The Narration of an Unhappy Consciousness: Lukács, Marxism, the Novel, and Beyond

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Parmenides said, 'one cannot think of what is not'; - we are at the other extreme, and say, 'what can be thought of must certainly be a fiction.' - Nietzsche (1)

Introduction

J. M. Bernstein has written a book that merits our attention (The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form, Harvester Press, 1984, 286pp, £22.50 hc), for it attempts a major rehabilitation of Georg Lukács's pre-Marxist work of 1914-15, The Theory of the Novel (2). Furthermore, the intentions behind the book are neither ahistorical nor politically regressive. Although he is not the first to recognise the importance of Lukács's early writings, Bernstein's approach is unique in that the aim is not to retrieve the tragic and existentialist vision of TN for contemporary philosophy, thereby discarding the path to Marxism Lukács was to take; rather, the aim is to open up a hermeneutic dialogue between TN and History and Class Consciousness, in order to locate the meaning of Marxism in narrative and praxial terms.

Bernstein wants to make substantial claims for the importance of Lukács's pre-Marxist essay. He wants to show that Lukács's theory of the novel is a Marxist one, or, more tentatively, that a Marxist theory of the novel can be excavated from Lukács's essay. For Bernstein Lukács's early essay is much more than an exercise in romantic anti-capitalism. It shows us, he argues, that the novel is the site where the alienated, unhappy consciousness of the bourgeois era reveals itself and points beyond itself for its fulfilment; the disclosure of the 'truth' of the novel points to the necessity of making the transition from the 'I' to the 'we', from contemplation to praxis.

I think it would not be unfair to say that Lukács's standing in the history of Marxist aesthetics has been overshadowed in recent years by figures such as Adorno and Benjamin. No doubt there are certain historical reasons for this elision of Lukács; the theories of certain Marxist modernists have come to be regarded as more conducive to the complexities of cultural and political revolution than the simple, dichotomous choices presented to us by Lukács in his championing of realist art, a commitment which has strained his relationship with cultural modernism ever since.

Bernstein's book enables us to redress the balance. Firstly, he notes that TN was regarded by a generation of leftist philosophers (Adorno, Benjamin, Goldmann, etc.) as a decisive piece of work in establishing the philosophical framework in which an understanding of modern art and its predicament could be situated. Thus, the essay's revered place in certain quarters needs to be explained. Secondly, he argues that Lukács later underestimated the achievement of the essay in exposing the novel to be an impossible, contradictory practice. Lukács's achievement was largely to do this through an analysis of the dialectics of form found in novel writing, an approach that he later abandoned and which was consistently pursued by Adorno in his analysis of modern works of art. And thirdly, Bernstein uses the insights of TN to show that the assumption, shared by literary and philosophical modernism, that there is something intrinsically radical about aesthetic modernism is philosophically naive and fundamentally ahistorical. Thus, Bernstein's book should be regarded as an achievement on several fronts - one, it reintroduces Lukács from the margins to the centre of contemporary debates; and two, through a painstaking reconstruction of Lukács's early, enigmatic essay, Bernstein is able to problematise our whole postmodern condition and offer a constructive basis for a Marxist political praxis. The book is an original attempt to take up Lukács's challenge of developing a distinctly Marxist philosophical culture (3), and of thinking through the antinomies of bourgeois thought: the aim of the book is to show that the novel gives 'phenomenological expression' to those same antinomies.

The following review essay is divided into five sections, with the aim of conveying the fundamental point - only implicit in Bernstein's argument - that the claim that 'the validity of the arguments put forward in TN require premises that are explicitly Marxist' (p. xiii) can only be demonstrated and appreciated by a phenomenological and hermeneutic exposition. In section one I attempt to present Bernstein's arguments for reading TN as a Marxist account of the novel, in a way which will serve as a general introduction to Lukács's essay; in section two I turn to a detailed presentation of what is the centrepiece of Bernstein's reconstruction, the claim that in TN Lukács is arguing that the novel is 'Kantian' in form, reflecting our contemplative relation to the world where freedom has become exiled within subjectivity, and where imagination has replaced praxis; in section three I trace Bernstein's claim that irony is the figure or trope that reveals the limits of the novel and its enterprise: the disclosure of the novel as a 'pseudo-praxis'; in section four I discuss Bernstein's objection to the modernist and postmodernist understanding of the novel and modern art; in section five I present Bernstein's construal of the meaning of Marxism in the light of the revelation of the 'truth' of the novel, and his arguments for a narrative Marxist praxis; and, finally, in the conclusion, I offer an assessment of the strengths and the weaknesses of the book.

I Introduction to The Theory of the Novel

As a historico-philosophical essay TN is dependent upon a specific tradition of modern German philosophy - Hegelian hermeneutics. However, its arguments are a coming together of various strands and schools of thought that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century in response to the changed conception

of the identity and role of philosophy that took place after the demise of Hegel's speculative idealism, and the return to Kant. In one short work Lukács employs the insights of Kant, Hegel, Schiller, Schlegel, Dilthey, Simmel, Weber, and Kierkegaard. Needless to say, this does not make for a harmonious combination: in his 1962 preface to the essay Lukács described it as a fusion of left-wing ethics and right-wing epistemology. The first part of the work offers a historico-philosophical approach to the novel, and represents a continuation of the insights of Hegel's aesthetics; the second part of the work develops a typology of the novel and shows the neo-Kantian influence on Lukács's theory. Lukacs later said that the work represented his move from Kant to Hegel, and Bernstein argues that a Marxist theory of the novel will obviously have to be sought in the first half of the book. Moreover, Bernstein's contention is that not only is a move from Kant to Hegel evident in TN but that, without Lukács himself knowing it, his later move from Hegel to Marx has already been reached in the argument of TN.

Bernstein commences his reconstruction with a chapter on 'Lukács' Aesthetic', an examination of Lukács's contrast between the epic and the novel. The originality of Bernstein's reading lies in its stress that in TN we have an attempt to determine the historical specificity of the novel; Lukács is presenting us with 'a hermeneutics of the novel rather than a theory of the novel embedded in a putative universal philosophy of history' (p. 47). Thus, Lukács's concept of the epic is not to be regarded as a utopian construct based on some longing for a Greek world of Apollonian sweetness and light, but, rather, it is to be seen as a hermeneutical construct, 'an act of historical awareness from the perspective of the present by which that present can begin to come to self-consciousness of its historical situation' (ibid.). The intention, then, is to trace the change in literary forms as a response to changing socio-historical conditions. The novel represents the epic of modernity. It is to modern society what the epic was to the integrated world of the Greeks.

Once Lukács's intention has been recognised, then we can begin to appreciate that the central problem for him in TN is the autonomous status of art in modern society. Art - the 'visionary reality made to our measure', as Lukács eloquently put it - has become severed from its relation to life. It is no longer a copy but a created totality; all the models have gone; art no longer has anything to do with a world that is immanently complete in itself. Lukács's fundamental point is that this is not for any artistic reasons but for historico-philosophical ones. For Lukács, literature is to be understood as a cultural practice and not in terms of an essentialist or naturalist theory, where some fundamental properties are considered constitutive of the 'literariness' of all literary artefacts. The rules of literary activity have a historical substratum.

In the age of the Homeric epic, art possesses an immediate reality. It requires no preliminary justification on the part of the writer; the story to be told needs no background in time because the culture knows no history; social institutions are not regarded as external traditions. In sum, the work of art possesses a concrete basis in the life of the society. By contrast, works of art in the modern epoch are characterised by a whole set of different elements. They are now autonomous; they reveal an ethic of creative subjectivity; telling a story has become problematic, its meaning no longer immanent but transcendent; the author displays an ironical self-consciousness; the hero of the novel is the problematic individual who stands in opposition to society, tradition, and history. In a word, the work of art has become abstract (4).

Bernstein argues that Lukács's major point is not simply that art has become autonomous but that (i) this autonomy is historically specific to capitalist society, and (ii) the autonomy of art is determined by the fragmentation and reification which accompanies the capitalist mode of production. It is this that renders the novel such a problematical and contradictory practice. The relation of the novel to the world, and how the novel conceptualises the world, are governed by the reified condition of that world. The autonomy of art in modern society represents a dialectic of freedom and impotence, where the novel is free to experiment (form) but where its freedom remains trapped in subjective consciousness. The freedom of the novel is entirely fictional.

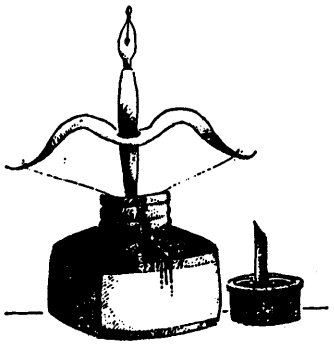
II Kant and the Novel

One of Bernstein's great achievements is to show that in TN Lukács conceives the novel in Kantian terms. The novel is written against a background of Kantian assumptions that are constitutive of the form of the novel. Here lies the point of contact between the pre-Marxist Lukacs (TN) and the Marxist Lukacs (HCC).

In HCC Lukács's aim was to show the neo-Kantian origin of modern sociology and of orthodox Marxism which conceived itself in terms of an empirical science of society. Lukács argues that both are based on a representational epistemology of subject and object where the former 'represents' the latter, and that, consequently, our current modes of thought cannot overcome the 'givenness' of reality. Representational thinking relates statically and contemplatively to its object, seeing it as something external to itself. Orthodox Marxism (the Marxism of Anti-Dühring and the Second International for Lukacs) makes a philosophy of praxis (the transformation of the world) impossible (5).

For Lukács it is primarily Kant's philosophy that both testifies to and sanctifies the emerging separation of private and public life, work and leisure (labour and culture), etc. that defines the moment of capitalism. Kant's philosophy expresses its fundamentally antinomic character in a series of dualisms: subject and object, freedom and necessity, is and ought (facts and values in modern parlance), and so on, and in the positing of an irrational and unknowable thing-in-itself. The positing of a thing-in-itself reflects Kant's failure to penetrate to the heart of modern, bourgeois society and its contradictions (6). As reflected in Kant's philosophy, the subject of modern society is one that can only exist in a fictional world (noumenal reality) radically divorced from empirical life (phenomenal reality). The reified world of capital provides the historic substratum of Kant's antinomic thinking, of his two-world thesis of a phenomenal world of cause and effect and a noumenal world of causality through freedom. Freedom in Kant is placed in a world beyond the self which is forever striving for fullfilment, but whose purity of moral will renders it incapable of realising its ethical vocation in the empirical world. The Kantian moral subject can only stand in contradiction to the world; the Kantian self is a divided self which expresses its critique of society in terms of a self-perfecting moralism. 'Human freedom,' Bernstein writes, 'remains exiled within subjectivity unable to determine or shape the objective world in terms appropriate to itself' (p. 21).

Because Kant conceives of the empirical world in terms of a Newtonian necessity, so that teleology can only be thought as a regulative idea, ethics is restricted to subjectivity. It is at this conjunction that the modern novel assumes the ethical task of making the world intelligible to the alienated, Kantian (bourgeois) consciousness, for in a world of transcendental subjectivity ethics can only be objectivised as art: 'the aesthetic can be ethical only because the ethical has already been rendered aesthetic (fictional)' (p. 100).



Instead of history, tradition or society, it is now the 'I' of transcendental subjectivity that becomes the form-giver which renders life intelligible.

Kant's philosophy results in a contemplative relation to the world. The universality of this relation between man and the world is argued by Lukács to be the specific result of a capitalist mode of production. Under capitalism the social world comes to appear as an object externally related to the self living in that world, a process Lukács named 'reification'. For Bernstein TN can be construed as a Marxist theory of the novel because it 'locates the antinomies of the novel in a grammar of contemplation' (p. 42). The central aesthetic problem of the novel is the separation of form and life, the fact that meaning is no longer immanent in the world itself. 'Form' and 'life', the two key categories of Lukács's theory, are employed to show that the problem of novel writing is that of synthesising the radical heterogenity of life in accordance with the dictates of form. Novel writing issues from a world where forms of intelligibility and meaning are no longer authorised by tradition and custom. In this context the novel shows itself to be a contradictory practice, for the formal imperative, let life be made intelligible, results in the world of the novel being totalised in abstract terms owing to the radical disjunction that exists between form and life. Thus: 'the novel is characterised by a dialectic of form-giving and mimesis where form demands immanence and the world mimetically transcribed resists form' (p. 107). As a result totality becomes a normative postulate, remaining valid only as an ideal.

Because of the disharmony between form and life, and the retreat into subjectivity, the task of rendering ethical life intelligible has thus fallen to the imagination. In a chapter entitled 'The Novel's Schematism: Binding Time' (pp. 109-46) Bernstein shows how the novel devises strategies and procedures for overcoming the disjunction between form and life and making the latter intelligible. The symbolist techniques of the novel indicate to what extent the immediate meaning of the objects of the world has disappeared. Because of the separation between form and life the novel adopts a vast schematising procedure which represents 'a search for modes of temporal ordering which would give our normative concepts access to the world' and, moreover, 'a constitutive role in our comprehending existence' (p. 113). For the novel schemata (Kant's procedure for determining how transcendental categories can be applied to objects of experience - the task of synthesising concept and intuition) become what Bernstein calls 'narrational strategies' that are capable of rendering normative concepts empirical. The more the disjunction between form and life becomes manifest, the more fragile, artificial and purely literary will the schemata employed by the novel appear. The novel, argues Bernstein, is the literary form of our time because it takes up the task of the 'temporalising of form' which the secularised, disenchanted modern world simultaneously demands and refuses (7).

In this section of the reconstruction Bernstein presents a reading of Flaubert's Sentimental Education as a way of both revising Lukács's original inadequate account of the problem of time in the novel, and as a way of showing how the novel and writing naturalise our inability to transform the world by presenting all attempts at historical change as doomed from the start. In the novel Flaubert continually undermines the hero's (Frédéric's) attempts at meaningful action by a process of ironising his hopes and dreams. To be sure, Frédéric's hopes are without ground in reality, but what Flaubert does is to present a novel in which all attempts, whether well grounded in reality or not, to translate hopes and dreams into praxis and action are seen as illusory. For Bernstein the ideological perspective of Flaubert is determined by his act of transposing the 'time' of the defeat of the (1848) revolution into the revolutionary period itself (p. 140). The environment of post-revolutionary defeat is thus responsible for Flaubert's mistaken perspective that all history is doomed to meet a similar fate. Thus Bernstein writes: 'Sentimental Education may be "a novel about nothing", but it is written from a determinate perspective which makes its very meaninglessness, its denial of meaning, significant. Not to take this step outside the experience of the novel is to accede to Flaubert's ideological perspective, to treat the moment of 1848 and its failure as nature's givens rather than as moments of history' (p. 145). The result of Flaubert's naturalisation of the impossibility of history and praxis is the reduction of reality to illusion and the retreat into fiction as the only valid form of subjective freedom. In this 'romanticism of disillusionment' we have perhaps the model of our latter-day post-structuralist prophets of despair and defeat.

Throughout, the aim of Bernstein's reconstruction is not simply to show how the novel invents strategies and styles for dealing with the problems of the form of its enterprise, but to pose the fundamental question why we can project the image of our life as a whole only through an act of imagination (p. 115) (8). It is necessary, he argues, that we are able to grasp the historical meaning of Kant's separation of sensibility and intellect and thereby recover 'the historical meaning of the claim that it is the imagination that mediates between the two' (p. 114).

Bernstein's insights have far-reaching implications for our understanding of philosophical modernism. The world has become for us modern subjects, we might say, a world of as-if; we can only comprehend our relation to the world in regulative and not in constitutive terms (9). Contemporary reason, the reason of Kant, argues Bernstein, is contemplative. It becomes contemplative when it finds itself unable to determine its empirical reality. In philosophy, positivism is the effect of this contemplation and reification of reality; in ethics contemplation forces Reason into a beyond; in culture this beyond finds a home, a social site, for itself in 'socially controlled acts of the imagination' (p. 102). According to Bernstein the fact that the novel has assumed such a central place in bourgeois society and culture is to be explained by its imaginative function for a fragmented and individualistic (non-)community. 'The novel,' he writes, 'is the crisis of modern culture because it is the space, and the only space available to contemplative reason, where ethical reason and empirical reality can meet. It is then neither through accident nor arbitrary ideological assumptions that contemplative consciousness has so often chosen literary culture, and in especial the novel, as a site for ethical argumentation and ideological debate' (pp. 102-03). What is frequently overlooked by defenders of modernist culture is that this site is predetermined by the confinement of ethics to a realm (noumenal) unspoiled by reification, and, moreover, that this realm is itself a

product of reification. Instead our fictional status, our inability to transform the world, is celebrated.

III Irony and the Limits of the Novel

In the novel freedom expresses itself in terms of an ironic subjectivity. The freedom of subjectivity lies in that it is defined as a 'nothingness', it can only define itself in relation to what it is not, its freedom is entirely negative: freedom from rather than freedom to. This negative freedom is the freedom of the unhappy consciousness (10).

As Bernstein points out, the primacy of individual experience is the ideology of modern times, of bourgeois philosophy. Forms are no longer given by tradition or religion (the death of God); instead, subjectivity proclaims itself to be the only authentic substance of experience and volition. The self has become form. Romantic irony, as theorised by Friedrich Schlegel, represents an attempt to bring to self-consciousness the alienation of the self from the world. However, for Bernstein, irony, the trope of the beautiful soul whose consciousness of its predicament deprives it of its ability to act, reveals the ideological boundaries of the present:

> Because of its distance from both theory and action the novel is inevitably tempted to underplay the intractability of reality or to divinise the powers of language and imagination. Ironic structuring, so pervasive in modernist writing, represents a way of avoiding these extremes without abandoning novel writing altogether; but this is no more than a recognition of the limits of the novel, it is not a real solution to the world's fragility. (p. 118)

In modernism the resolution of self and world is achieved on the level of fiction, and because it is language that makes possible the distancing of the transcendental or fictional self from the empirical self, the self is transformed into a linguistic self whose authentic existence is a fictive one: 'Authentic subjectivity has been reduced to a moment in a linguistic trope; the self has become no more than a figure of language' (p. 214). The delusion of realism is that interpretation is taken to be representation, the novelist becomes a social scientist and the novel social theory. Modernism, by contrast, recognises the delusion and treats fiction (illusion) as fiction (illusion) and is therefore, we might say, true. However, it is necessary, argues Bernstein, to distinguish between different strategies modernism has developed in response to the illusions of realism.

Accordingly, Bernstein locates two types of response the novel develops, in the form of exemplary ironic strategies where it comes to self-consciousness and questions its removal from experience. The first, characterised as 'negative' irony, uses the problematical status of the self generated by the alienation of the individual from the world in order to promote 'a derealisation of the real (empirical), an ethics of fiction'. That is, the forms produced by the author in order to show the disjunction between form and life are treated as fictions and deprived of any representational power. A novel employing this type of irony will be marked by an absence of authorial authority and by the loss of subjectivity in-forming the discourses of experience. It signifies 'the discontinuity in absolute terms between fiction and reality', and it results in a self 'which appropriates language to itself and thus through language reality' (pp. 216-17). The second type of strategy, characterised as 'positive' irony, will be an attempt to overcome the novel's irony ironically in order to show the limits of the novel. Whereas the former represents a valorisation of the fictional over the empirical, the latter reveals the novel to be a pseudo-praxis. The first strategy is associated with an author like Flaubert, the second strategy with Thomas Mann in Doctor Faustus.

For Bernstein, Mann's achievement is that, while he concedes the modernist critique of realism he does so without falling prey to modernism's glorification of its ironic status. Both realism and modernism fail to recognise the radical historical nature of the novel form, and affirm a contemplative conception of reality. Form remains 'an ideality, an expression of what ought to be in the face of recalcitrant reality' (p. 219). It is Thomas Mann, argues Bernstein, who shows writing to be an ethical act, an interpretation of history and in history. He thus returns the novel form in its self-conscious mode as an act of narration to history. This return, however, is subject to a final irony, one that reveals the limits of the novel:

> the affirmation of the historical and interpretive moment of the text is itself textualised ... the figure of the text's historicality becomes, ironically, a statement of its negativity, of its distance from its object and from its practice.

Thus, we can read Mann's text (Dr Faustus) as 'an emblem of the novel as a pseudo-praxis, as an unhappy consciousness at home neither in the idealities of fiction nor in the realities of history' (p. 220).

Mann's overcoming of the novel's irony not only reveals the novel to be a pseudo-praxis but also discloses to us the identity of the transcendental subjectivity. The question of identity - who am I? - the question that has been the controlling question of the Western metaphysical tradition since Descartes (the novel, Bernstein aims to show in Chapter V, can be construed in terms of a Cartesian narrative) is shown to be the crisis point of the novel, for it cannot answer this question: 'Its unanswerability was guaranteed by the ahistorical and unnarratable character of the cogito' (p. 221). Mann's ironic overcoming reveals the negativity of art: 'its power to preserve itself and its forms against the "destructive power of the whole".' This leads Bernstein to argue that it is the 'whole', what Hegel calls the 'universal language' of a time's customs and laws, which is the ultimate concrete subject: 'Transcendental subjectivity is concrete social practices as the bearers of history, a "we" which brings about the unity and separation of "I"s.' But, although the identity of the alienated, unhappy consciousness can be located, Bernstein recognises that

> The specificity of our time is that this unity appears not as our self-possession but as an externality, a negativity against us, making our separation not a moment of individuation and self-realisation, but a moment of isolation and diremption from the totality we are. (pp. 222-23)

IV Modernism and the Novel

The objection that is most likely to be raised against Bernstein's book is that it displays a fundamentally nostalgic diagnosis of modernity, a failure to come to grips with the possibilities of pluralism and play opened up by the disintegration of traditional society and the challenge of modernist experience. Indeed, could not Lukács's lifelong career be construed as representing in pristine form such a failure?

Bernstein is astute in pointing out that it is not simply a question of choosing between modernity and anti-modernity but of showing the equivocal nature of our condition and not shirking our historical responsibility.

The superiority of a historico-philosophical approach is readily apparent when we compare it to

formalist and post-modernist approaches. Panegyrics on modernism are usually based on modernism's break with realism - 'the time of 1848'. Modernism, it is argued, no longer seeks a harmony of sign and meaning as did romantic art, but represents a demystification of romantic delusions concerning the nature of art. But this, in turn, is based on certain delusions which reveal the ahistorical nature of theoretical modernism. Referring to one leading theoretical modernist (Paul de Man), Bernstein writes, 'He takes the historical experience of modern literature to be such as to allow a privileged insight into the true metaphysical nature of literature generally' (p. 66). Theoretical modernism is based on a hypostatisation of certain specific historical features in modern art, and it thus fails to find anything problematic in the dissonance between sign and meaning. The ideality of transcendental subjectivity has been replaced, Bernstein argues, by the ideality of linguistic effectivity (p. 235). There has taken place a reification of writing and of the literary text.

This reification of writing is clearly evident in the work of Roland Barthes and his progeny. As a defender of literary modernism, Barthes champions the liberation from realist representation as a realisation of writing's 'true, "fictive" and scriptual vocation'. But this view is naive in several respects. Firstly, its error lies in conceiving the constituting feature of modernity - against which aesthetic modernism rebels - to lie in representation. As Bernstein points out, representation has never been primary or innocent within the tradition (p. 234). Descartes, regarded by Lukács and Heidegger alike, as instituting the permanent crisis of modernity, establishes the autonomy of the thinking subject from nature, society, and history, only to be left with the problem of representation, that is, the truthfulness of his thought. Modernism and postmodernism simply replace the thinking subject with the writing subject whose sole essence and reality is to be a fictive being within the play of language. Secondly, the error lies in reducing the constraints of representation to 'pure textual productivity'. Against this view, Bernstein wants to argue that

> the discourses of experience are already constrained and moulded, not artificially or arbitrarily (like the arbitrariness of the sign in Saussure), but consistently by the complex material and semiotic processes by which (capitalist) society continually produces and reproduces itself.
> (p. 234)

Lukács can be seen in TN to prefigure certain modernist insights, in particular the recognition that the problem of the novel is the problem of its form. However, Lukács goes one stage further by showing the dialectics of form: the autonomy of art is affirmed by its attempted negation. The novel expresses its negative power (which could perhaps be viewed as the play of the negative, by contrast with Hegel's 'labour of the negative') in relation to reality, but reveals an impotence to change the world in other than fictional terms. And, as Bernstein puts it: 'We cannot produce another reality for ourselves simply by producing different fictions' (p. 234). Both literary and philosophical modernism have taken up Lukács's insights by elevating the agnostic historical pessimism of TN into a self-perfecting style, a general epistemological scepticism, a deconstructive strategy that fails to ask after the historical ground of the transition from metaphysical to metaphorical truth, a reification of writing that fails to ask why the modern self has become language bound - as Bernstein says, no more than 'a linguistic trope'.

The success of Bernstein's focus on the dialectics of form is that it enables him to show that modernism does not represent an epistemological break with realism but rather inherits and exacerbates all the fundamental antinomies of realism. He is thus able to avoid the twin pitfalls of empirical reductionism (realism) and metaphysical reification (modernism), and present the antinomies of fiction in their historically specific context, and in a way that points to their philosophical and praxial transcendence.

V Marxism and beyond the Novel

Frederic Jameson has alerted us to the fact that Lukács's work can be seen as a lifelong meditation on narrative, on its basic structures and its relationship to the reality it expresses (11). In the final chapter on 'Practical Reason', Bernstein argues for a narrative construal of the meaning of Marxism. Marxism, he holds, is the only philosophy of praxis that is capable of overcoming the pseudo-praxis of the novel, the exile of form into fiction (that which gives life its meaning and coherence), the limitations of transcendental subjectivity and the ironic consciousness, and hence the contemplative standpoint of much contemporary art and philosophy.

Bernstein is arguing for a hermeneutic comprehension of the meaning of Marxism. On the one hand he argues that the question of a post-literary form of narration is not a matter of idle speculation for its outlines are already contained in HCC in the account of class praxis. On the other hand, however, he finds it necessary to turn to the insights of Hannah Arendt and Hans-Georg Gadamer in order to give Marxism the narrative dimensions he wants. Marxism, he argues, cannot be construed as a universal philosophy of history for the simple reason that the space for epic history has gone. Moreover, he argues, all universal philosophies of history are disguised secularisations of theology (from heaven to earth, from God to man, etc.) which imply that there is an 'end of history', thus reducing historical praxis to a contemplative position. He further argues that all talk of the cunning of nature (Kant) or the cunning of reason (Hegel) is decidedly made redundant by the catastrophes of the twentieth century. If Marxism is not to be understood in terms of a universal philosophy of history then neither can the proletariat be viewed as the subject-object of history, assigned a messianic role, 'as if history had been waiting for the arrival of the proletariat in order to redeem it' (p. 25). The 'meaning' of Marxism needs to be understood as historically specific and historically relevant.

Where Bernstein differs from a straightforward hermeneutic position is on the need to make the transition from contemplation to praxis. Gadamer's critique of modernity fails to recognise the social and historical basis of the crisis of reason (what Gadamer calls, from Aristotle, phronesis). Nevertheless, Gadamer's notion of an effective historical consciousness can be used to give Marxism the praxial specificity less hermeneutic accounts fail to provide.

The possibility of a collective narrative that will replace the narrative of the bourgeois era stands, argues Bernstein, at the boundaries of the novel and at the centre of Marxism's self-understanding. However, he believes that it must be construed in a way that does not make the Marxist narrative transcendent to concrete social practices, that is, transcendent to the world we inhabit: 'To urge at this juncture,' he argues, 'that there is a collective history, an unfinished plot, breaks the fundamental connection between collective narratives and social identity' (p. 261). Thus, he is particularly sensitive to the problems confronting a collective narrative. On the one hand, he argues that the novel points to the need for a different storytelling in which the novel itself cannot participate, for its story is the absence of a collective subject that would give its many stories the meaning that would make their tellings redundant (p. 262). On the other hand, he wants

to alert us to the 'truth' of modernism that tells us that there is no longer one single, great collective narrative within which our individual fates can be narrated. He contends that today we are witnessing the 'becoming of anti-narrativity, the story of the undermining of the conditions for storytelling altogether' (ibid.). However, where he parts company with the ideology of modernism is in arguing that the antinomies of the novel prefigure not the death of narrative but the necessity for a new, non-literary form of narration.

It is in Arendt's linking of identity with narrativity that Bernstein sees the possibility of developing a narrative Marxism that is capable of forming a collective subject. He borrows the notion of 'the worldliness of the world' in order to argue that the background in and against which narratives are written is a world: 'the temporal structure of a life, an individual fate, is bound to the world order ... the meaning of an individual fate depends for its coherence on communal destiny' (p. 259). (It is Descartes' rejection of a world and a history - a past - as necessary conditions of self-identity that made it impossible for him to provide an account of his identity.) Still, this leaves the question of praxis in abeyance. For Bernstein, praxis needs to be understood as a world narration.

In TN, which offers us a tragic vision of the world, Lukács had posed the question of social change in terms of an unbridgeable gap between the reality that is and the ideal that should be. There have been many critiques of the position Lukács later came to hold in HCC (usually charges of idealism), and it is a point of controversy whether Lukács's standpoint is a form of neo-Fichteanism with the categorical imperative of 'proving the truth in practice', or whether Lukács's standpoint is a more speculative one, a (Hegelian) revolutionary realism, where the future is conceived, dialectically to be sure, but not in terms of a teleological finality and an ought of natural law, but as an active praxial reality informing and determining the present (12).

Bernstein argues that the great weakness of Lukács's position is that it is based on an assumption concerning the possibility of class consciousness and without identifying what he calls the 'becoming' of that consciousness. Lukács's account, he argues, is marred by an unwarrantable optimism. The sign of his optimism is the assumption 'of the existence of a class whose narrative was yet to be written, his assumption that the minimal consciousness of the alienation of proletarian individuals could be transformed into a class subjectivity' (p. 263). Lukács's optimism can be further explained, he argues, by the absence in his presentation of 'a mechanism of narrative production, a mechanism whereby the "I" of the individual proletarian and the "we" of the collectivity could be intersubjectively mediated' (ibid.). He argues that the continuation of Lukács's project would be the construction of a theory of praxis as a theory of political narration: 'a theory of the formation and re-formation of a collective identity through narratives whose telling would be at once a collecting and a making' (ibid., emphases added). He argues that the premises of praxial action, of a collective narrating of experience, neither presupposes the actual existence of a class consciousness nor represents a search for a subject capable of completing itself. Rather, he concludes by arguing:

> In learning to see political action in terms of a collective narration we realise the truth of the pseudo-praxis of the novel and simultaneously overcome the exclusion of form from non-literary domains. Praxis is a political narrating of experience; political narrative collects experience by collecting subjects into a collective subject; that collective subject becomes itself by producing a world in which it can say who it is.
> (p. 266, emphasis added)

Conclusion

The achievements of Bernstein's reconstruction are substantial. In this concluding section, I would like to offer an appraisal of what I take to be some of the strengths and some of the possible weaknesses of the argument.

Bernstein's reconstruction affords us the opportunity of revaluating Lukács's contribution to Western Marxism. Sensitive to the richness of Lukács's standpoint, he shows us that Lukács cannot be easily assimilated to idealist or utopian positions. For example, he warns us against viewing Lukács's conception of the proletariat in HCC in terms of a simple transposition of a Fichtean absolute subject into the proletariat through the addition of history and class. This, he argues, would simply reduce Lukács's position to the contemplative one his theory of praxis attempts to sublate (p. 25). Bernstein wants to argue that class consciousness exists as a possibility, and that some kind of formative (educative) process is needed to initiate and develop this potential revolutionary consciousness into a practical one, able to conjoin praxis and action in a way that is not open to the type of criticism Marx made in the third thesis on Feuerbach concerning 'educators' and 'educated'. He is astute in pointing out that 'what the social placement of the proletariat does not do is causally guarantee that class consciousness will be achieved' (p. 30). Even if Lukács did not completely succeed in his account of class praxis, it remains clear that we must take our starting-point from his attempt because the account he gives of the transition from partial to full class consciousness through praxis and action does at least provide us with 'an image of how class consciousness can be formed without presupposing what the content of that consciousness is to be' (p. 264). Although there are undoubtedly weaknesses in Bernstein's 'narrative' solution, his book, I would argue, must be seen as one of the few genuine attempts since Lukács to develop further the problem of the nature of class praxis, a project that remains essential to Marxism. Indeed, it is such a project - the attempt to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between theory and practice - that makes Marxism superior to all other philosophies of practice.

It is possible to see Bernstein's narrative construal of Marxism as a response to Habermas's advocacy of a social theory able to initiate what he calls 'processes of enlightenment'. Indeed, what is striking about this narrative construction of Marxism is its affinity with Habermas's general project of enlightenment. As a result of this affinity, Bernstein's thinking suffers from certain weaknesses which also occur in Habermas. His theory of praxis as a political narrative which allows us to say 'who we are' is very reminiscent of Habermas's desire for some ideal-speech situation. In both we find a yearning for some lost immanence of meaning and experience (identity). Bernstein wishes, above all, to emphasise the praxial nature of narrative, and yet, along with Arendt, he turns narrative into a new ontological foundation, almost a transcendental condition of possibility of meaning and experience. Once the idea of narrative is ontologically grounded then Marxism is simply brought in to make the transition from contemplation to praxis. This may not be what Bernstein intended, but it seems to follow from his eclecticism. There is certainly a lack of clarity in his final argument, and it is to be hoped that the author will be able to develop further the idea of narrative and explore how it relates to a Marxist praxis in what he tells us will be his next book, on 'Identity and

Totality'. It is clear that the account of praxis in terms of a 'world' narration is open to charges of idealism: Bernstein's argument is susceptible to a deconstructionist reading which would have no problem in locating a metaphysics of presence in this construal of Marxism.

However, Bernstein is at pains throughout to disassociate himself from such a utopian and eschatological standpoint. His construal of a narrative, Marxist praxis is grounded in the view that the truth of Marxism is a practical one which can only be demonstrated and realised through its making and creating. Praxis, therefore, is a constituting medium which enables the subject to see itself in the world (object) he/she creates. But, this praxial account of Marxism is also susceptible to the criticisms that have been brought against a Fichtean Marxism, for it is evident that Bernstein's narrative project does reveal a certain similarity to a Fichtean standpoint vis-à-vis actuality, despite his own attempts to liberate Lukács from such a position. What the author would need to show and argue is that one could only escape the unmistakeable dangers of Fichteanism - and, it could be argued, the unavoidable dangers, given the fact that the reality of Capital persists in determining the antinomical character of our thinking and equally our attempts to think beyond those antinomies - by sinking into the political quietism and impotence, of wanting 'a revolution without revolutionaries' (13).

Having located what I see as some of the weaknesses of the book, let me conclude by emphasising its importance in the current intellectual situation. The book should be widely read and discussed amongst those engaged, in whatever way, in postmodernist and post-structuralist debates. For its lesson is that to surrender subjectivity to the prison-house of language and to condemn the world to textual play is tantamount to political nihilism. This is what can be learnt from Flaubert's reduction of reality to illusion and his celebration of the freedom achieved through fiction. Bernstein shows us that no narrative is politically neutral, and here represents the book's advance over several others which have recently argued for the necessity of a story-telling that will inform us as to our moral destiny (14). His politicisation of narrative reveals that narrative is the telling and re-telling of our political fate and destiny. It is Marxism, he shows, that can provide the framework in which a political narrative able to make life under the rule of capital comprehensible can be constructed. Such a narrative leads us from the confines of what he calls the 'categorial contemplation' of philosophy to the open spaces of political praxis.

Like many other reappraisals and revaluations of the Marxist project in recent years Bernstein's leave us at the point of the problem of formation, of a 'culture (Bildung) of politics' (15). The 'truth' of Marxism, Bernstein aims to demonstrate, resides not simply in the certainty of its object (Capital) but in the experience of its praxis (Culture). Narrative for Bernstein needs to be construed as a self-formative process which is politically educative. Whatever its difficulties, this is a challenging and instructive vision of what Marxism might mean. On the question of whether reading of TN on which it is based is a correct or legitimate one, I hope I have succeeded in showing that Bernstein's claims must be understood in phenomenological and hermeneutic terms. The author has given us an immanent interpretation whose practical intent is to in-form us of our historical responsibility and our political fate.

NOTES

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, 1967, section 539.

2 The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature, Merlin Press, 1978. Henceforth abbreviated to TN.
History and Class Consciousness, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, 1971, will be abbreviated to HCC.

3 See Georg Lukács, Record of A Life, edited by Istvan Eorsi, Verso Editions, 1983, p. 77.

4 The problematic or abstract status of art in capitalist society first becomes evident in the philosophical tradition that is the background of TN in Kant, where the autonomy of art receives its ideological justification (what is ideological is the claim to universality on the part of the aesthetic judgement), and is recognised as a distinctly historical process by Schiller in his The Aesthetic Education of Man, trans. R. Snell (Frederick Unger, New York, 1965). In this context Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy of 1872, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1967) gains a new relevance. In section 23 of that work Nietzsche speaks of modern abstract man, untutored by myth, and who possesses only 'abstract morality; abstract law; the abstract state'; in a word, an abstract culture. However, the choice between the two traditions of Schiller/-Nietzsche and Hegel/Marx is clearly between an aestheticised politics and a politicised aesthetics, between a politics of culture and a culture of politics.

5 For a defence of a Lukácsian philosophical position within the pages of Radical Philosophy see Ian Craib, Lukács and the Marxist Criticism of Sociology in RP 17, Summer 1977.

6 The danger here of course is that Kant's philosophy is being reduced to an epiphenomenal status, and Kant reduced to being merely a spokesperson for the rising bourgeoisie. Although it is a danger Lukacs perhaps succumbed to in writings like the Young Hegel, the achievement of the approach in HCC is that it precisely avoids such reductionism. Lukács shows that even the most progressive and radical of bourgeois thinkers were not able to resolve the contradictions (antinomies) of their theories because they failed to penetrate the contradictory character of reality itself.

7 On page 89 Bernstein points out some of the distinctive features of a 'philosophy' of the novel. According to Bernstein TN is to be construed neither as a work of literary criticism nor as an exercise in the sociology of the novel. Rather, it is a theoretical and conceptual argument which is 'the interpretation of a practice' as opposed to 'the representation of an object (the novel)'. He goes on to say: 'Like any interpretation of a social practice the result is very general ... since Lukacs is interpreting the practice of novel writing, his theory is not such as would allow one simply to apply the theory in order to interpret any particular novel. The meaning of a social practice should not be confused with the interpretation of the products of that practice.' Bernstein is resisting any attempt that will reduce Lukács's theory of the novel to an epistemological and empirical account of the novel. Throughout he remains faithful to Lukács's project of a Hegelian Marxism in HCC.

8 In cultural terms, Bernstein argues, the novel can be read as a kind of 'societal transcendental imagination' (p. 116).

9 For Kant's own undermining of the distinction made in the Critique of Pure Reason between constitutive and regulative knowledge see section 70 (Book Two) of the Critique of Judgement.

10 Hegel's classic definition of the unhappy consciousness runs as follows: 'Consciousness of life, of its existence and activity, is only an agonising over this existence and activity, for therein it is conscious that its essence is only its opposite, is conscious only of its own nothingness.' G. W. F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford UP, 1977), Section 209.

11 See Frederic Jameson, Marxism and Form (Princeton UP, 1971).

12 For an excellent account of the complexity of Lukács's position see Michael Löwy's intellectual biography of Lukács, From Romanticism to Bolshevism (New Left Books, 1979), pp. 168-93.

13 This is Habermas's judgement of a Hegelian position: 'Hegel desires the revolutionising of reality, without any revolutionaries.' See 'Hegel's Critique of the French Revolution', in Theory and Practice, trans. John Viertel (Heinemann, 1974), p. 139.

14 See for example Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: a study in moral theory (Dickworth, 1981); Hannah Arendt, Kant's Political Philosophy (Harvester Press, 1982); and Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Fontana Paperbacks, 1985). One should also consult the excellent work of Richard J. Bernstein, The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976). In my opinion it is this book that provided the inspiration behind the central thesis of After Virtue, but which itself is far removed from the ahistorical character of MacIntyre's 'Nietzsche or Aristotle?' argument. See also by the same author, 'From Hermeneutics to Praxis' in Review of Metaphysics, Vol. XXXV, No. 4, June 1982, pp. 823-45. Also relevant is the work of perhaps the most interesting of all the French post-modernists, at least from the perspective of the 'political', Jean-François Lyotard, who is very much concerned with the idea of narrative as it relates to politics. For a good introduction to Lyotard, and one which does 'justice' to his position, see David Carroll, 'Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard: From Aesthetic to Political Judgements', in Diacritics, Fall 1984, pp. 74-90 (special issue on the work of Lyotard).

15 The phrase 'culture of politics' is borrowed from George Kelly's Hegel's Retreat from Eleusis (Princeton UP, 1978), p. 25.