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Transcendental Homelessness and Longing for Totality in Thomas Mann

Abstract: This paper interprets the actions of Thomas Mann's bourgeois characters, specifically their struggle to regain an image of totality, as the result of a certain transcendental homelessness described in Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel and Soul and Form*. Indeed, some of the "life" figures in Mann's early works can be understood as aesthetic constructs of a lost community, shaped by an insoluble tension between the protagonists' "soul" and (social) "form". The element of irony in Mann could be explained by the futility of aestheticisation. A Lukácsian reading attempts to complement Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean analyses of Mann's artist-heroes while alluding to the relationship between a desire for wholeness and reactionary attitudes.

Keywords: transcendental homelessness, aestheticism, totality, reactionary politics, Thomas Mann, Georg Lukács

1. Introduction

“... there is a nostalgia of the soul when the longing for home is so violent that the soul must, with blind impetuosity, take the first path that seems to lead there...”

(György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*)

This paper explores the possibility of placing the bourgeois heroes of Thomas Mann – conflicted by a lack of meaning and a necessary gap between action and thought – in a Lukácsian framework of lost totality. Doing so would allow one to interpret the aesthetic transfiguration of the object as a result of longing. Adopting the Lukácsian framework, the following motif may be identified: the subject (driven by “transcendental homelessness” and a longing for totality) constructs an artificial “whole” through the aestheticisation of life in order to complement the fragmentedness of modern conditions and yearns to connect with this artificial image, yet organic totality is never achieved since the reflective protagonists are distanced from their illusory constructs. If the distance vanishes, the image vanishes with it. In this view, aestheticisation is an insufficient coping mechanism for abstract loss.

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Critical analyses of Mann's artist-heroes frequently rely on a psychoanalytic or a Schopenhauerian-Nietzschean structure (Bornedal 2012). The attempt to establish a different interpretation calls for a focus on being cast out of a primordial state, as well as an emphasis on tensions between soul and form along with conflicts between the "aesthetic" and the "social". This is achieved through a close reading of *Buddenbrooks* as well as that of Mann's early works – in particular *Tonio Kröger*, *Death in Venice*, *Vision and The Dilettante*. The closing remarks return to the potential dangers of such efforts.

Aestheticisation is merely one of the possible answers to abstract loss, a mechanism to cope with the duality of life and form in modernity. Based on Márkus (1983, 10-12), Terezakis maintains that the possibility of grasping the concept of form, a prerequisite of the possibility of an integrated life through diagnosing the "crisis of culture", remains a central issue for Lukács throughout his life (Terezakis 2010, 228); for my mind, this is also true for the literary characters considered in this article. Though Márkus may be right, Lukács' later thought (e.g. *Realism in the Balance*) is characterised by a distinct shift in the portrayal of life and form as related to society; indeed, Lukács explicitly renounces *The Theory of the Novel and Soul and Form* after his conversion to marxism-leninism (Lukács 1980, 49). Considering the relevance of the latter works to questions of form (Butler 2010, 1-2), early Lukács will be given more attention.

2. Longing and "transcendental homelessness" in Lukács and Mann

"Happy are those ages when the starry sky
is the map of all possible paths..."
(György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*)

Lukács asserts that an encounter with "the Tonio Kröger-problem" (Lukács 1948, 6) had a significant effect on his early works. Before an outline of longing, the admittedly romantic Lukácsian notions of totality and form need to be addressed, especially since they rely on, but are not identical with, similar concepts in Plato, Schiller, Kant, Hegel et al.¹

The logic of *The Theory of the Novel* is Hegelian insofar as it grounds aesthetics in historical necessity ("A work of art cannot entirely free itself from the culture of its time" – Hegel 1975, 297-298), and the image of an idyllic Greece evokes Hegel's lectures on the timespace of Greek art (Miles 1979, 27), yet – as opposed to Hegel, for whom the decline of art as the primary expression of the Idea is a sign of the self-discovery of Spirit (Hegel 1975, 11) – art for Lukács expands *because* the world has "gone out of joint". For Lukács, the rise of questions about essence and being are, instead of signalling an increased self-awareness, signs of the fragmentation of a

totality (Lukács 1971, 35) in which the passive receptivity of *given* meaning had unquestioned primacy. Lukács's totality also parallels the unity the "play drive" restores in Schiller (Schiller 2002, Letter XV), who claimed that we all were, and necessarily have to become again, objects of human longing. That said, Lukács employs the concept of totality in a multitude of ways (Stahl 2013), both in aesthetic and social contexts, without providing an exact definition: there exists organic (as opposed to artificial and unstable) totality as well as individual (as opposed to social) totality. In general, it is a constellation of meaningfully interrelated elements: these elements can only be understood in relation to each other. The hero of the novel longs for an organic totality in which form is not externally imposed upon life², but this requires a historico-metaphysical structure no longer available (Lukács 1971, 97). The lack of this former, unified historico-metaphysical structure results in "transcendental homelessness" (see below)³.

Similarly, "form" is used in different, though interrelated, senses: Lukács discusses forms of works of art, e.g. the essay as form, as well as forms of life, e.g. a bourgeois form of life, asceticism and so on (Lukács 1971, 69). Along with social forms of life, the individual can attempt to give a form to his own life e.g. through *gestures* (Lukács 2010, 45-46). Forms are historical and attempt to communicate the individual and social conditions of their own emergence (Butler 2010, 4; 6-8); as Butler states, Lukácsian forms have a "Platonic streak", but are not identical with Plato's Forms or with Kant's notion of form as a spatiotemporal dimension, despite having Kantian aspects (artificial form is hostile to essence in both Kant and Lukács).

For every literary genre, there exists a corresponding state of affairs characterised by its distance from the metaphysical and the degree of its fragmentedness as a result of this distance. Works of art – in this case, Mann's stories – reflect on these states of affairs. The novel in particular transforms the "sentimental striving for the immediate unity of life" to a state, to "being" (Lukács 1971, 77). For Lukács, the literary problem is inseparable from the social problem: both the form of the novel and the forms depicted in the novel are shaped by an attempt at homecoming.

How do literary forms express homelessness? For Lukács, and for the outsiders of Mann, a yearning for home is a yearning for another time because modern man is a "latecomer" to the world (Miles 1979, 23) and is "truly at home nowhere" (Castillo 1986, 89). Matthias claims that a simple sign of transcendental homelessness is that "major portions of novels [are] no longer set in the characters' homes" (Matthias 2006, 1). In the concrete sense, Foucauldian *heterotopias* replace the ancestral abode: Castorp remains on the magic mountain, Tonio's home becomes a public institution, the withering Buddenbrooks retreat to Travemünde, and Felix Krull spends his days at a hotel. In an abstract sense, physical home is gradually disattached from "heimisch". The few remaining threads that bound Tonio to the

declining Kröger family and his ancestors grow even weaker as the story progresses (Mann 1954, chapter III): his former home seems “tiny” and “comical” after his return, yet it evokes a sharp “pang” of yearning. Another sign of homelessness is the structure of the *Bildungsroman* itself, the genre which Mann subverts through the Magic Mountain: the *Bildungsroman* is considered (Cheah 2003, 242-242) an attempt at the symbolic resolution of the subject’s alienation from the world. To understand alienation, one needs to look at Lukács’s notion of a primordial unity.

For Lukács, the object of yearning is a closed totality exemplified by Greekdom, in which “life, culture, meaning, action and social institutions formed a harmonious whole” (Stahl 2013). As opposed to the life-denying maturity of modernity characterised by a “sterile existence too close to the earth and too far from heaven” (Lukács 1971, 57), Greekdom is described as childhood, ironically evoked in Hanno’s stuttering recital of classical literature in *Buddenbrooks* (Meyers 2014, 24). Lukács posits a primordial community (Miles 1979, 25), a true totality of being – which seems to be a precondition of organic forms (Lukács 1971, 17) – grounded in metaphysics. In this pre-reflective state, the world “feels like home” because soul, society and natural phenomena are, though clearly distinct, of the same essential nature. It requires a metaphysical structure in which subject and substance is one in a Hegelian sense: the substantial connection between the epic hero and the world enables “meaning” to be clearly visible. Goals are given, answers come naturally and precede existential questions (Lukács 1971, 32) because a metaphysical compass renders everything possibly intelligible – if gods, stones and men are of the same substance and function according to the same logic, there is no unknowable noumenon for the pre-Kantian subject. “Life” gives birth to its own form, i.e. the actualisation of inherent potentialities is a simple process of “becoming conscious”; forms are not externally imposed on life, there is no contradiction between form and life in a modern sense (Lukács 2010, 136).

The introspective literary subject and the “craving for substance” is born through the collapse of this social and metaphysical unity. Yearning is thus a matter of historical development (Terezakis 2010, 222): the world loses its substance for the subject, who can find substance only in himself. The alienation of the subject from “the external” means that an organic totality of life becomes elusory for form (Lukács 2010, 204) both on a literary and on an existential level, i.e. for post-epic literary forms and individual actions. As opposed to organic totality, in which life and organic form are not in contradiction, adequate *artificial* forms can still be created after the collapse, yet they are unstable and fragmentary (Lukács 1971, 76) since *time*, as opposed to e.g. the timeframe of the epic, *becomes constitutive* through a loss of the primordial home. In short: for Lukács, time becomes a defining factor in shaping forms after the loss of a timeless, organic totality depicted

in the epic. The fact that every form is subjected to the destruction of time means that the stability of the “transcendental points of orientation” (Lukács 1971, 40) (i.e. the direction given by a stable unity of gods and men) is lost, the world outside the subject ceases to be a source of meaning. Since the “Gods of Greece [were] driven away”, the *Buddenbrooks*’s motto (*Dominus providebit* – “the Lord will provide”) becomes bitterly ironic, mocking the family’s decline. In Greek totality, definite and fixed social bonds would be an unnecessary burden; this self-made second nature, along with the never-ceasing demand of the categorical imperative (Lukács 1971, 36), results from the loss of “supra-natural necessities”, i.e. the rules of a world not yet abandoned by gods, through constitutive time. Yet these artificial rules are alien to human aspirations, and Kant’s imperative restricts the richness of experiences – thus the increasingly self-aware subjects⁴ find them more and more constraining, and are therefore increasingly distanced from them and from each other. Mann himself states that Tonio Kröger and Tristan are conflicted by their “isolation (...) in the world of reality”, both socially *and metaphysically* (Mann 1936, vi).

It is this isolation that produces a nostalgia for the irretrievable, lost simplicity (Lukács 2010, 79) of a former whole defining Tonio’s yearning for an uncomplicated life or the Sehnsuchtsmotif Meyers identifies in Mann’s Tristan (Meyers 2014, 42). The promise of totality, a longing for a “form that completes itself” (Castillo 1986, 89) is the unsettled desire of the modern novel. The heroes of Mann’s novels are seekers (Miles 1979, 23) trying to express life through a proper form, but life has become irreparably heterogeneous. Indeed, after organic form is no longer possible, *the creator strives to give a proper (artificial) form to his authenticity*. This is problematic: first, the increasing inwardness due to the hostility of an unknowable world cripples the subject, thus every form he creates, be it action or artwork, is “incomplete” (Butler 2010, 14) as seen in Christian Buddenbrook, whose pathological self-analysis makes him unable to finish anything he starts. Second, the unstoppable movement of the “historico-philosophical position of the world’s clock” (Lukács 1971, 91) means that the created form eventually becomes restricting. In a given historical period, bourgeois ethics temporarily suspend eternal loneliness and longing (Lukács 2010, 75), but for Mann’s protagonists, the historico-metaphysical conditions giving birth to these ethics crumble; the disintegration of Hegel’s *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (Lubich 2004, 210) means that Thomas Buddenbrook’s *Haltung* (composure) subdues life instead of framing or balancing it. Mann’s heroes exist in an era of “no longer but not yet” (Broch 1984, 46), reinforcing the desire to return to mythical totality – see Aschenbach.

This motif of longing and the problem of artificial forms is identifiable in *Buddenbrooks*, *Tonio Kröger* and *Death in Venice*. Though signs of decay are present from the beginning of *Buddenbrooks* – the company which built the

home of the family goes bankrupt, and the collapse is described as “inevitable” and “destined” (Mann 1995, 19) – Thomas and Tony hold on to the bourgeois form of life shifting beneath their feet, despite being suffocated by the ideal of the older generation. Johann Sr. is described as rose-cheeked, full of vitality (Mann 1995, 6-7) and dedicated to the present. He is committed to an orderly, structured environment, while Jean feels comfortable in an untamed garden, longing for a “unity with nature” (Mann 1995, 27). Despite initial cracks pointing towards an inevitable fate, the lives and attitudes of the older Buddenbrooks are internally consistent and analogous, as Johann writes: “we are not separate, independent, self-subsisting individuals, but links in a chain” (Mann 1995, 140). This chain gradually ceases to be a source of meaning, parallel to the deterioration of the external world and the atomisation of the family property. The distance between fragile introspection (Hanno) and a natural ability to act (Johann), the Lukácsian “chasm” between cognition and action (Blanc 1997), also signals the growing distance between life and essence. Though Thomas longs for the vitality unconstrained by social norms characterising his forefathers, he is unable to adapt to a changing Germany. The “performative” replaces the natural: the sober outlook that came naturally for the older generations becomes a facade for Thomas. Tony similarly adopts the mask of the bourgeois ideal, but because of these artificial constraints, she remains a child forever. Lukács claims that “once [continuity and a sense of belonging] is destroyed, even the past disappears” (Lukács 2010, 129); in this case, the fragmentation of unity results in a longing for an idealised past which rewrites the actual family history, as seen in Tony’s exaggerations of the Buddenbrooks’ former wealth.

Whenever the subject feels that his “soul”, his identity is disattached from a given form (here: the bourgeois way of life), he attempts to create new forms; the Buddenbrooks are unable to do so – see Christian’s clownish directionlessness or Hanno’s overflowing compositions – because, in a Lukácsian sense, the soul is “wider” than the “destinies which life has to offer” (Lukács 1971, 112). This leads them away from a substanceless external world to the internal adventures of the intellectual and the aesthetic. Following the loss of home⁵, Hanno turns towards art and Thomas turns towards Schopenhauer. Since Thomas’ life is overburdened by the shackles of form, he is pleased by Schopenhauer’s idea that “birth is captivity”⁶; through philosophy, Thomas realises a “*longing envy*” for what man can not have and can not be, and that the gaze of the “longing envy (...) turns to love” (Mann 1995, 632). Hanno is the most aware of the inevitability of the fragmentation and is the most inclined to escape to his closed world through art, described as an ecstasy of “urgent longing” (Mann 1995, 486). Yet Thomas can not exist in an absence of will and Hanno perishes prematurely – similarly, Tonio’s artistic gaze opens his soul for

him, but all he sees is “Komisch und Elend”⁷ (comical and tragic). In conclusion, art and philosophy are inadequate answers to a longing for the unrestricted form of an uncomplicated totality.

In modernity, a glimpse of meaning is the most the subject can attain, longing can only be satisfied temporarily (Lukács 1971, 115). Aschenbach is rescued from the taxing monotony of “being an amateur in the gay, outside world” by contemplative moments of mystical meaning through the associations evoked by the facade of the chapel outside the social reality he is accustomed to. It is “*the widening of inward barriers*”, similar to the largeness of the soul constrained by form in Lukács, that sets him off on his journey of transfiguration (Mann 1954, chapter I). Like Tonio and Thomas, he is disconnected from previous generations (his appearance betrays his mother’s longing for the exotic while his desires betray his father’s work ethic) and attempts to escape to the “lotus-eaters” whose realm Adorno describes as a deceptive image of bliss of a pre-productive stasis (Adorno 2002, 49-50). Aschenbach longs for a state in which no more *Haltung*, no more tension between the life-instinct and social requirements, is needed to sustain forms. Indeed, the starting point of the search for an image of wholeness is a conflict between physical reality and the “fiery ardours of the spirit” (Mann 1954, chapter II): the adventures which Aschenbach is unable to experience in the external world is lived internally, but this is only possible through soul-crushing self-constraint. The artist’s fancy yearns for the “simple”, “vast”, “immeasurable” and “eternal” in which these tensions disappear, yet salvation through art is necessarily short-lived, restricted to the duration of the artwork’s influence on the subject creating or perceiving said piece of art⁸.

Likewise, Tonio’s adoration of Hans and Inge is the longing for a “solid majority” (Mann 1954, chapter IV) due to his own “doubtful standing among men”. This is, in Lukács’ words, “a longing for the thing most opposite to ourselves; a longing for the great, holy simplicity” (Lukács 2010, 74). Tonio is, as opposed to the desired objects, directionless, dictated by the loss of the points of orientation in Lukács. His potentialities can not be actualised – there are a “thousand ways of life” within him, all “sheer impossibilities” (compare this to *The Dilettante*). Tonio is lost. He can not overcome the yearning for unity, mourning “a certain joy that was of the soul” which “once [...] had been his own” (Mann 1954, chapter III), which leads him to reconstruct the image of Hans and Inge – yet he takes an almost masochistic delight in the impossibility of an organic unity, since it shapes his individuality and reinforces his position as the outsider. This joy is overshadowed by the tension between soul and form: if the “heart is too full”, the soul is “not fated to receive a final form” and can only be expressed in distorted banalities. On the other hand, the masterfully crafted prose is void of life. Tonio expresses a view similar to the Lukácsian notion

that conceptualisation “kills life”: “there’s a [...] cool cheek in the [...] way a writer can get rid of his feelings by turning them into literature. If your heart is too full, [...] go to the literary man, [...] he will analyse and formulate your affair, and [...] make you indifferent to it” (Mann 1954, chapter IV).

In turbulent times, attempts to restore an image of totality – Lukács’ examples are artworks conceived in a style shaped by the Winckelmannian understanding of ancient Greece – can make men “forget [...] the irreparable cracks in the edifice of their world and tempt them to dream of new unities” (Lukács 1971, 37). This is what Mann’s heroes attempt to accomplish through their transformative gaze, yet organic unity can not be restored. The distance between the subject and the image, like the distance between Keats’ bold lover and the object of his desire, is bound to remain (“Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss / Though winning near the goal”).

3. The transfiguration of the object, failure to achieve totality

“Longing makes a link between those who are unlike one another, but [...] it destroys every hope of their becoming one; becoming one is coming home, and true longing has never had a home.”

(György Lukács, *Soul and Form*)

Since longing for a home means longing for a pre-reflective state and since conceptuality itself “kills life”, the subject tries to grasp totality through art. As shown above, alienation and increasing subjectivity are the spring for a desire of synthesis (Lukács 1948, 70); Broch claims that distinguishing the beautiful as an aesthetic elect is a reaction to the horror of a fragmented life, and that an attempt to restore totality has to come from a breakthrough into the irrational, requiring a “single, essential symbol” of inalterability (Broch 1984, 33; 48). It will be shown that Tadzio, Hans, Anna and Alfred (from *The Dilettante*) can be considered such symbols. In a Lukácsian framework, this breakthrough is the subject’s attempt to project the soul to “the external”; the creative agent tries to recreate meaning by assimilating everything that is valuable into the formed world – but these two are too hostile to another to be simultaneously affirmed.

How does one apply the Lukácsian notion of totality to the object transformed by creativity? On an individual level, totality implies a soul “at rest” even in action, one that is never a stranger to its surroundings. Life is ignorant of the form assigned to it, yet form envelops life perfectly (see the older *Buddenbrooks*). This requires unreflectiveness (Lukács 1971, 35), a life unburdened by normative questions *of* life, enabled by “epic” time: time loses its constitutiveness, thus the aesthetic image retains its essence

through the passage of time – just like Helen of Troy, Hans and Inge do not age in the modern sense. The artificial image is of a being whose predispositions and attitudes towards the world are aligned with social expectations, as in the integrated and “bounded” societies of antiquity (Miles 1979, 23); there is no Other to be confronted, the soul is at home. Errors can be made, but they are contingent, and can be determined by their distance from a locus of meaning which is intellegible. This does not imply a strict identity between subject and object, only that the individuals and objects divided by sharp lines can be placed in a homogeneous system of “love, family and the state”, the archetypal home.

The idea that a “pang of home-sickness” is associated with a longing for an uncertain past – manifesting itself in a symbol based on vague memories of happy companionship (Mann 1956, chapter VIII) – can be traced back to Mann’s *Vision* (1893). While “forgotten things [and feelings] rise up”, an image “full of bliss” appears and blurs into the whole. This image is described as “perfect”, “a world”, “a universe [in itself]”; a “sweet enigma” pulsating with life (Lawson 2005, 14). This image of wholeness is elaborated upon in more mature artistic attempts such as *The Dilettante*. The protagonist, driven by a lack of substance in “the external”, paints an image of wholeness, that of individual life in harmony with social forms and the transcendental, through bestowing his aesthetic objects (Anna and Alfred) with the qualities he attributes to a former totality. They are described as “children of light”: easy-going, spoiled, friendly and admired by all¹⁰. These favourites of the Gods thrive in the necessity Tonio Kröger struggles with. The dilettante continues: “I confess that I should like to be them. (...) *I am possessed with the feeling that I once belonged among them*” (Mann 1936, 41); yet the children of light are characterised by a lack of “the faintest self-consciousness” (Mann 1936, 45), thus it is his own reflectiveness that distances the dilettante from this image of wholeness. He feels disqualified and unknown despite their assumed former unity.

Tadzio is, as a par excellence aesthetic object (Bornedal 2012, 14), identical to the children of light. He evokes an image of “the noblest moment of Greek sculpture” (Mann 1954, chapter III), yet his pure serenity is “unlike anything” in nature. Similarly, Hans is described as uncommonly handsome, a scholar and a sportsman basking in popularity and, as opposed to Tonio, in harmony with society at large. Through Aschenbach’s gaze, contradictions dissolve: Tadzio’s hair is described as “golden darkness” in contrast to his pale skin, his body is formed of something transparent, something “other than flesh” (Mann 1954, chapter IV). He is seen as the “perfection of form” expressing the “perfection of thought”; in the absence of a certain creative agency, these contradictions can not coexist without tension. The transformation of Tadzio to an image of pure perfection¹¹ allows Aschenbach to experience reality, through Tadzio, as that of the

idealised ancient world: for example, dawn is humanised once again, described as “Eros (...) rising from the side of her spouse”. In short, the image of the boy is, paraphrasing Meyers, the result of the artist’s struggle to unite real and ideal (Meyers 2014, 63) at the cost of his *Haltung* – as seen in the collapse of Aschenbach’s own form.

In Lukácsian terms, Tazio’s actions – along with those of Alfred, Hans etc. – are, as opposed to the actions of the late bourgeois subject, “well-fitting garments” for the world (Lukács 1971, 30). The tension between the internal and the external dissolves; this is because the children of light are *aesthetic experiments* modelled after a state preceding the reification of consciousness, and thus exist in doubtless unity. Evoking the old *Gemeinschaft*, Hans and Inge are “removed from time”; likewise, Tazio “blurs time” (Robertson 2004, 96) for Aschenbach. The attempt to create an image of totality is also identifiable in the character of Felix Krull, who becomes “nameless, ageless, free and pure”, a harmonious union of life and art, through the gaze of the military committee (Lubich 2004, 210). Encountering the star of the theatre shaped young Felix’s outlook on life: Müller-Rosé is an image of perfection for the petty bourgeois audience of the operetta (Mann 1970, part I chapter V), radiating brilliance through seemingly natural, flawless form. In Felix’s imagination, the conventions of theatre do not restrict Müller-Rosé, but release him from “the limitations of everyday life”. This other-worldly image is the result of Felix’s, and the bourgeois spectators’s, longing for the “realm of the great, the whole and the infinite” (Lubich 2004, 204). Yet as soon as the distance between the creative mind and the object dissolves, Felix is confronted with the reality of the repellent creature behind the “beautiful and symmetrical proportions” of the image, and is disgusted by the sight.

For Aschenbach, the problem of distance manifests itself in the fact that there is no contact, physical or otherwise, between himself and Tazio, though the image of Tazio appears everywhere in Venice. Chasing the boy, Aschenbach’s soul “beats in vain” against a glass wall (Lukács 1971, 90). Tonio concedes that he both desires and renounces the shrinking of distance between himself and Hans, since closeness would destroy the image just as in the Dilettante; a certain detachment is maintained since Tonio both desires to be Hans – at the very least, to take part in the unreflective unity he stands for – and desires Hans to remain the image of a wholesome other. In Lukács’s words, a “profound sense of union” is, contradictorily, enabled by “being-separate” from this union (Lukács 2010, 112). After the disappearance of an organic unity, the aesthetic transfiguration of the object is not directly suitable to systematise totality. To extend this aesthetic notion to the world of the novel: the attempt of the longing subject to create organic totality fails because of the inadequacy of the historico-metaphysical conditions. The form-giving intention can not surmount the distance

between subject and object; on the contrary, it maintains the distance. Though Tadzio may speak of commonplace events in Polish, it remains “mingled harmonies” for Aschenbach (Mann 1954, chapter III) as long as he does not understand Tadzio; similarly, Tonio and Inge exist in different (linguistic) worlds. The necessity of distance in transfiguring an object is supported by Kierkegaard¹² and by Benjamin, who state that inapproachability is a primary quality of the auratised image (Benjamin 2002, chapter XI). One could also claim that this problem of distance is the root of irony: though Solger asserts that irony is a modern method of form-giving, perhaps it is the limitedness of the modern method of form-giving that results in irony. Indeed, for Lukács, irony is the attempt of the subject to “imprint” the content of its longing upon a world alien to it (Castillo 1986, 96), along with a realisation of the futility of this endeavour. The reflective hero accepts that soul, once universal, exists only in the lover instead of both the lover and the adored object – which results in irony.

Though longing seems to be inseparable from modernity, acting on longing through aestheticism may have considerable consequences in both aesthetics and politics. Lukács draws attention to the fact that, in a fragmented world in which aesthetics is “no longer metaphysics”, an attempt to restore totality through art means a violation of the particular that lies outside art (Lukács 1971, 38); in fact, a longing for totality – a “hunger for wholeness” – in an era defined by the inaccessibility of organic forms may lead to reactionary attitudes, i.e. forcibly subsuming the particular under the whole. Modern artworks can give a false sense of unity, and form is sometimes fetishised to the point of inauthenticity (Terezakis 2010, 229). Indeed, one may doubt the authenticity of the image of Greekdom Lukács paints in order to sustain his argument: for Adorno, the totality of Greekdom was just as alienating as modernity and the image of communality is merely a result of the oppression of instrumental reason. Second-degree critical philosophies (Jameson) centre exactly around critiques of the oppressive whole while pointing out the dangers of trying to eradicate the distance inherent to longing¹³. Though a detailed discussion of these dangers is beyond the scope of this paper, one may identify them in works of critical theory such as Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* or *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹⁴, Hermann Broch’s assessment of modernity or Benjamin’s politicisation of the aesthetic. The point of this chapter is that the artificial image of wholeness is, because of its instability and exclusivity, necessarily inferior to the organic totality Lukács links to a primordial home.

4. Conclusion

In early Lukács, organic totality is lost and adequate artificial forms emerging after this loss can only suspend longing for organic totality in

certain historico-metaphysical conditions. Transitional periods, in which forms become increasingly restricting, are characterised by an increased longing for totality. This results in experiments with artificial forms in an attempt to regain totality, to return “home”. The aesthetic transfiguration of the object is such an attempt, yet – since maintaining the image requires a distance from the subject – totality is beyond reach. What is more, efforts to create par excellence aesthetic objects in order to satisfy longing may be damaging; fetishising the image of the “children of light” does not improve the situation of the dilettante, Tonio or Aschenbach, and in case of the latter, it brings about the disintegration of Haltung and dissolves the pure style of the classical writer, a life’s work (Robertson 2004, 97-101). *The importance of examining the connection between longing and the transfiguration of the object lies in the potentially devastating implications* of said connection; for example, Leverkühn’s pact with the devil leads to the birth of fascism in Doctor Faustus (Meyers 2014, 122). Using a reactionary idea of wholeness as a rhetorical device so as to constrict conceptual solutions is not unheard of in contemporary politics, either.

Investigating the assumption of a supposedly raptured historico-metaphysical structure, extending the inquiry to a framework potentially able to substantiate claims on the loss of totality and pre-given meaning, could be a logical continuation of early Lukács’ study of form and culture – one may look to Nietzsche or Heidegger for a more detailed analysis of the erosion of *Gemeinschaft* and its consequences. Another approach to elaborate on the relation of aestheticism to a loss of totality is through the ethical notion of absolute sinfulness (“vollendete Sündhaftigkeit”), a term borrowed from Fichte: sinfulness – like Adorno’s concept of the “false condition” – seems to limit the subject’s possible reactions to transcendental loss insofar as it is an *essential* feature of modernity. A “mood of permanent despair” (Lukács 1971, 12) may not only open the way towards the emergence of the novel as a literary form, but also reinforce aestheticism as an answer to a “wrong” (substanceless) life which – again, paraphrasing Adorno – can not be lived rightly.

Pointing to Dostoevsky in the *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács maintains a vague hope that, despite the fragmentedness of the world, the birth of a new literary form could signal some kind of restoration of meaning (enabled by a new relationship between the individual and the external). These signs of optimism notwithstanding, the longing for wholistic communities prevails. If aestheticism is indeed an inadequate reaction to abstract loss, it is unclear what other attitudes can the subject of late modernity hope to rely on in face of a substanceless world.

Notes

¹ The image of modernity as an age of fragmentation expressed through the novel form is also comparable to Broch's assessment of the modern condition.

² This is what Lukács implies by "home".

³ While introducing the notion of totality, Lukács hints at rationalisation as a possible reason for the collapse of organic totality, but Cheah is wrong to believe that Lukács established a relation between disenchantment and instrumental reason. Lukács's intention is not to describe the cause of the transformation of the metaphysical or the social, as opposed to e.g. Adorno (Cheah 2003, 241).

⁴ ...whose increasing self-awareness is itself due to a loss of "objective" meaning and the resulting journeys inside the psyche (as opposed to the Homeric journeys in a colourful world of mythical creatures).

⁵ "Als wir klein waren und 'Kriegen' spielten, Tom, da gab es immer ein 'Mal', ein abgegrenztes Fleckchen, wohin man laufen konnte, wenn man in Not und Bedrängnis war und wo man nicht abgeschlagen werden durfte [...]. Mutters Haus, dies Haus hier war mein 'Mal' im Leben, Tom." (Mann 1995, 561)

⁶ For Lukács, philosophical thought signals a rapture between the "internal" and the "external" (Lukács 1971, 29).

⁷ The English translation (tragic) does not do justice to the original expression, *Elend*.

⁸ This is what Lukács referred to as the "Luciferian" aspect of art.

⁹ Like Antoine Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée*, the dilettante is driven to travel in search of meaning (exploring the salons of Paris, the mountains of Asia etc.) and, like Roquentin, he discovers universal meaninglessness.

¹⁰ "There are men, the favourites of the gods (...) whose happiness is genius (...) children of light, who move easily through life with the reflection and image of the sun in their eyes; easy, charming, amiable, while all the world surrounds them with praise, admiration, envy and love (...). And they mingle in the world like children (...) spoiled as the sunshine (...) as though it were impossible things should be otherwise." (Mann 1936, 41)

¹¹ In Robertson's reading: a self-contained, free-standing form detached from the spectator (Robertson 2004, 96).

¹² Invoking Plato's Symposium, Kierkegaard states that "loving is the only thing I'm an expert in, (...) just give me an object for my love (...). But here I stand like an archer whose bow is stretched (...) and who is asked to shoot at a target five paces ahead of him. This I cannot do, (...) but put the target two or three hundred paces further away and you will see!" (Lukács 2010, 50-52)

¹³ "The mechanism of longing at times denies or ignores [distance] in an effort to grasp the whole in the present moment." (Castillo 1986, 97)

¹⁴ "Synthesis [becomes] salvation"; "any [...] resistance [Enlightenment] encounters merely increases its strength" (Adorno 2002, 3).

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