

# A World without the Novel

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The primary objective of the essay is to draw the consequences of a truly consistent deployment of the utopian desire that animates Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*. On the one hand, it is quite evident that for Lukács the theory of the novel is a utopian means of the destruction of the novel form itself. On the other hand, however, I argue that Lukács also shows that this utopian desire for the destruction of the novel form is in reality an essential component of the novel form itself. As a result, the novel form is by definition an attempt to imagine what from the perspective of this form remains unimaginable: a world without the novel. The contemporary relevance of this argument, however, remains obscured until we free it from one of Lukács's basic metaphysical limitations: we must question the central status of the category of the "world" for the theory of the novel.

The idea of the "novel" and the idea of the "world" seem to attract each other with an unusually strong force.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether we conceive of this relation as a natural consequence of our metaphysical realities or a never quite accomplished historical destiny, the two concepts seem to mirror each other in infinitely complex ways. In fact,

the two categories have been orbiting each other for so long now that today we find it hard to fully tell them apart. There is the lurking suspicion in the back of our minds that, on a certain level, our age has been defined by the ambiguous approximation and sinister doubling of these elusive yet strangely self-evident categories. Whether this age has already come to an end is one of the possible metaphysical questions of our times.

In order to test the true strength of this cosmic attraction, we can start here with a thought experiment that, one might argue, remains Kantian in spirit. In the metaphysical exposition of the concept of space, Kant asks us to perform the following exercise. First, let us start by removing in our imagination every single object one-by-one from space. Nothing could be easier. After we removed the final remaining object from space, all we are left with is space itself. Up to this point, our imagination performs its duties as expected. But, then, as a last step, we are ordered to remove space itself from this otherwise empty existence. Here, our cognitive faculties fail us. Obviously, we reached a boundary that the human mind cannot cross.<sup>2</sup>

Kant, of course, uses this argument to establish the necessity (and, hence, the universality) of space as a pure form sensuous intuition - which is not the problem that I intend to pursue here at all. I would like to propose a more modest version of this exercise that retains only its basic structure as an experiment: let us try to identify an entity whose imaginary elimination as a representation proves to be unusually difficult if not impossible for us today. The question that, therefore, emerges is the following: Can the subtraction of entities taken for granted by our historical experience be pushed to a limit where this exercise forces a crisis of imagination that reveals something about the fundamental structures of this experience? To put it differently, the question is not only what it is that we cannot imagine today, but also what it is that we cannot *not* imagine?

Thus, abandoning the concrete context and actual content of the Kantian argument, we can design a structurally similar experiment about the novel for our own age. Can we thematize the relation between the novel and the world by trying to imagine them without each other? Can we imagine a novel without the world and a world without a novel? At

what point will this separation force a crisis for our imagination? Where does our imagination fail us in this experiment? Can we establish the necessity of the world or the necessity of the novel or the necessity of their relations through a quasi-metaphysical deduction? On a methodological level, the ultimate goal of such an experiment would be to try to produce an understanding of the novel that is devoid of any reference to the category of the world in order to test the hypothesis that the very concept of the world that we often employ in our critical engagements is itself a novelistic concept. The relation of the two concepts seems to have produced a critical short circuit: the only proof we have of the existence of the world is the evidence of the novel; and yet the novel must be judged in relation to the world as if the latter were an independent entity from the novel. It is possible that the time has come to break this circuit.

So, to start this experiment, let us pose a first question: Is it possible for us today to imagine a world without the novel? The question is, of course, ambiguous as its historical scope is not immediately obvious. Needless to say, we all know that, taken in a specific sense, there was a world without the novel – the world before the historical emergence of the novel form. In fact, regardless of when we think the birth of the novel actually took place, this world must have been in existence significantly longer than anything resembling a world in which the novel form has already come to fruition. Taken in this sense, the question would remain quite trivial and would have very little to offer for our reflection. Another possibility, therefore, opens up when we take the question to ask something about our future. Would it be possible to imagine a future world in which the novel no longer exists? A world in which it is no longer practiced as a possible form of artistic expression and is seen at best as a quaint relic of a glorious (or not so glorious) past? This question is, of course, already familiar to us as the 20<sup>th</sup> century announced a number of times the “death of the novel.” A common concern here appeared to have been what would “replace” the novel as the quintessential expression of the age: what would be the “novel” of an age without the novel?<sup>3</sup>

While the question about a future without the novel is more intriguing than the one about the past, there is also a third option that we

have not yet considered. What happens when we take the question to address the actual present of the novel – not only our current historical moment but the entire period when the novel was present as a dominant form of literary expression? In this case, the attempt to imagine a world without the novel might first appear to be a historical absurdity. But the point here is, of course, not to write an alternative history in which we try to imagine a modernity without the novel (as if we wanted to raise the question “what if the novel never existed?”). To the contrary, the goal is to understand the actual historical unfolding of the genre of the novel and to inquire what this history has to do with the question of a world without the novel. For, it is not impossible to argue that the question is in reality internal to the novel form itself and, as such, functioned as a novelistic means of reflecting on the historicity of the form itself.

Posing the problem in these terms is not quite fortuitous. In its final paragraphs, Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* bequeathed to its posterity the exact same problematic.<sup>4</sup> Here Lukács raised the possibility that a new world was in the process of being born that was no longer going to be the age of the novel. As we learn from Lukács's famous 1962 preface to the book, this theory of the novel (that is at the same time a projection of a utopian world without the novel) is best understood as a rejection of the historical world that provided the immediate context for the writing of the book. Lukács insists on the significance of the fact that this little book was written “in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world.”<sup>5</sup> The subjective condition for this theory was, therefore, the utopian rejection of WWI and bourgeois society. The first impulse for the theory of the novel was a desire for a withdrawal from the world that failed to live up to its own promises. When the world ceased to be a world, the theory of the novel became a possible and necessary exercise in the utopian imagination.<sup>6</sup>

What this new world will be like is hard to tell, but three things stand out in Lukács's admittedly speculative conclusions.

1. Discussing Tolstoy's novels, Lukács notes that in spite of the fact that Tolstoy is correctly considered to be something like the “final expression of European Romanticism,” “in the few overwhelmingly great moments of his works [...] he shows a clearly differentiated, concrete and existent world, which, if it could spread out into a totality, would be

completely inaccessible to the categories of the novel and would require a new form of artistic creation: the form of the renewed epic.”<sup>7</sup> These words suggest that the emergent world that no longer would be accessible to the categories of the novel is going to be once again an “epic” world. No doubt, this will be a renewed epic appropriate for the historical conditions of its production, but its fundamental register will nevertheless remain that of the epic. While the novel is “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God,” the world without the novel will be once again the age of the epic (as, this time, the novel is going to be abandoned by the world).<sup>8</sup>

2. The return to the epic is justified by Lukács’s brief descriptions of this new world as an escape from the torments of modernity: “This world is the sphere of pure soul-reality in which man exists as man, neither as a social being nor as an isolated, unique, pure and therefore abstract inferiority.”<sup>9</sup> Apparently, in this new world the human being would be revealed in its self-sufficient singularity beyond the divisions that defined its fate in the age of modernity. Neither a social being nor an isolated individual, this new human being is going to be simply itself facing a new totality: “If ever this world should come into being as something natural and simply experienced, as the only true reality, a new complete totality could be built out of all its substances and relationships. It would be a world to which our divided reality would be a mere backdrop, a world which would have outstripped our dual world of social reality by as much as we have outstripped the world of nature.”<sup>10</sup> The incomplete totality of the age of the novel could be once again rounded off as social antagonism itself becomes reduced to a mere backdrop, not unlike the way we already relate to the “war of all against all” of nature today. This world “this new world, remote from any struggle against what actually exists,” thus, would restore the immanence of meaning in life.<sup>11</sup> In a certain sense, (as a complete totality) it would restore the world itself to its status as an authentic world that can be once again inhabited by the soul.

3. It is, therefore, clear that this new world represents a positive ideal for Lukács. We could say that this is where the utopian dimension of Lukács’s argument comes to the surface: “It will then be the task of historico-philosophical interpretation to decide whether we are really

about to leave the age of absolute sinfulness or whether the new has no other herald but our hopes: those hopes which are signs of a world to come, still so weak that it can easily be crushed by the sterile power of the merely existent."<sup>12</sup>

The hope for a new epic in the age of restored totality, however, puts the theory of the novel in a strange position.<sup>13</sup> What these concluding lines show is that the very theory of the novel is driven by a desire to have done with the novel. Once the theory of the novel is complete, it is possible that there will be nothing left for it to theorize. As Lukács himself suggests, the theory of the novel is already written in a historical moment when the first glimpses of a world without the novel have already become visible *in the discourse novel itself* (in Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky). Interestingly enough, it is precisely the novel (and as far as Lukács's text is concerned *only* the novel) that bears witness to the fact that a new and happier world without the novel might be coming our way. But, as fragile as this vision might be, it is clear that the desired utopian task is to actually bring about a world without the novel – a task that the novel itself cannot accomplish.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the possibility is raised here that the theory of the novel is simply the becoming-conscious of the internal teleology of the novel form, which amounts to a destruction (or sublation) of the form itself. In this sense, the theory of the novel functions here for Lukács as the subjective condition of making the world exist by making the novel no longer exist.

This last formulation, however, highlights the strange double relationship between the novel and the world in Lukács's book. On the one hand, the two categories are in a relation of full adequation with regard to each other in the sense that the novel is the most authentic formalization of the contemporary state of the world. Several passages in the book suggest a deep identity between the two categories, as if they were simply manifestations of the same phenomena in different registers. On the other hand, on the level of the utopian desire that animates the book, they remain fully irreconcilable with each other. In this context, they remain mutually exclusive categories: if the world exists as it should exist, the novel ceases to exist; if the novel exists as it really is, this world does not yet exist. Of course, we could explain some of these complications by highlighting the fundamentally fluid nature of

some of Lukács's categories – for example, we never really get a systematic definition of what he means by the “world,” a term whose meaning therefore oscillates between “reality” and “totality.” But there might be more compelling structural reasons for this simultaneous equivalence and irreconcilable difference between the two categories.

An early clue as to what Lukács means by the “world” comes in the first chapter of the book, when he contrasts the ancient Greek world with that of modernity:

The circle within which the Greeks led their metaphysical life was smaller than ours: that is why we cannot, as part of our life, place ourselves inside it. Or rather, the circle whose closed nature was the transcendental essence of their life has, for us, been broken; we cannot breathe in a closed world.<sup>15</sup>

While the Greeks lived in an essentially homogeneous, closed world (a description that amounts to something like a normative definition of what it means to inhabit a world as a home), the moderns live in a defective world that is a world only in a limited sense as a reality that falls short of an ideal. When Lukács draws the consequences of this historical change, he claims that, for the moderns, inherited images and forms lost their objective self-evidence (since it is now the productivity of the spirit that is supposed to unfold their meaning historically); as a result, all human-made forms remain essentially incomplete; and the self is elevated to the level of being the only true substance since now there is an unbridgeable rift between the self and the world.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the very possibility of totality is undermined in this world.<sup>17</sup> The modern world, therefore, is real without being a totality as it is divided into two worlds (the world of interiority and the external world – with the latter further divided into the world of nature and the world of social convention, first nature and second nature).

This is a significant point because it also reinterprets the function of art. For the Greeks, Lukács insists, metaphysics is aesthetics.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the artistic forms that defined their world were not subjective creations but organic consequences of their metaphysics (which, unlike philosophy, was experienced immediately as immanent reality). But after Kant, we can certainly say that the link between metaphysics and

aesthetics (that was once again reinforced by Christianity for a while) was irrevocably broken:

Art, the visionary reality of the world made to our measure, has thus become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models have gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that in the modern age an artificial totality replaces the organic totality of the ancient Greeks, however, has serious consequences for both the world and art. Lukács's point is quite compelling here: "the very disintegration and inadequacy of the world is the precondition for the existence of art and its becoming conscious."<sup>20</sup> To paraphrase, then, the worldlessness of modernity is the precondition for the very existence of art as a self-conscious praxis. The disintegration of the world is the foundation of the worldliness of art. And, as we have seen, this is a new type of worldliness: art does not provide us a "world" by imitating reality but by creating a world where there is now an abyss in being. Art becomes worldly in a strong sense: if there is no world, the function of art is to create one. If the world existed, art as we know it would not exist.

The precondition for the existence of art is, therefore, the "transcendental homelessness" of artistic creation.<sup>21</sup> This means that "the old parallelism of the transcendental structure of the form-giving subject and the world of created form has been destroyed, and the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless."<sup>22</sup> To be more precise, every essential historical change takes place by way of the severed link between the transcendental subject (that creates forms) and the already available created forms. The destruction of this link is the precondition for the creation of new forms. But the novel is an exceptional historical form because its position is not sufficiently understood if we simply describe it as yet another transcendental form among other possibilities. Lukács's point is precisely that in the novel this transcendental homelessness itself must become form. Practically all of the internal complications and contradictions of the novel form can be derived from this single condition: in the novel, the very principle of formalization itself must be thematized and problematized. Quite significantly, for Lukács, this is a normative argument: a longish prose work in which the impossibility of formalization is not immanent to the form is not really a novel.

Thus, the internal danger of the novel form can be reduced to two extreme possibilities. Either, the novel will overemphasize worldlessness and the impossibility of meaning and, therefore, it will cancel out the meaning that its paradoxical form demands (a situation that leads to a contradiction between its form and content). Or, the novel will overemphasize the existence of the world as a closed totality and, formally speaking, it will cease to be a novel. But the fragility of the world cannot be abolished and it will re-emerge in the form of unprocessed raw material that disturbs the formalizing principle that aims to close the world. Nevertheless, once again the same paradox becomes visible at this point:

In either case the structure remains abstract: the abstract basis of the novel assumes form as a result of the abstraction seeing through itself; the immanence of meaning required by the form is attained precisely when the author goes all the way, ruthlessly, towards exposing its absence.<sup>23</sup>

So, this is a clear exposition of the paradoxical nature of the formalization of the novel: the immanence of meaning is attained when the form as meaning-giving principle is determined by the absence of immanent meaning. Form confers meaning on life; but when life is devoid of immanent meaning, the formal principle that is adequate to this life defies a basic determining function of formalization. When form confers meaning, it becomes alien to life.

To the degree that the central historical task of the novel is to give form to the absence of immanent meaning (and, therefore, to the lack of immanent forms in modern life), every act of formalization assumes the nature of an ethical decision in the novel (i.e., a decision that has no ontological guarantees). As a result, the ethical process itself is what is immanent in the novel form rather than specific forms. The prominently ethical nature of the form guarantees that “the novel, in contrast to other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as something in the process of becoming.”<sup>24</sup> But, as we have seen, the formal complication (the structural incompleteness of the novel form) carries within itself a certain normative force. Lukács speaks here of a “normative incompleteness” that, in reality, only applies to the content of the novel (to the incompleteness of the represented world) but not

necessarily to its form. To put it differently, if the absence of immanent meaning is formalized, meaninglessness is given meaning to the degree that it is formalized as the ultimate reality. On the level of form, "the novel establishes a fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being; as the idea of becoming, it becomes a state."<sup>25</sup>

The constitutive paradoxes of the novel (meaninglessness as ultimate meaning; formlessness as form; becoming as a state, etc.) are eventually all subsumed under the problematic of irony. Lukács deduces the necessity of irony in a consistent fashion: if the ethical dimension is a structural constituent of the novel form, the danger of subjectivism remains a permanent risk in the novel. The nature of this risk is clear: without the ontological guarantees of an organic totality that would prescribe immanent forms for the artist, the possibility that the artist captures only a limited, subjective aspect of life (rather than an existent totality) persists. In order to counteract this internal threat, the solution has to come from within the novel form itself. This internal solution is precisely the ironic division of the subject. This divided subjectivity is simultaneously a subjectivity as interiority (which always carries within the conditions of subjectivism) and a subjectivity that comprehends the limitations of a world divided into an internal and external world. Thus, ironic subjectivity allows the duality of the world to persist yet also allows the artist to glimpse a unified world "in the mutual relativity of elements essentially alien to one another."<sup>26</sup> Once the antagonistic nature of the inner and outer worlds is recognized as necessary, the artist has a minimal formal principle at their disposal that allows for the projection of a purely formal unity:

The irony of the novel is the self-correction of the world's fragility: inadequate relations can transform themselves into a fanciful yet well-ordered round of misunderstandings and cross-purposes, within which everything is seen as many-sided, within which things appear as isolated and yet connected, as full of value and yet totally devoid of it, as abstract fragments and as concrete autonomous life, as flowering and as decaying, as the infliction of suffering and as suffering itself.<sup>27</sup>

This is the upside-down world of the novel, where the fundamental worldlessness of modernity ironically appears as a unified world.

The nature of this irony can be, then, summarized in reference to the most often quoted thesis of the text:

The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.<sup>28</sup>

We can, then, paraphrase this thesis (no doubt, in a tendentious manner) in the following terms: the novel is the paradoxical form of an age that knows very well that the world does not exist yet still needs to think in terms of the world. The novel is the ironic longing for a world in an age that is not quite ready yet to give up the idea of the world. The power of Lukács's thought, however, manifests itself in his insistence on the "double irony" at work here.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, the search for meaning that constitutes the novel is a futile struggle; yet it is impossible to abandon the struggle. On the other hand, while irony depicts reality as victorious over human ideals, it also reveals that this victory is never quite final. This melancholy insight is the state that he calls "mature virility."<sup>30</sup> What is left of the world in the novel is, therefore, a result of this double impossibility: the impossibility of the world cannot be separated from the impossibility of total worldlessness. The novel is defined by the surprising yet elusive emergence of meaning in the midst of absolute meaninglessness.<sup>31</sup> It is this structure that allows Lukács to simultaneously assert the radical incompatibility of the novel and the world as well as their fundamental identity.<sup>32</sup>

In light of the utopian anti-novelistic or, at least, post-novelistic desire behind *The Theory of the Novel* that was fuelled by the rejection of the historical worldlessness of the moment of its inception, it might be necessary to re-examine what Lukács says about the utopian nature of the novel itself. It is important to note, then, that Lukács unconditionally affirms the utopian dimension of the novel form although he gives it a specific meaning. He calls the properly understood utopianism immanent to the novel form "*a priori* utopianism."<sup>33</sup> Two things should be immediately obvious: on the one hand, this utopianism has nothing to do with "empirical" utopias (i.e., with utopias as sensuous realities); on the other hand, by locating the question of utopia on the level of the transcendental constitution of forms, Lukács identifies the utopian

dimension with the problem of form rather than content. The utopianism of the novel has to do with the way the novel form itself is constituted: it is the novel form as such that has a utopian dimension and not specific instantiations of this form. This utopianism must be located precisely on the level of the inherent paradox of the novel form: the utopian moment comes to the surface when we perceive that the novel is the formalization of the impossibility of immanent forms.

Lukács describes the “ethical problem of Utopia” as “the question whether the ability to imagine a better world can be ethically justified, and the question whether this ability can serve as the starting point for a life that is rounded in itself.”<sup>34</sup> But if we are talking about an a priori utopianism, the ability to imagine a better world must be an a priori problem, while the realization of such an imagination is an ethical one. Either way, the distance separating the utopian desire both from the transcendental forms that it can receive and the ethical actualizations of these forms in historical reality must remain absolute in order for this desire to be genuinely utopian:

To create, by purely artistic means, a reality which corresponds to this dream world, or at least is more adequate to it than the existing one, is only an illusory solution. The Utopian longing of the soul is a legitimate desire, worthy of being the centre of a world, only if it is absolutely incapable of being satisfied in the present intellectual state of man, that is to say incapable of being satisfied in any world that can be imagined and given form, whether past, present or mythical. If a world can be found that satisfies the longing, this only proves that the dissatisfaction with the present was merely an artistic quibbling over its outward forms, an aesthetic hankering after times when the artist could draw with more generous lines or paint with brighter colours than today. Such longings can indeed be satisfied, but their inner emptiness becomes apparent in the work's lack of idea.<sup>35</sup>

A genuinely utopian desire is, therefore, worldless: although it is based on the rejection of an actually existing world, no world can be found that satisfies this longing. To put it differently, this utopian desire is legitimate (as the curious center of a world) only if it cannot be given a predetermined form with a determinate content. But if it were to remain

forever alien to formalization, it would simply disappear in the darkest depths of the soul. Such a utopian desire, therefore, manifests itself by marking the limits of the imagination. True utopian desire refers us to what is unimaginable and must remain unimaginable in a given historical moment. We can speak of an “a priori utopianism,” therefore, when the transcendental limits of the imagination themselves take on a historical function: the fact that the imagination is structurally limited becomes the guarantee of the possibility of a historical reality beyond the present.

So, what is interesting is that Lukács's reflections on the utopian dimension of the novel form suggest that it has a structural relation to what remains forever unimaginable. The utopian dimension of the novel is truly utopian only when it refers us to an unimaginable ideal. If the ideal projected by the novel could be realized in an actually existing world that is currently imaginable, strictly speaking this dimension would cease to be utopian. It would be a mere a correction of our reality on the level of content but would not actually concern the problem of the form of this world – the transcendental constitution of this reality. There must be something present in the novel that will never assume the form of a world.

As far as the novel form is concerned, then, two things follow from this definition of legitimate utopian desire. On the one hand, when a novel presents an imaginable utopia, it strictly speaking ceases to be a novel. On the other hand, in order to be a real novel, even if it apparently has nothing utopian about its contents, its form must be marked by the unimaginable utopian dimension. The inherent contingency of formalization that is the essence of the novel form becomes here a correlate of the transcendental limits of the imagination. Every act of novelistic formalization that is by necessity aware of its own contingency is also aware of the limitations of the imagination. This limitation, however, is not the external ruin of the form but a principle that must become inherent to the form itself. The novelist is free to give form to the absence of immanent meaning in life, but this freedom is limited by its own conditions in that the novelist cannot imagine the world that is the object of the utopian desire produced by the contingency of forms. The

transcendental limit of the novelistic imagination is its very condition of possibility.

So, what is it exactly that the novel cannot imagine even though the longing for an unimaginable utopia is a core constituent of its form? The answer is clear: a world without the novel. The paradox of the novel, as we have seen, is that it gives form to the immanent meaninglessness of life. As a result, it cannot avoid the risk of giving meaning to meaninglessness. This act of formalization (that reintroduces meaning in the midst of meaninglessness), therefore, projects the utopian possibility of a meaning that would make the novel form an inadequate expression of the metaphysical status of a world abandoned by God. Every true novel is, therefore, a preparation for a world without the novel, and yet it must be unable to imagine this world as an actual historical reality. In case this dimension is absent or is reduced to an imaginable utopia, as far as Lukács is concerned, we are no longer talking about a genuine novel. Thus, the specificity of the novel form is not that it can project “possible worlds” for us (as other literary forms can do that as well), but that it structurally refers us to an impossible world without the novel. And Lukács repeatedly insists on the point that only the novel can do the latter.

If the impossible imagination of a world without the novel is an internal element of the novel form, its effectivity manifests itself immediately in the present rather than in the future of the novel. To the degree that Lukács decrees a ban on actually imagining this future within the novel itself, he suggests simultaneously that this impeded imagination becomes a structuring force of the form itself and that the realization of this world will take place outside or independently of the novel. But, then, the utopianism of *The Theory of the Novel* is itself an instrumentalization of a novelistic desire against the novel. To put it differently, the theory of the novel functions here as an attempt to isolate a formal element of the novel (the longing for a world without the novel) in order to declare it to be the engine of the historical dialectic of the novel form.

Lukács's typology of the novel form in the second half of the book is clearly driven by this insight. The original manifestation of the novel form in what he calls “abstract idealism” (*Don Quixote*) is negated by its

logical opposite “romantic disillusionment” (*Sentimental Education*). Lukács clearly identifies these two basic types as exercises in a priori utopianism:

The romanticism of disillusionment not only followed abstract idealism in time and history, it was also conceptually its heir, the next historico-philosophical step in *a priori* utopianism.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of abstract idealism, the utopian transformation of the world remains unimaginable because the challenge to the world is simply crushed by the brute force of reality. In the case of the romanticism of disillusionment, the defeat of the individual is already a precondition of the form as subjective interiority is completely cut off from the possibility of effective action.

The logical synthesis provided by the *Bildungsroman* (*Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship*), therefore, appears on the scene of history as the overcoming of these mutually irreconcilable forms of utopianism. It offers us the practical utopia of the pragmatic reconciliation of the internal and external worlds, which makes effective action in social reality possible once again through the active production of the community by way of education. Social convention assumes the role of a mediating agency between interiority and the world, since convention is open to at least partial penetration by meaning. This kind of novel, however, runs a double risk. On the one hand, it might overemphasize subjectivity and present the education of a single individual that cannot be generalized as a common destiny. On the other hand, it might romanticize a specific segment of reality to the degree that it becomes absolutely non-problematic (and, therefore, something like a fairy tale). Either way, the self's antagonistic relationship to the world can be reconciled only through a compromise that in essence amounts to a non-novelistic intervention into the novel form.<sup>37</sup>

So, the dialectic does not stop here and a fourth step is necessary: the utopian imagination of the world without the novel must actually accede to the destruction of the novel form itself. This final step manifests itself through an inherent possibility of the novel that Lukács describes as “the overlapping of the novel form into the epic,” which amounts to imputing “a substantiality to the world it describes which that world is in no way capable of sustaining and keeping in balance.”<sup>38</sup> In other words,

the historical overcoming of the novel form will come about by way of an internal possibility of the form that returns it to the epic. The precondition of this return of the epic is the unattainable “utopian demand of the soul” to find an outside world that is adequate to the soul as interiority.<sup>39</sup> The utopian anti-novelist longing is, therefore, an epic desire. At first, this longing manifests itself as the rejection of the conventional world, which is easily contained within the novel form as a subjective attitude. But if it ceases to be merely an inner attitude, it begins to threaten the novelistic form itself:

Such overlapping is, however, unavoidable if the Utopian rejection of the conventional world objectivises itself in a likewise existent reality, so that polemical refusal actually becomes the central form of the work. No such possibility was given by the historical development of Western Europe.<sup>40</sup>

This is why Lukács claims that Tolstoy represents the novel’s maximum overlap into the epic.<sup>41</sup> Western European cultures conceived of the relation between the internal and external worlds exclusively in negative polemical terms. But, according to Lukács, Russian literature was produced under completely different “organic natural conditions” that made it possible for this literature to be “*creatively* polemical.”<sup>42</sup> In Tolstoy’s novels, the opposition of social convention and nature is overcome temporarily in “great moments” of insight when the meaning of life is revealed to some characters. But these great moments remain only passing experiences of essential life and do not allow themselves to be transformed into collective life. To put it differently, within the novels, they remain utopian moments of longing for a more adequate external world. So, while in Tolstoy’s works “intimations of a breakthrough into a new epoch are visible,” in Dostoevsky’s fiction “this new world, remote from any struggle against what actually exists, is drawn for the first time simply as seen reality.”<sup>43</sup> This is why “Dostoevsky did not write novels” as he “belongs to the new world.”<sup>44</sup> As a result of this non-polemical acceptance of existence, the utopian desire is presumably no longer operative in his writings. Dostoevsky’s works are potentially already the epics of a world without the novel. The novel form itself comes to an end when the desire for a world without the novel is no longer operative. Or, to put it

differently, the novel lasts exactly as long as the desire for a world without the novel since without the latter there can be no novel.

This is the point where a crucial metaphysical limitation of Lukács's argument surfaces. For, it is clear that while he finds it easy to imagine the possibility of a world without the novel, what appears to be impossible to conceive of within the horizon of *The Theory of the Novel* is, what we could call, a novel without the world. The unimaginable historical break that Dostoevsky bears witness to retains the category of the world at the expense of the novel. But if the new epoch will still present itself to us as a "world," albeit a world that is now adequate to the longings of the soul, it is not entirely clear that we have completely left the old epoch behind. Lukács's opening arguments made it clear that the "happy ages" of the epic did not yet know the inside/outside division since the immanence of meaning created a truly homogenous world: "Being and destiny, adventure and accomplishment, life and essence are then identical concepts" (30). In a world like this, the very division between the human being and the world is fully included in this homogeneity since substantiality is equally distributed among all existing things (including the soul). To put it differently, Lukács's point is not that for the Greeks there was no difference between the soul and the world. The difference between the soul and the world was real, but it was exactly like any other difference that made up the totality of being.

Modernity, therefore, distinguishes itself from this age by elevating this one single difference to the level of a central and irreconcilable gap, an absolute difference that supposedly organizes all other differences around itself. As a result, in this age, substantiality was increasingly concentrated in subjective interiority. The same way that "art" according to Lukács did not exist as an autonomous, self-conscious praxis before this historical break, we could argue that the "world" itself did not exist before the abyss of this single difference became the only essential relation. Following Lukács's argument, we can make two important observations on the way the idea of the world functions here. On the one hand, Lukács's historical argument suggests that the "world" came into being precisely at the moment when the world no longer could perform its function as an organic homogeneous totality – in other words, when it ceased to be a world. On the other hand, the birth of this world without a

world is a direct correlate of the transcendental constitution of the novel form. As we have seen, the function of art in this age is to create a world where there is no longer a world. The novel form, therefore, is simply the most appropriate artistic formalization of the epistemological problem of an incomplete world. It is in this sense that we could say that the world remains a “novelistic” concept in *The Theory of the Novel*. But if this is in fact that case, a world without the novel would also have to be a world in which the novelistic concept of the world no longer fulfils any meaningful roles. When the age of the novel comes to an end, the world as we know it will also expire.

If our thought experiment to separate the novel and the world from each other were to produce any pragmatic results, they would have to be the products of a delicate inversion of the Lukácsian formula. Lukács found it quite easy to separate the two concepts as long as he could hold on to the world. But what happens to the novel when we approach it from the perspective of a radical worldlessness that is not the temporary loss of a world that can be restored in a utopian future? The possibility of a genuinely counter-Lukácsian hypothesis emerges here that, at this point, exists only in the form of a few basic questions: Would it be possible to reread the history of the novel from the perspective of the immemorial and irreparable ruin of the world? What if what becomes legible in the novel is not a nostalgia for the world but the fact that the world never existed—and that is not such a bad thing after all? These questions gesture in the direction of a new metaphysics of the novel that would be truly utopian in the sense that in it the novel could find absolutely no place for itself in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> For recent attempts to connect the two ideas, see the following examples: Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (New York: Verso, 2000); Michal Ginsburg and Nandrea Lorri, “The Prose of the World,” in *The Novel, Vol. 2: Forms and Themes*. Ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 244-73; Jonathan Arac, *Impure Worlds: The Institution of Literature in the Age of the Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); John Brenkman, “World and Novel,” *Narrative* 24.1 (January 2016), 13-27; Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> As Kant writes: "Space is a necessary representation, *a priori*, that is the ground of all outer intuitions. One can never represent that there is no space, though one can very well think that there are no objects to be encountered in it. It is therefore to be regarded as the condition of the possibility of appearances, not as a determination dependent on them, and is an *a priori* representation that necessarily grounds outer appearances." See, Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 175.

<sup>3</sup> This debate did not die with the old century and continues even today. For a recent resurgence of the issue, see Will Self "The Novel is Dead (This Time It's For Real)," *The Guardian* May 2, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>

<sup>4</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, translated by Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> I am referring here to Lukács's explanation for his original plans for the book: "Such was the mood in which the first draft of *The Theory of the Novel* was written. At first it was meant to take the form of a series of dialogues: a group of young people withdraw from the war psychosis of their environment, just as the story-tellers of the *Decameron* had withdrawn from the plague; they try to understand themselves and one another by means of conversations which gradually lead to the problems discussed in the book—the outlook on a Dostoevskian world." See, Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 151-52.

<sup>8</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 152.

<sup>12</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 153.

<sup>13</sup> As Lukács puts it in his preface, in the final analysis, he was more interested in finding a new world rather than a new literary form: "The fact that the book culminates in its analysis of Tolstoy, as well as the author's view of Dostoevsky, who, it is claimed, 'did not write novels', clearly indicate that the author was not looking for a new literary form but, quite explicitly, for a 'new world'." See, Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Lukács makes this point quite clear: "But art can never be the agent of such a transformation: the great epic is a form bound to the historical moment, and any attempt to depict the Utopian as existent can only end in destroying the form, not in creating reality. The novel is the form of the epoch of absolute sinfulness, as Fichte said, and it must remain the dominant form so long as the world is ruled by the same stars." See, Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 152.

<sup>15</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 33-34.

<sup>17</sup> As Lukács explains, a totality is possible only when being is already homogenous even before it receives forms. In other words, there is a pre-formal formalization that must take place in being itself in order for a totality to be possible: "Our world has become

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infinitely large and each of its corners is richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks, but such wealth cancels out the positive meaning – the totality – upon which their life was based. For totality as the formative prime reality of every individual phenomenon implies that something closed within itself can be completed; completed because everything occurs within it, nothing is excluded from it and nothing points at a higher reality outside it; completed because everything within it ripens to its own perfection and, by attaining itself, submits to limitation. Totality of being is possible only where everything is already homogeneous before it has been contained by forms; where forms are not a constraint but only the becoming conscious, the coming to the surface of everything that had been lying dormant as a vague longing in the innermost depths of that which had to be given form; where knowledge is virtue and virtue is happiness, where beauty is the meaning of the world made visible.” See, Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 85.

<sup>31</sup> As he puts it, this is why irony is the “objectivity of the novel” (90). Although irony is a subjective principle, its function is to cancel out the inherent tendency of the novel toward subjectivism. This also means that it is the subjective principle that cancels out the subjective origins of the novel. It is the principle in which subjectivity transcends itself internally and becomes an objective principle: “The writer’s irony is a negative mysticism to be found in times without a god. It is an attitude of *docta ignorantia* towards meaning, a portrayal of the kindly and malicious workings of the demons, a refusal to comprehend more than the mere fact of these workings; and in it there is the deep certainty, expressible only by form-giving, that through not-desiring-to-know and not-being-able-to-know he has truly encountered, glimpsed and grasped the ultimate, true substance, the present, non-existent God. This is why irony is the objectivity of the novel.” Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> In addition to irony, the concept of the “demonic” fulfils a similar role in *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukács’s other famous formulation of impossible yet necessary totality in the age of modernity gives it a theological spin: “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.” See, Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 88. But Lukács’s argument once again follows the logic of double irony. The fact that God abandoned

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the world does not mean that this is simply a godless world without any reference to a transcendent domain. The failure applies on both sides: the world fails to accede to God; but it also fails to give up this struggle to reach God. This is how demons are created who are no longer or not yet gods. This is a demonic world, then, that is caught somewhere between a world ruled by God and a fully godless world.

<sup>33</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 117.

<sup>34</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 115.

<sup>35</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 115.

<sup>36</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 117.

<sup>37</sup> Lukács's example for this external intervention is the ending of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, where the author is forced to introduce "the much-criticized fantastic apparatus of the last books of the novel, the mysterious tower, the all-knowing initiates with their providential actions, etc." See, Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 142. The introduction of this ironically miraculous element (as the miracle is given a purely profane content), however, reintroduces an epic dimension to the text.

<sup>38</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 144.

<sup>39</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 144.

<sup>40</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 145.

<sup>42</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 145.

<sup>43</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 152.

<sup>44</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 152.

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