices rather than the more customary unity deriving from a sustained, single voice. Dostoevsky's novels are, therefore, called *polyphonic*.

Polyphony is an instance of the manifestation of multiple points of view on the ideological plane, and its structure may be indicated in terms of the following basic requirements:

(a) Polyphony occurs when several independent voices are present within the text. The term polyphonic, that is, many-voiced, is self-explanatory.

(b) The point of view in a polyphonic work must belong directly to characters who participate in the narrated events. There must be no abstract ideological position outside of the personalities of the characters.

(c) The ideological points of view become manifest primarily in the manner in which characters (vehicles for ideological positions) evaluate the world around them.

Bakhtin relates the possibility of the polyphonic novel to the multi-levelled and contradictory nature of the objective social world:

The age itself made the polyphonic novel possible. Dostoevsky was *subjectively* involved in the contradictory multi-levelledness of his time; he changed camps, he switched from one to another, and in this respect the planes which existed in the objective social life were for him stages on his life's path and in his spiritual evolution. This was a profound social experience, but Dostoevsky did not give it direct monological expression in his art. It only helped him to more profoundly comprehend the coexistent, extensively manifest contradictions between people, but not between ideas in a single consciousness. Thus the objective contradictions of the age determined Dostoevsky's art not in that he was able to overcome them within the history of his own spirit, but in that he was able to view them as simultaneously existing forces.<sup>39</sup> (emphasis in original)

The significance of the polyphonic novel is that it recognizes the complexity and the contradictions of the modern world, the dialogic nature of human consciousness, and the "profound ambiguity" of every voice, gesture and act. The imposition of a monologic

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

structure on a literary work, bringing under a unifying and rational consciousness all the ambiguities and complexities of personal and social life, distorts the latter in the pretence of a singular coherence. Polyphony, on the other hand, deconstructs the entrenched ideological forms of literature and society.

In his review of the first edition of Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky's novels (1929), Lunacharsky, while agreeing with Bakhtin on the significance of "multi-voicedness" of Dostoevsky's novels, posed the question of the novelist's forerunners in the realm of polyphony and questioned if Shakespeare could not be regarded as one of them.<sup>40</sup> While certain elements of polyphony can be found in Shakespeare's plays, as in the works of Cervantes, Rabelais and Grimmelshausen, the drama is by nature alien to genuine polyphony; it can be multi-levelled, but cannot contain multiple worlds, as it allows for only one, not several systems of measurement. In each play of Shakespeare, there is *essentially* only a single full-valued hero's voice, while a polyphonic structure would demand a plurality of full-valued voices within the bounds of a single text. Every drama has a "monologic frame" which precludes the possibility of the articulation of diverse voices in all their fullness.

In his later theoretical and historical essays on novelistic discourse,<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin comes to regard the "dialogism" of Dostoevsky's novels not so much as an unprecedented event in the history of the genre but rather as the purest expression of what had always been implicit in it. The novel now ceases to be "simply one genre among other genres", as most theorists of the novel assume; it becomes not only "the main hero of the drama of modern literary development" but the most significant force at work even in those early periods when according to traditional literary historiography there were no novels being written at all.

At the centre of Bakhtin's theory of the novel and its prehistory is a typology of discourses. He begins by isolating at least two types of narrative, which eventually results in a redistribution of genres. In the first type, the discourse is monologic and the dialogue inherent in discourse is smothered by a prohibition, a censorship, such that this discourse refuses to turn back upon itself, to enter into dialogue with itself. It is the representative mode of description

<sup>40</sup> A.V. Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1973, pp. 79-107.

<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

and epic narration. The organizing principle of epic structure is always monological. The speaker does not make use of another's speech, and if there is a dialogical interplay of language and contradiction, it takes place only on the level of narration and through the denotative word. It does not exteriorize itself at the level of textual manifestation as in the structure of novels. The dialogue of language does not manifest itself except within the narrative infrastructure, and at the level of apparent textual organization (historical enunciation/discursive enunciation) there is no dialogue at all: the two aspects of enunciation remain limited by the narrator's absolute point of view, which coincides either with the wholeness of society or with God.<sup>42</sup>

In the other type of narrative which is dialogic, on the other hand, discourses meet, contradict and relativize each other. The novel, according to Bakhtin, is the supreme instance of this kind of dialogic discourse. Contrasting the openness of the novel with the closed nature of the epic and other monological genres like poetry and drama, Bakhtin identifies three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel:

- (a) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-languaged consciousness in the novel;
- (b) the radical change it effects in the temporal co-ordinates of the literary image;
- (c) the new zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness.<sup>43</sup>

Traditional literary history is right, within its own terms, when it asserts that there were no novels in Plato's Athens or during the Middle Ages, or no novel as we have come to know it. But Bakhtin is not referring to that concept of a novel which begins with Cervantes or Richardson. These books, and especially the nineteenth-century novel in the "realistic" tradition, have become the canon of the genre, *the* novel. Traditional literary history is comfortable only when dealing with canons, which is why Bakhtin says that literary history reveals its complete helplessness when dealing with the novel. Rather, "novel" is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints, of that system. If literary

<sup>42</sup> Julia Kristeva "The Ruin of a Poetics", in *Russian Formalism*, ed. Stephen Bann and J.E. Bowlt, Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1973.

<sup>43</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 11.



systems are comprised of canons, the force of “novelization” is fundamentally anti-canonical. It defies generic monologue. Always it will insist on the dialogue between what a given system will admit as literature on one hand, and those texts which are otherwise excluded from such a definition of literature, on the other. What is more conventionally thought of as *the* novel is simply the most complex and distilled expression of the novelistic impulse—the struggle between discourses.

The prehistory of the novelistic discourse, as conceived by Bakhtin, is very long, but it exists outside the bounds of what has been traditionally thought of as “literary history”. After all, the essential characteristic of novelistic discourse lies in the transgression of prohibition inherent in the generic monologue of a literary system. Bakhtin refers to the rise and development of numerous genres in classical antiquity and in the epoch of Hellenism which were counterposed by the ancients to the more serious genres. What distinguished these serio-comical genres from the serious genres like epic and tragedy was that their understanding and evaluation of the reality is always formulated from the standpoint of the *present*, and the object of a serious, if comical, representation is presented without epical or tragic distance, presented on the contemporary level in direct and even crudely familiar contact with living contemporaries. Even the mythical heroes and historical figures are contemporarized in these genres. Bakhtin refers in particular to the Socratic dialogues and Menippean satire, but it is the latter which most clearly exemplifies the novelistic impulse of classical antiquity. Petronius’ *Satyricon*, for example, is characterized by an extraordinary freedom of philosophical invention and invention within plot, and situations are presented to test a philosophical idea, for an ideological purpose, and ultimate questions are put to test. It freely uses other genres—novellas, letters, oratory, symposia—and mixes poetry with prose to intensify the variety of styles and tones, and it has a topicality and publicistic quality which makes it, like the novels of any period, the “journalistic” genre of antiquity. The diversity of “speeches” and the detailed attention to the present and the past of characters emphasizes the historical process of change and *becoming*. As Erich Auerbach notes in his study, *Mimesis*,<sup>44</sup> the contrast between the modes of

<sup>44</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Trans. W. Task, New York, Doubleday, 1957.

characterization of the Homeric epic and this Menippean satire is striking. While Homer too brings in the lineage station and previous history of his characters, they do not lead us to a situation of change, to something in process; on the contrary, they lead us to a fixed point from which we can take our bearings.

Rather than an impression of historical change, Homer evokes the illusion of an unchanging, a basically stable social order, in comparison with which the succession of individuals and changes in personal fortunes appear unimportant.<sup>45</sup>

Petronius' ambition, on the other hand, like the realists of modern times, is to imitate "a random, everyday, contemporary milieu with its sociological background, and to have his characters speak their jargon without recourse to any form of literary stylization".<sup>46</sup> Menippean satire, like other serio-comical genres, emerged in an epoch of the decline of the monological tradition, in an epoch of intense struggle among multitudinous heterogeneous religious and philosophical schools and tendencies, when dispute over "ultimate questions" became a mass phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> It represents a preliminary but incomplete novelization of the classical literary canon, and can best be considered as proto-novel in a broad historical sense. But some of the characteristics of novelistic discourse can be identified in it in their rudimentary form.

Bakhtin's history of the novel, then, would be charted, among other ways, in devaluation of a given culture's higher, privileged literary forms: the parodies of knightly romances, pastorals, sentimental fiction, etc. It would seek to retrieve the voices of opposition to the monological authority in the literary system of successive epochs. The tendency has been there in every literary system, and a historical poetics would need to identify them in order to explain the concrete life of the novelistic texts in the unity of the generating literary environment, the literary environment in the generating ideological environment, and the latter, finally, in the generating socio-economic environment which permeates it.<sup>48</sup> As formerly distinct, canonical genres are subjected to the novel's

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>48</sup> Medvedev/Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, p. 27.

intensifying anti-generic power, their systematic unity is violated and they become “novelized”, not in the sense that they all become novels—such a view of the novel would be certainly permissive—but in that they cannot but open up to a dialogue with other voices from below. Even the drama (Ibsen and other Naturalists), the long poem (Byron’s *Don Juan*), the lyric (Heine), seek to incorporate the dialogic structure of the nineteenth century. The novel itself, however, possesses no such canon; it is, on the contrary, anti-canonical, preserving through time only its openness to time, that is, to the multiplicity of discourses that the socio-economic, cultural and ideological environment articulate within themselves. Depicting the present in all its completeness, the novel is itself ever incomplete; but the reality is in motion, open to the future, towards its becoming, as variable as the usage of language.<sup>49</sup> It is thus defined only by its perpetual re-definition, by its fundamental structuring impulse which is always subversive and system-debunking.

The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language—that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic centre of the ideological world... The novel begins by presuming a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world, a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness, which no longer possesses a sacrosanct and unitary linguistic medium for containing ideological thought.<sup>50</sup>

## VI

Bakhtin thus provides an outline for a sociological poetics of the novel. His project involves a drastic recharting of cultural history, as he more than any other Marxist critic of his time, is sensitive to the fact that the literary text—novelistic or any other—must be conceived of as a problem in understanding and therefore as a social process deeply embedded in history.

By emphasising the dialogic dimension of the novelistic text, as well as the literary and social contexts in which a text is situated and in whose dialogues it participates, Bakhtin brings to the fore

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Leenhardt, “Lecture critique de la théorie goldmannienne du roman”, p. 180 (translation mine).

<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 366-367.

the political and historical character of all literature, but particularly that of the novel. The language of the novel is a manifestation of the ongoing political, social and ideological struggle between antagonistic social classes and, by its very nature, undercuts the unitary language of hegemonic discourse. Every significant novelistic text is, then, engaged politically in undermining the hegemonic ideology and projecting elements of a new one. Both in its form and its content, the novel cannot help being temporal and political; its fundamental aim remains the deconstruction of the existing hierarchy and its authoritative discourse.

A sociological reading of the novel, then, should determine a text's social orientation and its relation to the historical process by analyzing the dialogic structure formed by its system of languages. Since this system is constituted by authoritative discourse in conflict with internally persuasive ones, these voices must be differentiated, and the implicit principle of discursive organization and stratification attended to, in order to read the text's socio-political evaluation of reality. As Jacques Leenhardt puts it,

Today it is necessary to start again from the novelistic text in order to seize in it, through its modes of representation, the articulations of heterogeneous discursivity which constitute it; and it is also necessary to enrich and inform this reading by starting from a social scheme which does not conceal the fact that the novel develops itself even today in a petrified society of antagonisms.<sup>51</sup>

This is as relevant for the study of the novelistic texts produced in the age of advanced capitalism as it is for approaching the novelistic texts of the Third World, produced during the period of colonialism or later. It would enable us to understand the specific ways in which the novelistic texts could be inscribed in the social and historical processes.

Prabhakara Jha  
(*University of California, Davis*)

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Leenhardt, "Lecture critique de la théorie goldmannienne du roman", p. 182 (translation mine).