Anyone interested in the thought of Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács would be pleased to know that Continuum recently published a new volume of essays devoted to his work. And they would be doubly pleased, if also slightly perplexed, to learn that in fact within scarcely more than a month not one but two such volumes appeared from the same publisher. This is a curious state of affairs. But as no such collection has been published in English for over two decades—i.e., Lukács Reappraised, edited by Agnes Heller (Columbia University Press, 1983), and Lukács Today, edited by Tom Rockmore, (Springer, 1988)—the dual publication amounting to almost 500 pages is certainly a welcome windfall for Anglophone scholarship.

The two volumes share a general basic aim, which is to re-examine Lukács’ work in the light of more recent political and theoretical developments in order to show that it is still productively relevant to many contemporary issues. Related to this general aim, both volumes tend to reject as unhelpful and obsolete the standard periodisation of Lukács’ work in terms of (a) his early Romantic neo-Kantianism (e.g., Soul and Form, Theory of the Novel), the tragic utopianism of which was supposed to be resolved by (b) his euphoric revolutionary Hegelian-Marxism (i.e., History and Class Consciousness), which is by and large his principal claim to fame, but which itself however ultimately collapsed into (c) his inglorious decades as, seemingly at any rate, a Stalinist philosophical hack (e.g., The Destruction of Reason, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism). Although significant breaks and turns do exist within Lukács’ development, in the post-1989 context it becomes clear that this threefold scheme is overly simplistic. For in retrospectively viewing it as pivoting around a failed revolutionary engagement, it effectively reduces Lukács’ long career to a blind alley of dialectical errors in a way that occludes the innovative insights that belong to the deeper core of his work. The idea, then, is to salvage the latter from the historical vicissitudes with which Lukács’ intellectual life was interwoven. In this sense, the common goal of the volumes—
and this is what sets them apart from those earlier collections—is to push Lukács beyond himself, or, as expressed in the blurb to the Bewes and Hall volume, to "liberate [his] thought from its formal and historical limitations."

While both volumes aspire to approach Lukács afresh, there is nevertheless an important dissimilarity pertaining to the relation between aesthetics and politics. This relation was always a central concern for Lukács, whose work militates against any crisp distinction. (It should be kept in mind that with regard to aesthetics Lukács was concerned nearly exclusively with literature and literary criticism.) But what these volumes show is that his work may be approached anew in two different ways, by negotiating this relation by way of emphasising one of the relata over the other. Thus while the Thompson volume (hereafter, GLR) is on the whole more concerned with political-philosophical questions and the contribution that Lukács might make to a reinvigorated project of Critical Theory (which, to be sure, also includes some considerations on aesthetics), the emphasis in the Bewes and Hall volume (hereafter, FDE) is on aesthetic themes, albeit with some more directly political contributions. And in each case the respective emphasis is reflected structurally: GLR sandwiches a section of essays dealing with aesthetics between two others dealing with philosophy and critical theory respectively, while FDE does the opposite, positioning its cluster of more politically oriented essays between sections that address "Paradoxes of Form" and "Aesthetic Reframings." These general editorial tendencies constitute the basic difference between the volumes. This difference is not trivial, but the nature of Lukács' work all but ensures some substantial overlap and complementarity.

GLR is ostensibly premised on the paradoxical claim that Lukács is at once "one of the truly great thinkers of modern times" (GLR, 7), and yet also someone whose theoretical contributions have fallen into "almost total neglect." (GLR, 1) The idea here is that while Lukács is a major figure within the tradition of radical critical theory, that tradition itself has lately fizzled out due to the "collapse" of classical Marxism, upon the revolutionary perspective of which it was theoretically and normatively dependent. In this context, the general aim of the volume thus implies a reassessment of the theoretical viability of Lukács' efforts to retool that tradition—in particular, the account of reification at the heart of History and Class Consciousness. Thompson claims in his "Introduction" that such a "reconsideration" could revitalise Critical Theory by "giv[ing] foundation once again to a humanist ethical tradition with an objective understanding of social reality." (GLR, 7)
Matters are somewhat different in *FDE*. Here the general theme (aesthetics) is more clearly defined, and tends to be approached on its own terms rather than within the general parameters of Critical Theory. As expressed in the blurb, the idea is that recent developments (e.g., neo-realism) in literary criticism have enabled "new readings of Lukács" that are "less in thrall to the positions taken by Lukács himself on political and aesthetic matters." A radical and oppositional critique of contemporary capitalism and its cultural contradictions is still the aim, but there is a sense that Lukács' commitment to the revolutionary intentions of classical Marxism may itself be one of the "historical limitations" that needs to be overcome. More attention is thus paid here to Lukács' pre-Marxist work, and more effort is put into mining his later work—especially concerning realism—for specific methodological insights in a way that does not directly reaffirm in any substantive way the framework within which Lukács originally presented them. In contrast to *GLR*, then, here it is less a matter of recovering an eclipsed figure than of discovering a new, post-Marxist Lukács, and this as a resource for critical aesthetics rather than for radical social theory as a whole.

Given the nature and scope of its goal, the contributions in *GLR* addressing Lukács' "philosophical legacy" are disappointingly one-sided. In a broad survey of Lukács' career, Stephen Eric Bronner highlights the role of philosophical idealism in his original recasting of Marxist politics. This is important, but the message is ambivalent. For while granting Lukács' view of consciousness as the "decisive moment" for revolution (*GLR*, 30), Bronner also dismisses Lukács' early communism as a normatively ungrounded "politics of will." (*GLR*, 19 ff.) Lukács' later work may have attempted to correct for that, but Bronner holds that it yields no positive lesson whatsoever. The upshot is thus that the Lukácsian legacy boils down to nothing more than an "ethical commitment" severed from the objective political-economic analyses of the Marxist tradition. (*GLR*, 30) Tom Rockmore likewise emphasises the role of philosophical idealism in Marxism, and similarly—although more bluntly—tries to read Lukács out of and against the Marxist tradition. In his view, what value there is in a text like *History and Class Consciousness* lies in its potential contribution to a "non-Marxist" re-reading of Marx. (*GLR*, 36, 48) For Rockmore, this would ultimately mean locating Marx within the philosophical tradition of German Idealism, and Lukács' theory of reification within a broader humanist concern with alienation. And although he would endorse a more dialectically balanced reading of Lukács' turn to Marxism, even Michael Löwy's brief discussion of *Tailism and the Dialectic* included here also comes across as a one-sided plea for the role of ethical sub-
jectivity in the revolutionary process. Conversely, Stanley Aronowitz takes up the unenviable task of offering a defence of Lukács’ 1954 work, *The Destruction of Reason*, which portrays post-Hegelian idealism *tout court* as a degenerate and ideologically dangerous irrationalism. Not without reason this text is often judged to be philosophically crude. So even if Aronowitz finds in it some anticipations of Adorno and Bourdieu (but note that his essay, rich in typos, lacks notes or references), he effectively admits that if the work has a virtue, then it may lie precisely in its “vulgarity” (GLR, 64)—yet no less than a depoliticised ethics, this is hardly what is needed for a contemporary revival of Critical Theory.

By contrast, the strongest essays in *GLR* are those in the final section dealing with “Perspectives on Critical Theory.” These tend to engage more productively with Lukács’ work, and they can be profitably read alongside the political essays in *FDE*.

Konstantinos Kavoulakos develops a nuanced re-interpretation of the philosophy of history that shaped Lukács’ early Marxism, and does so as a way to redress the “antinomies of formalism” that enervate second- and third-generation Critical Theory. (GLR, 152 ff.) Premised on an invigorated reading of the dialectical mediation of subjectivity and objectivity in *History and Class Consciousness*, Kavoulakos’ argument retains the concept of proletariat but reformulates it in post-class terms as the intersubjective process underlying the contingent historical emergence of universality. This revised approach to the thorny question of the “subject-object of history” may be usefully counterposed to Neil Larsen’s provocative contribution to *FDE*. Here a similar attempt is made to re-historicise *History and Class Consciousness*, except that Larsen, relying on the work of Moishe Postone and others, aims to do so by purging it entirely of the proletariat as a category of historical subjectivity, resting the possibility of immanent critique and social transformation instead on capital’s own objective tendencies toward catastrophic crisis.

Sharing with Kavoulakos a charitable reading of Lukács’ understanding of dialectical mediation, Andrew Feenberg provides an impressive reconstruction of some of the key arguments in *History and Class Consciousness* concerning reification. This enables him to show the inadequacy of Adorno’s influential critique of Lukács—“Adorno is tone deaf to the music of Lukács’ dialectic.” (GLR, 173) But more generally, it also allows him to indicate the essential need for Critical Theory to base itself on a more dialectically sophisticated approach of the sort that may be found—not, of course, without some shortcomings—in Hegelian Marxism *à la* Lukács. In a related but less rigorous piece in *FDE*, Feenberg develops this view in terms of social praxis as a
partial corrective to Axel Honneth’s recent moral re-reading of Lukács’ notion of reification as interpersonal misrecognition.

Timothy Hall challenges Honneth’s reappropriation of Lukács from a similar angle, offering a radically historicist view of social praxis as creative “improvisation,” basing this on an account of what he terms ontological “novelty.” (GLR, 202; cf. FDE, 122 ff.) This exposes some of the transformational possibilities neglected by Honneth’s account (among others). But more generally it challenges any reading of Lukács as an identity thinker by using his account of reification to question some of the usual ontological assumptions of historical materialism. In a related discussion in FDE (which he co-edited), Hall develops this improvisational view in terms of the link between social justice and the good life, thereby showing the relevance of History and Class Consciousness to questions concerning the normative content of Critical Theory. Inasmuch, however, as it takes Lukács as following Marx in the assumption that life as such can never be fully subsumed by capital, this view is challenged (as Kavoulakos’ is by Larsen) by Stewart Martin’s interesting but somewhat strained argument, also in FDE, to the effect that Lukács was on the contrary a consistent theorist of “capitalist life”—something like an early exponent of radical biopolitics—and that the implications of his work for Critical Theory need to be rethought accordingly.

Extending the ontological theme, Thompson’s own discussion of Lukács’ work foregrounds the late (and posthumously published) text, Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins. The aim here is to show that Lukács’ project is fundamentally a matter of ontology—specifically, a materialist ontology of social becoming through transformative praxis that is modelled on but not reducible to labour—and that precisely for this reason it is uniquely well-suited to grasp the dialectical relation between subjectivity and objectivity, and hence to serve as the basis for a radical renewal of Critical Theory. Although it unfolds at a very high level of generality, the discussion is strong in terms of its reproof of any attempt to articulate critical normative claims in abstraction from social ontology. But it remains unclear just how a new ethics would emerge from this. Helpful here, then, is an essay on the concept of form in which Katie Terezakis argues that the operative sense of Lukács’ concept of totality—which is usually paid more attention—hearkens back to the philosophical romanticism of Soul and Form, with the implication that issues of aesthetic criticism—especially concerning narration, although this is touched on only briefly—would constitute the bridge between ontology and ethics.

Some aspects of this insight are investigated in excellent essays by Yoon Sun Lee and Patrick Eiden-Offe in the “Paradoxes of Form”
section of FDE. Lee looks at how Lukács’ idea of form became increasingly conceived temporally, such that the “recurrence” characteristic of narrative form is able to represent the “temporalized invariance” upon which historical truth is based—this being how, for Lukács, aesthetic experience can mediate humans’ understanding of their real historical possibilities. (FDE, 18 ff.) A key ingredient here is Lukács’ notion of type or typicality, of which Eiden-Offe provides an important conceptual clarification. Based on an account of its Weberian roots, this shows from another angle the intersection in Lukács’ work between literary criticism and class-based social analysis, in that both are concerned with the eschewal of direct naturalistic description in favour of historical narrative as a kind of typological interpretation.

These contributions help to shed new light on what is involved and at stake in Lukács’ later conception—and staunch defence—of literary realism. FDE includes a translation of Lukács’ 1926 article “Art for Art’s Sake and Proletarian Writing” (for which Andrew Hemingway provides a historical and political contextualisation). In the same way as Lukács’ contemporaneous (and better known) article on Moses Hess marks a political turning point, this text signals a turn in his aesthetic thought, in particular with regard to realism and the concomitant importance for Lukács of historical narrative. Several essays address this area of his work. Norman Fischer (GLR) and John Marx (FDE) take up Lukács’ interest in the writings of Walter Scott. Both undertake to re-read The Historical Novel more consistently on its own terms, that is, decoupled from the theory of historical stages and Lukács’ ostensible focus in his treatment of Scott on the prehistory of bourgeois individualism. In this way Fischer articulates in some detail a nuanced re-reading of Lukács’ leftist intentions, whereas John Marx contends that the upshot of Lukács’ analysis supports a broader notion of solidarity that invalidates class-based perspectives.

Probing more deeply, Peter Uwe Hohendahl (GLR) undertakes a detailed examination of the debates between Lukács and Adorno concerning literary modernism and realism. He shows that they share considerably more theoretical common ground than is usually thought, and that consequently this relation—so important for later generations of Critical Theory—needs to be thoroughly reassessed. Related to this at a general level is János Kelemen’s discussion (GLR) of the overall continuity and philosophical sense of Lukács’ work as a literary historian (but note that some citations in this text remain in Hungarian), and Werner Jung’s (GLR) brief discussion of time in The Theory of the Novel (but note that a poor translation leaves the piece only partly intelligible). Of more specific relevance is Michael Löwy’s brief discussion (FDE) of Lukács’ view of Kafka, which Löwy claims is
more complex than traditionally thought, and this in a way that could have important implications for Lukács’ account of modernism. (In support of this essay, FDE includes as an appendix a translation of Lukács’ 1964 foreword to Volume 6 of his Werke, in which he makes some brief references to Kafka.) Likewise relevant but more philosophically substantial and ambitious is an essay by David Cunningham (FDE) in which he argues that The Theory of the Novel provides a better account of the “real abstraction” intrinsic to capitalist society than Lukács’ later work rooted in historical materialism. (FDE, 56) Bewes also returns to that early text and offers a new reading which, partly informed by Lukács’ little-known contemporaneous thoughts on cinema, tries to liberate the radical method the book portends from the idealist historical ontology in which it was framed. Similarly, Gail Day (FDE) looks at the relevance of Lukácsian realism to contemporary practices of politicised art, arguing that many of Lukács’ own theoretical formulations and corresponding aesthetic predilections were inconsistent with his deeper motivations, and that properly reinterpreted his work can serve militant artists today as an instructive model of “how emancipatory ambitions refract through aesthetic-political mediations.” (FDE, 217)

There is clearly a lot going on in these volumes. Both are uneven in terms of the quality of their contents, but each contains some strong essays which, taken together, reaffirm Lukács as a figure to be reckoned with. Of course, many issues remain outstanding. Not the least of these concerns the status of revolutionary politics within the Lukácsian legacy—there is a big difference between recovering Lukács in post-Stalinist terms and discovering him anew as a post-Marxist thinker. Either way he comes across as a positively rejuvenated Hegelian, but whether the standpoint of critique thereby implied is still modulated through the figure of, say, Lenin, for example, is left unaddressed here. Yet inasmuch as concrete totality and the inherence of consciousness in social being are taken seriously, such questions cannot be avoided if historical subjectivity and aesthetic normativity are to be brought together without political equivocation. These volumes offer a great deal for those interested in these problems. But if his work is to have theoretical purchase and political bite in the contemporary context of global crises and growing anti-capitalist movements, then there is still a lot more work yet to be done with Lukács.