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History and Class Consciousness as a Theory of the Novel

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"The approach of literary history is the one best suited to the problems of history."

György Lukács

"[I]n the last resort no one can be slain *in absentia* or *in effigie*."

Sigmund Freud

György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* is not usually seen as advancing an aesthetic theory in its own right. Apart from some scattered remarks on the anticipatory insights of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, these "studies in Marxist dialectics" attest no interest in literature or art whatsoever. Faced with this absence of an explicit aesthetic program, commentators have tried to provide one for *History and Class Consciousness* (HCC) by linking it with Lukács's more obviously literary writings. Consequently, HCC has been handled as a political epistemology or sociological toolkit in search of literary-aesthetic application, as when Jay Bernstein examines Lukács's "pre-Marxist theory of the novel from the perspective of his Marxist social theory," or Fredric Jameson contends that "[t]he analysis of the subjective precondition of [literary] realism forms a parallel to the analysis of the preconditions of knowledge of the totality in *History and Class Consciousness*."¹ That is, HCC has been taken to provide a vocabulary that can be extended to literary and ideological analysis, but whose own "narrative" concerns are limited to the unaesthetic, for example, the grand récit of the proletariat as the Subject of History.²

However, especially in the essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," HCC implicitly advances a theory of the novel independent from either Lukács's earlier *The Theory of the Novel* (TN) or his later studies on realism. Although overlooked by critics, the literary-theoretical specificity of HCC is hiding in plain sight. The central moment of his argument — the self-recognition of the proletariat as a world-historical subject from out of "the riddle of commodity-structure" — is

Lukács's only elaboration of dramatic *anagnorisis*, or recognition scene, a central structure in narrative theory since Aristotle's *Poetics*.³ What is aesthetic in *HCC* is therefore immanent in the very categories of "reification" and "the consciousness of the proletariat," since these make up the terrain of that recognition. In what follows, I read the decisive moment of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" as a paradigmatic recognition scene, whereby "in the commodity the worker recognizes himself and his own relations with capital."⁴ In this pivotal instant, the worker becomes self-conscious in that very location (the commodity) where he has been produced as an unconscious thing: "in his social existence the worker is immediately placed *wholly* on the side of the object."⁵ By this logic, reification should be seen as a structural misrecognition, "the split between subjectivity and objectivity induced in man by the compulsion to objectify himself as a commodity."⁶

To be sure, I am not the first to see recognition as a central category in Lukács's analysis of reification in *HCC*. Axel Honneth, in a significant reinterpretation of Lukács's concepts, has argued that "the core of all forms of reification" is the "forgetting [of] our antecedent recognition."⁷ However, the effect of Honneth's analysis is to gut the Marxist account of reification and replace it with a theory of communication as a socio-behavioral practice.⁸ To this end, reification is behaviorized as "a habit of mere contemplation and observation," in which one perceives one's surroundings in "a merely detached and emotionless manner."⁹ Along these same lines, Honneth defines recognition as "an affirmative, existentially colored style of caring comportment," an intersubjective relation of "engaged praxis" and empathy.¹⁰ So, for Honneth (following Cavell, Habermas, and Levinas) recognition means *acknowledgment*, or the reciprocal awareness of others.¹¹ However, in order to pursue these tendentious redefinitions, Honneth has to jettison nearly all of Lukács's argument — the decisive casualty being the connection between subjectivity (the consciousness of the proletariat) and the commodity-form. Honneth ignores or misreads Lukács's account of subjectivity, such that reification's effect on subjectivity is read simply as a regrettable "mode of behavior."¹² But if we turn to Lukács's text, we see that he scrupulously argues that reification is *constitutive of subjectivity* as such, that is, the very categories of knowing and acting.¹³

For the present essay, recognition is to be understood as dramatic or narrative *anagnorisis*, not as intersubjectivity or Neo-Hegelian acknowledgment. To put this distinction in terms of Aristotle's preferred example: within Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, recognition and acknowledgment are clearly distinct dramatic actions. *Anagnorisis* occurs when Oedipus discovers his true breeding and finds his past to be steeped in incest and parricide. This retrospective self-knowledge is not to be confused with the subsequent scene where Oedipus, having gouged out his eyes and re-emerged a transformed figure, foists on the Chorus a demand for *acknowledgment* of his outrageous sufferings. (Another familiar shorthand for recognition, the master-slave dialectic in Hegel, also will not do here. The life-or-death encounter Hegel describes is

really closer to Oedipus's confrontation with Laius on the road from Corinth — a game of chicken where each party demands that the other give way — than to Aristotle's model of *anagnorisis*.)

Once we can see Lukács's subjectivity argument as a "recognition scene," though, we can also measure its distance from Aristotle's rationalist prescriptions for ancient drama. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines *anagnorisis* as the discovery of identity, arising from ignorance, immanent in events themselves, and coincident with a reversal of the situation. These four features will also hold for the consciousness of the proletariat. But *HCC* adds several features of recognition which I take to be specifically *novelistic*: the question of possible modes of objectification, the representation of social totality, and the cognitive form (as opposed to the content) of narrative knowledge.

Unfortunately, there is no similar *locus classicus* for the concept of "reification." The term appears perhaps five times across the three volumes of Marx's *Capital*, taking up considerably less space than the analysis of lesser-known topics such as the increasing organic composition of capital, differential rent, or the eighteenth-century distinction between fixed and circulating capital. Whereas associated words like "fetishism" and "alienation" are extensively discussed in Marx's 1844 manuscripts, "reification" [*Versachlichung* or *Verdinglichung*, interchangeable in Marx's use] first comes into use only in the specifically economic writings of the late 1850s, the *Grundrisse* and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In *Capital*, "reification" only appears as part of a set formula: "personification of things and reification of persons." Although the term would be extended by Lukács and subsequently the Frankfurt School, for Marx, reification is not an ontological or epistemological term.

Rather than rehearsing the *HCC* argument here, I should be forthright about my eccentric and polemical reading of Lukács's essay. Keeping in mind the objective of constructing a "theory of the novel" — rather than a full reconstruction of the reification analysis — I offer below a few theses just to clarify *how* I am (or am not) using "reification," and what I take to be a usable through-line through Lukács's at times unwieldy text.

- Notwithstanding Lukács's own heavy reliance on the Weberian vocabulary of "rationalization" in Section I of the reification essay, *the concept of reification should not for a moment be assimilated to rationalization* — as most notably in Jürgen Habermas's writing on Lukács.¹⁴ While Lukács's withering observations linking the drudgery and passivity of factory labor to journalism, bureaucracy, and scientific expertise are some of the most memorable parts of the essay, what Lukács so forcefully *describes* as "rationalization" would better have been *analyzed* in terms of Marx's "real subsumption" and the production of relative surplus-value.¹⁵
- *Neither should reification be confused with "alienation"* — again, notwithstanding Lukács's own admission of this "fundamental and crude error," in the 1967

Preface.¹⁶ Rather, Lukács interprets reification as the specifically capitalist mode of objectification — in Marx’s terms, as the scaffolding in which production is the “valorization” of abstract labor time. The basic criticism here (Habermas again) is that Lukács — by failing to distinguish non-reified forms of objectification from his criticism of its degraded, alienated forms — jettisoned all reason and science as hopelessly contaminated by capitalist rationalization.¹⁷ Theodor Adorno puts the stakes of this terminological confusion as starkly as possible: for Lukács, “thingness” is “radical evil.”¹⁸ If it were so, it was a grievous fault. But this is a strange criticism, since alienation does not play an important role in the reification essay. Apart from citations of Marx, Lukács’s only use of “alienation” in the reification essay is in Part III, Section 4, on the dialectic of “facts” and “totality.”¹⁹ Lukács analyzes commodity production as the production of surplus-value, and never as “alienation.”

- In keeping with this analysis of surplus-value production, reification (as Lukács constantly insists) is a category of *totality*, and so cannot be ripped out of the process of reproducing capital as a social form to cover any irksome conceptual stubbornness or fixity. Adorno, in particular, is fond of construing reification as something like “identity thinking” or “positivism,” terms considerably untethered from the commodity analysis and the subjectivity argument that govern the concept in *HCC*.
- The role played by the proletariat in Lukács’s analysis should not be assigned to an *empirically-given agent* (the industrial working class). Nor can the role of the Subject of history simply be transferred to Capital, as in Moishe Postone’s reading — a travesty of Hegel’s understanding of the subject-substance identity.²⁰ I take the decisive question here to have been posed by Neil Larsen in his essay “Lukács *sans* Proletariat”: starting from “(class) consciousness as *form*, as *structured* in its relation to reification,” what is “the *immanent* standpoint of a critique of reification”?²¹ Today, the looked-for revolutionary subject is no longer recognizable as belonging to the industrial site; the subject of history is rather *surplus-value in its dispersed, obscured, and de-collectivized* social reproduction.²² *HCC*’s Subject is not an empirically pre-existing (not even *qua* “alienated”) agent to which consciousness has only to be added, imported, or located. Class consciousness is not the ceremonial donning of the mantle of History, it is the anticipatory canceling of the very placement of consciousness and agency in capitalism.

On my reading, then, the reification argument in *HCC* is about the ongoing objectification of a structural misrecognition, in which capital makes over the world in its own image, bodying forth only an impotent chain of sameness (the tiresome grind of M-C-M), while subjectivity is split off and unconscious. Reified subjectivity thus misrecognizes itself in transcendental terms (as in Hegel’s figure of the “unhappy consciousness”), not understanding that the subject is perpetually *under construction*

elsewhere. Reification is not only a description of the bad, contemplative-idealist bourgeois subject — it is also an account of how the “objective” dialectic of capital (including the class struggle) is a kind of inverted narrative of collective subjectivity.²³

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It is notable that the reification essay should turn upon such a moment of recognition, because Lukács, in his literary criticism proper, shows no real interest in the category of *anagnorisis*. Wherever Lukács discusses recognition scenes, his remarks are fairly textbook and cursory.²⁴ For example:

The great scenes in classical literature clarified situations that were previously confused and obscure. The purpose of Aristotle’s recognition scene was to illuminate such obscurity. In major literary works of the past there were always crises in the composition at which the past and future were illuminated.²⁵

In *The Historical Novel*, the crisis in *Oedipus Rex* is described only as a “calling to account” or “day of reckoning,” not as self-knowledge in otherness.²⁶ In this, Lukács is only following Hegel’s theory of drama, in which recognition scenes play no real part, being subordinated to the collision of ethical structures.²⁷

My specific contention is that the non-appearance of recognition as a category in *TN* is not a mere incidental oversight, but clarifies the internal problematic of that work, while it is precisely the introduction of recognition in *HCC* that allows an advance in narrative terms over Lukács’s earlier novel theory. If the dramatic climax, so to speak, of *HCC* is a moment of self-consciousness arising from the mute objectification of external structures — the coming-to-awareness “on the side of the object” — the entire structure of *TN* is predicated upon the impossibility of this kind of recognition. In the earlier work, the novel is organized instead around an irreparable split between “soul” and “world,” where *form* is the ever-renewed but foredoomed attempt to bridge “the chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure.”²⁸ Lukács follows Hegel in seeing this barrier not as an a priori limitation of consciousness (as in Kant) but as a historical *result*, the condition of “a world that has been abandoned by God.”²⁹

This dualism holding the hero asunder from an indifferent external world is the starting point for what might be considered as the main current of the nineteenth-century European novel, which is continually taking up the questions, “What is my place in the world? How can I make my inner life into an external reality?” This is the situation of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, as well as of the heroes in the prototypical *Bildungsromane* of Goethe, Balzac, and Stendhal. The answer almost always involves the lowering or adjusting of one’s expectations; the difficulty is to wedge one’s life into

its eventually limited niche, to “find one’s place.” Instead of recognition, the operative term here is the *reconciliation* of the individual with reality, as paradigmatically in *Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Apprenticeship*.

We can now put our finger on the specific difference between *TN* and *HCC*. In the former, the structuring principle is the coming-to-terms with “the discrepancy between the interiority and the world,” an insurmountable opposition that can be domesticated only as a matter of the hero’s social “fit.”³⁰ Because “soul” or “interiority” is by definition split off from the stubbornly resistant “outside world,” which it contemplates as a separate order of being, there is no possibility of its grasping itself *from within* the discrete, obstinate persistence of reality.³¹ This exclusion of “self-surmounting subjectivity” (other than in the doomed form of irony) is an organizing *limit* for *TN*.³² *HCC*, however, posits the dialectical *identity* of “soul” and “world,” where the subject is able to reflexively seize its own determinations and “overthrow... the objective forms that shape the life of man.”³³ The Marxist analysis of subjectivity yields a picture where the “unbridgeable gap opening up between subject and object” is revealed as a *perspective* or *framing* that is just as much productive of the subjective-observing position itself.³⁴ Instead of the accommodation, irony, and romantic defeatism of *TN*, the subject of *HCC* is charged with the unrecoverable loss of its placement in the world — it must unmake the determining structures of its social being and annul the supports of that original perspective — and the staggering charge of constructing a new world.

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The contours of *HCC*’s recognition scene have been obscured by subsequent criticism of Lukács’s conception of the proletariat — including remarks by Lukács himself in his 1967 preface to *HCC*.³⁵ A recent characterization by Slavoj Žižek captures the consensus: “Lukács remains all too idealist when he proposes simply replacing the Hegelian Spirit with the proletariat as the Subject-Object of History.”³⁶ Some version of this objection — that casting the proletariat as the Subject of History is an illegitimate move, a *deus ex machina* — is now an almost compulsory concession, the price of entry to any discussion of *HCC*. However, in providing an *aesthetic* account of this moment, I hope to reconstruct Lukács’s conception of the proletariat in such a way as to meet these charges.

Although issuing in incompatible theoretical conclusions, the criticisms detailed by Louis Althusser, Postone, and Žižek (among others) coincide in two critical points.

1.) For the proletariat to overcome alienation and achieve itself as the subject-object of history, would mean only *recovering an original, lost, and transhistorical essence*. For Althusser, Lukács’s “religious’ conception of the proletariat” assures the messianic recovery of “the human essence itself.”³⁷ For Postone, the proletariat’s self-realization could only mean installing openly, without its “alienated” trappings, the transhistorical essence of “labor” (as the “history-making practice of humanity”).³⁸

The apotheosis of the proletariat would only be the elevation of an “alienated social form,” namely, labor as determined by capitalism.³⁹ And for Žižek, what would be reclaimed in Lukács’s “dis-alienation” are the subject’s *self-positing* “substantial presuppositions,” that is, the subject as its own origin.⁴⁰

2.) In that case, revolutionary class consciousness would not be a deduction from the reified structures of capitalism, as claimed, but a kind of *external agent parachuted from the realm of essences*. According to Postone, “Lukács grounds the possibility of self-awareness and oppositional subjectivity ontologically — that is, outside of the social forms.”⁴¹ And for Žižek, it is as though for Lukács “the subject somehow precedes its alienation — what this misses is the way the subject emerges through the ‘self-alienation’ of the substance, *not* of itself.”⁴² This external imposition would also be an illegal theoretical move according to Althusser’s Spinozist rulebook.

Against these characterizations, I argue:

1.) The self-recognition of the proletariat does not recover any lost essence or pre-existing (and then alienated) identity. The criticism, that Lukács’s Subject simply retrieves itself after a period (or structure) of mystification, confuses HCC’s model of recognition with the ending of a gothic novel like Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, where the rationalist unmasking of illusion is also a complete restoration of rights, a kind of “sorting” operation where exhaustive explanation of the sinister machinations of supernatural entrapment (hidden passageways, disguises, mysterious visitations) yields the “true” alignment of narrative agents. Everything here is put back in order: in the daylight, all relations are made transparent, and the heroic agent can retrospectively survey and comprehend the astonishing events that came before. Above all, our hero is slotted into his destined social role, no longer threatened by secret plots or buried genealogies. We have passed from insecurity (the story) to security (the ending).

But does Lukács really conceive of reification and its annulment in terms of these Gothic tropes? It is an oversimplification to say (*pace* commentators like Postone and Norbert Trenkle) that dereification in HCC is only seen as demystification, the dispelling of illusion, unmasking, and so on. To be sure, there is scattered textual support for this reading, where Lukács does speak of “illusions,” or a “cloak spread over the true essence,” and interprets proletarian labor as the living core of an over-quantified society, concealed under a crust of quantification.⁴³ (Such moments, which rely on the Weberian terminology of rationalization that we bracketed earlier, are the touchy-feely soil in which Honneth’s reading takes root.) But this is not the whole story. Reification is not an obscuring fog that has only to be lifted — as Lukács understands all too well: “this process [dereification] is no single, unrepeatable tearing of the veil that masks the process.”⁴⁴ The dire mistake of Postone and Trenkle is to confuse HCC’s “class consciousness” with some unreified essence of “labor” which is then uncovered.⁴⁵ Again, Lukács anticipates this misunderstanding: “If the attempt is made to attribute an immediate form of existence to class consciousness, it is not possible to

avoid lapsing into mythology.”⁴⁶ Nothing could be clearer than his specification that the “position of the proletariat in the production process” is only the determinate “point of view” — not the hidden essence — of its class consciousness.⁴⁷ The praxis following from this consciousness can only be conflated with the praxis of labor at the cost of a total misreading. But since even the devil can quote scripture to his purpose, let me just say: Lukács simply does not confuse some concealed-mystified essence of labor with the consciousness of the subject’s recognition.

2.) *HCC*’s recognition scene is not a *deus ex machina*, an undialectical imposition and deification of an external agent. Rather, Lukács implies the *negation*, the “barredness” of the subject — not its straightforward identity. Lukács no sooner introduces the notorious expression, “identical subject-object,” than he names it as the “dissolution” of the very framework (advanced capitalism) within which it arises.⁴⁸ In this sense, class consciousness is “equally the struggle of the proletariat *against itself*,” that is, against the conditions of its possibility.⁴⁹ I will come back to this subjective destitution in section V.

The “recognition scene” in *HCC* is therefore neither reconciliation nor restoration, that is, a move entirely within consciousness, the mere shuffling of mental furniture and nominations. It is rather the unmaking of reified objectivity.⁵⁰ The recognition scene is at once a moment in the process of “becoming-subject” and the undermining of the subject’s placement in the world. At the same time, the subject discovers itself as implicated in the fallen world of its emergence — not from some Archimedean point of view, but as its product, “the pure object of societal events.”⁵¹ The legacy of this recognition is “the future that is to be created but has not yet been born,” the uncertain freedom to be carried forward from this moment.⁵²

So far I have been arguing for a reinterpretation of *HCC* that would rescue its subjectivity argument from the objections of Althusser, Honneth, Postone, et al. To really make this argument would entail a reading of the structures of surplus-value production in Marx’s *Capital* as moments of misrecognized class subjectivity — a task for another day, perhaps. To be totally explicit: the most important contribution *both to Marxism and to novel theory* of *HCC* is its account of reified subjectivity and the dereifying dialectic of the subject: the subject is the self-imposed loss of its constitutive determinations. For now, I want to take the picture of subjectivity outlined just above—the subject as 1.) *undermined* by recognition, as 2.) *implicated* in the fallen world of its emergence, and as 3.) *destined* for further self-construction and transformation in an uncertain future — as the rudiments of a “theory of the novel.”

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Turning now to the novel, it is apparent we will need a different archive than the works comprising *TN*’s typology of thesis (*Don Quixote*), antithesis (*Sentimental Education*), and synthesis (*Wilhelm Meister*). The features we have identified — recognition scene, the undermining of the subject’s placement, the rootedness in

the fallen world, and the destiny of future self-unmaking — make up no part of Lukács's earlier theory of the novel, which is predicated on the abyss separating self and world; *TN* never countenances subjectivity as a moment of the external object-world. But these features are (I would argue) not simply a checklist for matching certain novelistic plots with an inventory derived from *HCC* — a kind of Bechdel Test for Hegelian Marxists. I would venture that we also have here a periodization: the culmination of (one trajectory of) literary realism. I am thinking of a specific cluster of works that refuse the terms of accommodation between the subjective ideal and resistant reality offered by *TN*: Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. In these works, we have nothing like the dualism of problematic "interiority" on one hand and "inessential, empty reality" on the other.⁵³ In these novels, recognition never leads to the restoration of a prelapsarian identity, nor are their conclusions conciliations with or accommodations of reality. Instead we find that interiority is decentered; the "soul" is not something self-given, but a product of external processes and supports that can be seized reflexively. This is the work of the recognition scenes. Daniel Deronda's Jewishness, the pre-history between Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond (and also the role of Ralph Touchett in securing Isabel Archer's inheritance), the confession of Smerdyakov to the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich, or Nekhlyudov's responsibility for the "fallen" woman on whom he is to pass judgment — in each instance we discover the roots of the self surprisingly *exposed* and *external* to the self; self-consciousness is "wholly on the side of the object," in the language of *HCC*.

Take for example *Resurrection*. The recognition scene occurs almost right away, as the aristocrat Nekhlyudov, while serving jury duty, discovers that the sorry and ruined woman standing on trial for murder is the same Maslova he seduced and abandoned nine years before. The recognition is not simply the identification of this figure from Nekhlyudov's past, but also the troubling implication of his own (caddish) responsibility for the chain of events that has issued in the wreck of Maslova's life and the present threat of her conviction. The bored, purely contemplative perspective of the juror-spectator is upended — Nekhlyudov feels "as if he were going not to judge, but to be judged."⁵⁴ In the further development of the plot, Nekhlyudov takes conscience of the unreflective vanity, insularity, and selfishness of his class position (a Czarist-era landowner socially contiguous with influential governors and administrators). All the while contesting Maslova's wrongful conviction, Nekhlyudov is drawn further into relinquishing his privilege, so as to wrench a truthful mode of being from the entrenched corruption of his milieu and his own moral formation and cultural insertion. Finally, in the novel's conclusion, Nekhlyudov is untethered from the all-consuming project of liberating Maslova — not only does he not succeed in overturning her sentence, but she dismisses him from this field of action by refusing to marry him; their involvement is at an end. And yet the last pages of the novel teem with restless promptings and a cascade of insights into his human purpose.

Nekhlyudov is to begin a new life, “not because he had entered into new conditions of life, but because everything he did after that night had a new and quite different significance than before.”⁵⁵ To gloss this in Lukács’s terms, “the act of becoming conscious turns into a *point of transition in practice*,” so that “*the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object*.”⁵⁶ (Incidentally, Lukács in his analysis of Tolstoy in the final chapter of *TN* does not even attempt an adequate characterization of this last of Tolstoy’s novels.)

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the recognition scene (Smerdyakov’s confession to the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich) does not only illuminate the empirical “facts of the case,” in the process clearing away the ambiguous (not to say raving) indications of guilt which land Dmitri in Siberia for the murder of his father. Beyond this “solution” of the novel’s central mystery, the recognition presents the figure of the despised, uncanny Smerdyakov to the “innocent” brothers as a mirror of their own Oedipal imbrications. If the rousing ending of the novel “makes a subject” out of the brothers, it is starting from this recognition of identity with Smerdyakov. That is to say, while none of the brothers *did* kill their father, their late collective identification is with the vanishing position of this non-brother. The recognition of how “we are all Smerdyakov” is simultaneously a dissolution of that place (he commits suicide) and a struggle *against* this identity, in their newfound solidarity.

The recognition scene in *Daniel Deronda* has the strange consequence of triggering what we might call a *second-hand* subjective destitution: when Daniel, raised as the adopted nephew of Sir Hugo Mallinger, learns that his parents were Jews, and is prompted to travel to the East to promote a vague Zionism, this is experienced as a “sort of crisis” in the life of the other protagonist, Gwendolen Harleth:

she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving.⁵⁷

Not for Daniel but for Gwendolen is the open-ended project stretching beyond the novel’s conclusion felt as “the bewildering vision of these wild-stretching purposes.”⁵⁸ And also for Gwendolen is the rootedness in the fallen world and the destiny of future self-unmaking; Deronda, who in F.R. Leavis’s judgment combines “moral enthusiasm” with “essential relaxation,” and “has no ‘troubles’ he needs a refuge from,” more or less translates his new identity into a self-evident and unproblematic sense of duty.⁵⁹ It is Gwendolen who is plunged in the icy bath of self-humiliation and emerges with no definite way marked ahead, with the minimal sense that somehow life will be different — better, but harder — going forward. And unlike in *Middlemarch*, there is no sagacious confirmation that this destiny ever takes place. The purposes are left as though hanging in history, mere vectors or first steps.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the recognition scene is quite explicitly Isabel Archer's recognition of her own reification: "the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron."⁶⁰ But this realization of how she has been treated like a *thing* (married for her money under false pretenses) is at the same time the realization that her very subjectivity is only a produced effect of prior stage-management. Far from being an abstract autonomy whose placement or determination is infinitely deferred, she is determinately placed not only by the conspiracy of her husband Gilbert Osmond and his former lover Madame Merle, but also by the observing perspective of her invalid cousin Ralph Touchett. The latter discovery discloses the ideal spectator for whom Isabel's "freedom" was enacted as just this frail, dying, heartbroken man — a combination of Prospero (weaving her fate from behind the scenes) and Caliban (cynical and shattered in body). Isabel's fate is usually taken as a stern lesson warning against the aestheticism of the self inhering in the idealist doctrine of an unbounded, self-created consciousness. But what I would like to emphasize is that the entire topic of unconditioned freedom is not just a fallacious perspective one might unwisely *adopt*, but is a subjective mode "always already" fixed by the voyeuristic gaze of Ralph Touchett. (And I would argue that this logic is also figured in the "house of fiction" metaphor in the preface to the New York Edition of the novel, where the key is that every observer has an *obstructed view looking out* — there is simply no "content" inside the house of fiction except the "form" of the window's angle and situation opening upon the external scene.) Isabel is implicated in the fallen world insofar as she invests her placement in this enchanted construction with a quasi-providential mandate, the projected and idealized obligation to grandly and freely *do*, that is, implicated to the degree that she posits some symbolic addressee of her fate and self-performance. (This transcendental perspective is essentially the mistake of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, regardless of his supposed "atheism.") And in the conclusion of the novel, Isabel can only recover her self-determination retrospectively, by restoring intention to the discontinuity and fumbling of a botched life. When faced with the concealed machinery behind her apparently free choices, Isabel does not retreat from them, does not plead that she did not mean it. Robert Pippin nicely captures the paradox here: for Isabel "to have achieved a self-determined life is to 'recover' her past as her own."⁶¹ The point is *not* to recover somewhere an un-barred subject. Instead, she affirms her own meaning within what she can only regret, claiming a mangled outcome as something desired: "One must accept one's deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate."⁶² In saying this, and in returning to Osmond, Isabel writes herself into her own history as free within the long wreck of her past.

Here is a table summarizing these features as they appear in these works.

	Recognition scene	Undermining of the subject's placement	Rootedness in the fallen world	Destiny of future self-unmaking
<i>Resurrection</i>	Maslova on trial	Corruption and complacency of class-insertion	Seduction and abandonment of Maslova	Christian brotherhood
<i>Brothers Karamazov</i>	Smerdyakov's confession	Identification with Smerdyakov at moment of his self-negation	Oedipal antagonisms of brothers	New solidarity of brothers echoed in Alyosha's speech to village boys
<i>Daniel Deronda</i>	Daniel's Jewishness	Marginal placement of Jews in England	Expressed second-hand in Gwendolen's humiliation and regrets	Zionism
<i>Portrait of a Lady</i>	Merle and Osmond lovers; Ralph the architect of Isabel's inheritance	"Freedom" not ontological but effect of voyeuristic gaze	Investment in project of autonomous "doing"	Returning to Rome; repeating the past decision now as "her own"
<i>History and Class Consciousness</i>	Worker becomes aware of himself as a produced commodity	Subject "split": consciousness found wholly on side of object	Forms of relative surplus-value are proletariat's unconscious objectification	Non-mechanistic, unguaranteed <i>praxis</i> overturns forms of objectivity

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I do not mean to suggest for a moment that (of all texts!) *HCC* endorses an individualistic program for the ethical rectification of bourgeois or aristocratic subjects, even if that is the unmistakable payoff of some of the novels in question. I have been guilty, certainly, of translating the perspective of "proletarian class consciousness" into the situations of an Isabel Archer or an Ivan Karamazov. But Marxism is not, after all, an allegory for Jamesian "doing" or the defiles of Dostoevsky's "salvation." I argued above that only the narrative model of the "recognition scene" allowed us to grasp the picture of subjectivity in *HCC*. It is equally true that the "novel theory" in question cannot be understood without Lukács's theory of reification — which means in terms of class, ideology, history, totality, etc. But none of these concepts should be taken as

reflections of positively-given social contents (or context). For instance, I would say that the truly political concept in *TN* is actually the formal notion of “Irony,” not any of the remarks directly expressing its romantic anti-capitalism. And so in *HCC*’s theory of the novel, Marxist categories should be understood as topics of representation rather than topics for representation.⁶³

I would like to return for a moment to the translation, so to speak, from the class subject of *HCC* to the individual subject of the novels (or novel theory) in question. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson famously announced that “all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community.”⁶⁴ It is not too difficult to read *Daniel Deronda* or *Resurrection* along those lines, since they are “about” radical political projects: Zionism and Tolstoy’s anarchist non-violence (so that *Resurrection* was only written to raise funds for the emigration of the pacifist Doukhobors from Czarist Russia). James and Dostoevsky, on the other hand, are aligned together by their shared hostility to Utopian or radical politics (although both authors might equally be seen as incisive critics of reification). But it is not the logic of the collective — even at some allegorical level of Jameson’s “positive hermeneutic” — which I see as the key social projection in *HCC*’s theory of the novel. (And the same could be said for the positive hermeneutic of *HCC* itself, where the essays on organization hang together awkwardly with the reification analysis.)

So, does our theory of the novel leave us with the same old individualist subject (the production of which has been claimed as the novel’s great accomplishment by Foucauldian critics like D.A. Miller and Nancy Armstrong)? Not at all. But to see this, we need to look at two facets of “dereification” which are in no way individualist — and which will lead to the question of how far our novels are engaged in “dereification” (not, by the way, a Lukácsian term). Namely, we will look at *reality*, specifically the renovation of *TN*’s concept of reality and the connection to realism, and *subjective destitution*, which I take to be a moment of social being, since the Lukácsian subject is not a mere ephemeral “effect” of structure but a necessary if misidentified support of its reproduction.

“Reality” plays a complex role in *TN*. On one hand, Lukács’s entire argument depends on reality *not being granted the status of “totality.”* Reality has fallen off from the homogeneous world of the epic, to become abstract, fragile, incomplete, and discontinuous.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the problematic of the novel — its specific “dissonance” — means “positing the fragile and incomplete nature of the world as ultimate reality,” or “the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again.”⁶⁶ In other words, the novel’s meaning and completeness result from “ruthlessly... exposing” the world’s meaninglessness and incompleteness even at the moment when reality triumphs over ideal.⁶⁷ The novel depicts said triumph as hollow, momentary, and glib.⁶⁸

HCC also depicts (reified) reality as fragile, riddled by contradiction, and rent by gaps — threatened by the outbreak of irrational crises and “unmediated

catastrophes.”⁶⁹ The conceptual scaffolding of reification (the “iron laws” of bourgeois political economy) never yields — and capitalism can never succeed in doing so — a social order where reason actually holds sway. Reification only succeeds in sweeping under the rug the irrational contents of bourgeois social forms, which are constantly re-emerging as new, heightened contradictions. The difference between *TN* and *HCC*, on the question of reality, is that in the earlier work reality *emerges* only when challenged. Its appearance depends upon the resistance offered by subjectivity. That is, “outside reality... reveals itself as it ‘really is’ only as an opposition to every one of the hero’s actions.”⁷⁰ But in *TN*, this “refusal of the immanence of being” is definite and actual: the subject has no part to play in the totality, and must find its consolations within itself. In *HCC*, reality works the other way around. Reification in *HCC* has the passive, automatic *appearance* of proceeding “*without the intervention of the subject*,” while (as I will argue in a moment) really *depending on* the barred subjectivity and misrecognized objectifications of the proletariat.⁷¹

HCC’s picture of reality is to a large extent carried over by Lukács in his writings on realism and the historical novel: hence the emphasis on reality as *process* or *becoming* rather than a totality of *facts*. (Although one can go seriously wrong here and equate *becoming* with the dialectic, and reification with any instance of rigidity and intransigence. Lukács is very clear elsewhere in the essay that capitalism is not “unchanging” or absolute in that sense, given “the unceasingly revolutionary forces of the capitalist economy.”⁷²) It is for this reason that Lukács’s “realism” is not a copy or reflection of reality, but a kind of dialectical scalpel that identifies fissures and anomie in their historical dynamic.⁷³ One way to read Lukács’s great essay, “Realism in the Balance,” is as an extended meditation precisely on everything disruptive, fleeting, fragmented, subjective, dissimulating, delayed, anticipatory, out of sync, false, and merely-apparent in the contingent flux of history. But the crucial difference between the realism essays and *HCC* is the question of the Archimedean standpoint examined above in the context of class subjectivity and totality. In “Realism in the Balance,” an obstructed view of totality, the necessary mediation of perspective, is *written into realism*; the point is to grasp these existential or experiential vicissitudes of perspective *as conditioning the literary form itself*.⁷⁴ However, the “standpoint” which is to seize upon these mediations is no longer the barred subjectivity immanent to reification. Lukács’s realist author undertakes a “a deeper probing of the world,” with his aim “to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible networks of relationships that go to make up society.”⁷⁵ We are dealing here with what Althusser criticizes as “empiricism,” the abstraction of a conceptual essence from the given, real object of knowledge.⁷⁶ Absent from this probing, scalpel-wielding, uncovering perspective is *the fundamental claim of the “standpoint” argument as it is articulated in HCC*: that this standpoint belongs to the *object*, it is the unconscious and misrecognized *vantage point of objectivity upon itself*. And what is crucial about our literary texts — from

Deronda to *Resurrection* — is that the recognizing subjectivity is revealed to be not an Archimedean empiricist, but rather a *produced* and constrained position within the determinacies of the object-world. The subject of HCC's theory (and this is the whole point of Hegel) is sought in what is unpromisingly objective or substantial, precisely what is *unreflective* and pre-structured in the situation of a Nekhlyudov, an Isabel Archer, and so on.

Having addressed de-reification “objectively,” in terms of reality, I now want to look at HCC's *subjective destitution*, which I read as a moment of social being, since the subject is not only subordinated to structure but is a misrecognized pillar of its reproduction, capable of (Samson-like) interruption. This destitution should not be confused with the negative *effects of reification upon the (bourgeois) subject*, for example, the contemplative stance assigned to the rational observer of reified processes. (Nor should the subject in question be confused with the Althusserian topic of interpellation as subject.) I wrote above that “the subject is the self-imposed loss of its constitutive determinations.” In keeping with the Hegelian position that the course of objective development (“the Absolute conceived not only as substance...”) is also the unconscious path of consciousness or Spirit (“but also as subject”), Lukács insists that, “[f]or the proletariat,” the ongoing reproduction of capital on an expanded basis, “means *its own emergence as a class*.”⁷⁷ But this positive moment *only* describes its misrecognized, unconscious being, its bad objectification under capital. *Class consciousness*, then, has to be understood not as the achievement of some potential contents, but as a void: “For it is itself nothing but the contradictions of history that have become conscious.”⁷⁸ Žižek therefore is too quick to draw a contrast between Lukács and Hegel where the former supposedly offers “an absolute Subject which, in total self-transparency, appropriates or internalizes all objective substantial content.”⁷⁹ (What is interesting here is that Žižek, who has spent his career combating the received mythological version of Hegel, simply transfers these misconceptions onto Lukács, as though *somebody* had to make the mistakes that Hegel is being absolved of.) For this reason the last feature of HCC's theory of the novel, the destiny of future self-unmaking, is in a sense *unrepresentable*, projected beyond the novel form.

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One of the sturdiest axioms of literary criticism after structuralism is the equation of *narrative* closure with *ideological* closure. In Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, the “writable” is atemporal: “without structure,” “reversible,” “never shut,” and “without reference to a big final grouping or ultimate structure.”⁸⁰ What is “readable” is by contrast “fundamentally submitted to logico-temporal ordering,” committed “to announcing the end of every action (conclusion, interruption, closure, denouement).”⁸¹ In Franco Moretti's reading of the Sherlock Holmes stories, the “disenchantment” (in a Weberian sense) resulting from the detective's solutions betrays “totalitarian aspirations towards a *transparent* society.”⁸² In D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*, even the failures and

dilations of closure are taken to be emanations of power's grip on interiority. Likewise in Mary Poovey's *Genres of the Credit Economy*, novelistic closure serves a functionalist role in capitalism, soothing and naturalizing the anxieties arising from new economic forms. A Marxist version of this is Fredric Jameson's reading of *telos* (for instance Hegel's "Absolute Spirit") as a "strategy of containment."⁸³

On my reading of *HCC*, its theory of narrative closure does not function as an imaginary resolution, phantasmatic compensation, or functionalist adaptation — in other words, it is neither a reconciliation with nor a displaced symbolic transcendence of reification. Eliot, Dostoevsky, James, Tolstoy, and Lukács are not uplifting or pedagogical. The recognition in *HCC* and in these novels is terrifying, revealing the utter lack of a safety net — the risk already run and lost, the (oblivious) destitution of long standing. The demands of this recognition are destabilizing and harsh. This would argue the inversion, I think, of the usual "ideological" role of literary closure. Reification itself, by populating objectivity with categories, rule-governed processes, and social atoms, can even seem warm by comparison to the emotional nudity of the moment of recognition. What is left intact along the path of the subject is not embellished; it is, as yet, a wasteland.

Notes

1. J.M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) viii, and Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 202.
2. So, for Jameson, in *HCC*, “the construction of Utopia henceforth no longer falls to literature” (as it did in *Theory of the Novel*’s “nostalgic vision of a golden age in which an epic wholeness was still possible”), but now devolves upon “praxis and political action itself.” Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 190.
3. György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1971) 83.
4. Lukács, *HCC* 168.
5. *HCC* 167.
6. *HCC* 168.
7. Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008) 58.
8. For criticisms of Honneth, see Andrew Feenberg, “Rethinking Reification,” *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetics, Politics, Literature*, eds. Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, (London: Continuum, 2011), and Timothy Bewes, “Capitalism and Reification: The Logic of the Instance,” *Reading Capitalist Realism*, eds. Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2014).
9. Honneth, *Reification* 25.
10. *Reification* 38.
11. *Reification* 51.
12. *Reification* 25-6.
13. *HCC* 168.
14. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 356-63. See also Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis* (London: Verso, 2014) 61-9.
15. On “real subsumption,” see Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977) 1023-5, 1034-8.
16. *HCC* xxiv
17. Habermas, *Communicative Action* 360.
18. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2003) 191.
19. *HCC* 184.
20. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: U Cambridge P, 1996) 75.
21. Neil Larsen, “Lukács sans Proletariat,” *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance* 83, 92.
22. See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital* (London: Verso, 2011).
23. *HCC* 171.
24. For example, in *TN*, the only mention of recognition scenes occurs in the context of the epic’s “timelessness”: “This is the formal meaning of the typical scenes of revelation and recognition which Aristotle shows us; something that was pragmatically unknown to the heroes of the drama enters their field of vision and, in the world thus altered, they have to act otherwise than they might wish to act. But the force of the newly introduced factor is not diminished by a time perspective, it is absolutely homogeneous with and equivalent to the present.” György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) 126-7.

25. György Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971) 177.
26. György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983) 101-2.
27. “[A]nagnorisis [does] not arise in the categories Hegel prefers.” Terence Cave, *Recognitions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 156.
28. Lukács, *TN* 97, 34.
29. *TN* 88.
30. *TN* 136.
31. “Because of the purely reflexive nature of the soul’s interiority, outside reality remains quite untouched by it.” *TN* 100.
32. *TN* 79.
33. *HCC* 186.
34. *HCC* 158.
35. *HCC* xxiii.
36. Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing* (London: Verso, 2012) 220.
37. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2006) 221-2.
38. Postone, *Time* 82.
39. *Time* 80.
40. Žižek, *Nothing* 258.
41. *Time* 275n41.
42. *Nothing* 261.
43. *HCC* 166.
44. *HCC* 199.
45. “[P]roletarian self-consciousness removes the veil and reveals the alleged core of social relationships. In this respect, the overcoming of this reification represents the liberation of labor from the compulsion of the commodity structure.” Norbert Trenkle, “The Metaphysical Subtleties of Class Struggle: On the Unspoken Premises of an Odd Retro-Discourse,” *Krisis* (2005). <http://www.krisis.org/2005/the-metaphysical-subtleties-of-class-struggle>
46. *HCC* 173.
47. *HCC* 209. See also *HCC* 190.
48. *HCC* 149.
49. *HCC* 80.
50. *HCC* 199.
51. *HCC* 165.
52. *HCC* 204.
53. *TN* 92.
54. Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, trans. Louise Maude (London: Oxford UP, 1916) Ch. XIX.
55. Tolstoy, *Resurrection* Ch. XXVIII.
56. *HCC* 178.
57. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London and Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1876) Ch. LIX.
58. Eliot, *Deronda* Ch. LIX.

59. F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948) 84.
60. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, vol. II (New York: Modern Library, 1951) 379.
61. Robert Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 142.
62. James, *Portrait*, vol. II 284.
63. This is perhaps the place to differentiate my approach from Anna Kornbluh's in her essay "Marx's Victorian Novel," *Mediations* 25.1 (Fall 2010) 15-37. Kornbluh's analysis demonstrates that the rhetorical figures and tropes of big-C *Capital* also belong to little-c capital; e.g. the dialectic of capital is itself "metaleptic." I have also attempted a "literary" analysis of reification and class struggle, but my sense of "novel theory" is confined to the kinds of problems broached in *TN*: specifically, the subject-object problem and its neighbor, totality. Another difference: Lukács is not what we would call a "close-reader" — in fact he barely manages to name the books he is discussing — nor have I tried to be one here. Kornbluh's essay is a model of close reading.
64. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 70.
65. See "The Inner Form of the Novel," *TN* 70-83.
66. *TN* 71, 84.
67. *TN* 72.
68. The discussion of Tolstoy in the last chapter of *TN* clarifies what is going on here. The epiphanies and enlightenments of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* are unsustainable; here it is the subjective side which is glib, discontinuous, and momentary: "Such paths cannot be trodden" (*Theory* 150).
69. *HCC* 165.
70. *TN* 100.
71. *HCC* 128.
72. *HCC* 97.
73. Fredric Jameson has recently offered a quartet of distinctions to parse this dialectic: transcendental immanence, transcendental transcendence, immanent immanence, and immanent transcendence. *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso 2013) 210-6.
74. György Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (Verso: London, 2007) 33-6.
75. Lukács, "Realism" 38.
76. Louis Althusser, "Du 'Capital' à la philosophie de Marx," *Lire le Capital*, vol. I, eds. Althusser and Étienne Balibar (Paris: Librairie François Maspero, 1968) 38-45.
77. *HCC* 171.
78. *HCC* 178.
79. *Nothing* 258.
80. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1976) 11, 16
81. Barthes, *S/Z* 53-4.
82. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London: Verso, 1988) 155, 136.
83. Jameson, *Political* 53.

