

# GEORG LUKÁCS

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## THE HISTORICAL NOVEL



*Georg Lukács*

# THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

*Translated from the German  
by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell*



*Penguin Books*

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England  
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.  
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia  
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4  
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

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First published in England by Merlin Press 1962  
Published in Peregrine Books 1969  
Reprinted 1976  
Reprinted in Pelican Books 1981

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Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,  
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Set in Linotype Juliana

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PELICAN BOOKS  
THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

In this study an eminent Hungarian critic brilliantly maintains that the classical form of the historical novel was forged by Sir Walter Scott in a direct continuation of the great realistic social novels of the eighteenth century. He follows his inquiry down to the works of such modern writers as Romain Rolland, Feuchtwanger, and Heinrich Mann.

'It is an inquiry into the nature of the historical novel rather than a history of the *genre*; and although, or because, it strictly adheres to Marxist doctrine and method, the book abounds in brilliant insights' – Martin Esslin in the *Spectator*

'The analysis of Scott may be, to readers in this country, the most valuable thing in the book, but there is much else besides. No one interested in the imaginative approach to history should miss this absorbing study, which will lead him to fresh consideration of such giants as Goethe, Flaubert, Balzac, Tolstoy and even Shakespeare' – C. V. Wedgwood in the *Daily Telegraph*

'I think Lukács has probably written one of the permanent classics of criticism' – Raymond Williams in the *Listener*

Georg Lukács was born in 1885 into a wealthy Hungarian family and educated in Vienna and Heidelberg. His first important work, a history of drama, was published in 1908, followed three years later by *Soul and Form*, a collection of literary essays. He twice took part in government in Hungary; after the First World War as Commissar for Education in Bela Kun's revolutionary government and as Minister of Culture in Imre Nagy's government in 1956. On both occasions his involvement led to exile: to Austria, where he wrote his best-known work, *History and Class Consciousness*, and to Romania, where he was deported by the Russians in 1956. Georg Lukács died in 1971.

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## Translators' Note

WE should like to draw attention to the following points. First, wherever possible we have translated quotations of non-German authors from their original language (e.g. French or Russian) rather than from the German in which they are given. This has sometimes produced certain slight divergences from their German renderings. Where verse quotations are concerned we have provided literal translations for the German passages, while for the French quotations (the only other language in question here), which are all given in the original, we have assumed a greater familiarity on the part of the reader and left them as they are.

Secondly, in omitting sources for quotations we have followed the practice of the original text.

Thirdly, with the exception of the term *Novelle* we have rendered all Lukács's specific literary and philosophic terms into English, varying their translation where a fixed word-for-word rendering would not adequately convey them. Sometimes we have indicated the original German word in parentheses.

Finally, a translator's apology: it has been difficult to produce a readable English version of a highly theoretical idiom in the German.

H. & S. M.

We add the following explanatory notes to aid the reader unfamiliar with certain names and references.

(pp. 28, 102)

Mikhail Lifschitz – a well-known Soviet critic who has written on Marx's philosophy of art.

(p. 58)

'social equivalent' – the phrase belongs to Plekhanov, the Russian Marxist critic, who wrote: 'The first task of a critic is to translate



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the idea of a given work of art from the language of art into the language of sociology, to find what may be termed the social equivalent of the given literary phenomenon.'

(Preface to the 3rd edition of the collection *The Past Twenty Years*, 1908.)

Plekhanov was criticized by Lenin and other Marxists for lapses into sociological relativism. The concept 'social equivalent', derived perhaps from Taine, was used by the 'vulgar sociology' which Lukács attacks.

(p. 170)

'for us' – Engels wrote: 'If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it for ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions, and using it for our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end of the Kantian incomprehensible "thing-in-itself". The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such "things-in-themselves" until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the "thing-in-itself" became a "thing-for-us" ...'

(Ludwig Feuerbach)

Lukács applies this idea *mutatis mutandis* to the literary treatment of reality.

(pp. 296, 297, 299)

Friedrich Gundolf – an influential German critic, associated with the Stefan George circle.

(p. 297)

*Biedermeier* – the period 1815–1848, i.e., from the end of the Napoleonic era to the 1848 Revolution. *Biedermeier* is the worthy, Philistine, middle-class German, so called after a poem by one Eichrodt which appeared in 1850.

(p. 316)

José Diaz – Secretary of the Spanish Communist Party from 1932 to 1942.

## Preface to the English Edition

THIS book was composed during the winter of 1936-7 and published in Russian soon after its completion. If today I present it to the English reader without any changes, my decision requires some explanation. For, obviously, the past twenty-two years have considerably increased the material of the last chapter. To quote just one example: a detailed analysis of the concluding second part of Heinrich Mann's *Henry IV*, which has since appeared, would certainly heighten the concreteness and topicality of the last chapter. The same goes for the later novels of Lion Feuchtwanger. But even more important than this is the fact that the picture of the times and the perspective it reveals are those of twenty-two years ago. Certain expectations have proved too optimistic, have been belied by historical events. For example, the book pins exaggerated, indeed false, hopes on the independent liberation movement of the German people, on the Spanish revolution, etc.

If I neither fill in the gaps nor correct the mistakes, but allow the book to appear as it was more than twenty-two years ago, it is chiefly because my present circumstances of work do not permit me to revise it to any worthwhile extent. I was thus faced with the choice either of publishing it unaltered or not at all.

This explanation, however, would be inadequate from a scholarly point of view were the literature of the past two decades able to affect the questions I deal with or the value and significance of my results in any decisive way. Which would indeed be the case if the question posed by my book were purely literary-historical, if its subject and theme were the development of the historical novel (or the historical drama) or even simply the unfolding of the historical spirit, its decline and rebirth.

However, as the reader will see, this is not the case. My aims were of a theoretical nature. What I had in mind was a theoretical examination of the interaction between the historical spirit and the

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great genres of literature which portray the totality of history – and then only as this applied to bourgeois literature; the change wrought by socialist realism lay outside the scope of my study. In such an inquiry it is obvious that even the inner, most theoretical, most abstract dialectic of the problem will have an historical character. My study is confined to working out the main lines of this historical dialectic: that is, it analyses and examines only the typical trends, offshoots and nodal points of this historical development, those indispensable to a theoretical examination. Hence it does not aim at historical completeness. The reader must not expect a textbook on the development of the historical drama or the historical novel; he will find a discussion simply of writers, works and movements who are representative from this theoretical standpoint. Hence in some cases I have had to deal at length with lesser writers (i.e. from the purely literary point of view), while disregarding more important ones in other cases.

This approach also enabled me to leave the old conclusion unchanged. The book ended with the German anti-Fascist literature of 1937. This was made possible, I believe, by the fact that the theoretically important questions – in the first instance the strengths and given weaknesses of the time both in respect of outlook and politics as well as aesthetics – had found a sufficiently clear expression in precisely this literature. The new important historical novels, like Halldor Laxness's *The Bell of Iceland* and Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (particularly its first half), confirm the principles I arrived at in a positive direction. In a critical-negative respect these theoretical conclusions have perhaps stood the test even better. For the fact that the historical novels which make the most noise today are those which accommodate a purely belletrist treatment of life to the latest fashions cannot affect the foundations of the artistic form. Thus, although my political perspective of the time proved too optimistic, this in no way alters the significance of the theoretical questions raised and the direction in which their solution is to be sought.

This aim determines the methodological problem of my book. First of all, as already mentioned above, the choice of material. I do not trace an historical development in the narrow sense of the

## *Preface to the English Edition*

word; nevertheless I do try to clarify the main lines of historical development and the most important questions these have raised. The ideal, of course, would be to combine a thorough elaboration of the theoretical viewpoints with an exhaustive treatment of the totality of historical development. Then, and then alone, could the real strength of Marxist dialectics become tangible to all, could it be made clear to all that it is not something essentially and primarily intellectual, but the intellectual reflection of the actual historical process. But this again was not my aim in the present work; hence I regard my book simply as an attempt to establish the main principles and approaches in the hope that more thorough, more comprehensive works will follow.

The second important methodological approach is to examine the interaction between economic and social development and the outlook and artistic form to which they give rise. Here an entire series of new and hitherto barely analysed problems is to be found: the social basis of the divergence and convergence of genres, the rise and withering away of new elements of form within this complicated process of interaction. In this respect, too, I consider my book no more than a beginning, a venture. In the concrete elaboration of Marxist aesthetics this question has as yet hardly arisen. However, no serious Marxist genre theory is possible unless an attempt is made to apply the theory of reflection of materialist dialectics to the problem of the differentiation of genres. Lenin, in his analysis of Hegel's logic, observes brilliantly that the most abstract deductions (syllogisms) are likewise abstract cases of the reflection of reality. I have attempted in my book to apply this idea to epic and drama. But here again, as in the treatment of history, I could go no further than give a methodological pointer to the solution of this problem. Thus this book no more claims to provide a complete theory of the development of dramatic and epic forms than it does to give a complete picture of the development of the historical novel in the domain of history.

Despite its extent it is, therefore, only an attempt, an essay: a preliminary contribution to both Marxist aesthetics and the materialistic treatment of literary history. I cannot sufficiently emphasize that I consider it, all in all, only a first beginning, which others, I

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hope, will soon extend, if necessary correcting my results. I believe, however, that in this still almost virgin territory even such a first beginning has its justification.

*Budapest, September 1960*

## Foreword

THIS monograph does not claim to give a detailed and complete history of the historical novel. Apart from the lack of real spade work for such an enterprise, this was not at all what I intended. I wished to deal with only the most important questions of principle and theory. Given the extraordinary role of the historical novel at present in both the literature of the USSR and the anti-Fascist popular front, such a study of principles seems to me as indispensable as it is topical. Especially so because the historical novel of our day, despite the great talent of its best exponents, still suffers in many respects from the remnants of the harmful and still not entirely vanquished legacy of bourgeois decadence. If the critic really wishes to uncover these shortcomings, then he must turn his attention not only to the principles of the historical novel, but to those of literature in general.

But there is an historical basis to our theoretical study. The difference of principles between the historical novel of the classics and of decadence, etc., has its historical causes. And this work is intended to show how the historical novel in its origin, development, rise and decline follows inevitably upon the great social transformations of modern times; to demonstrate that its different problems of form are but artistic reflections of these social-historical transformations.

The spirit of this work then is an historical one. But it does not aim at historical completeness. Only those writers are dealt with whose works are in some respect representative, marking typical nodal points in the development of the historical novel. The same principle of selection applies to our quotations from older critics and aestheticians and from writers who have dealt theoretically with literature. In both spheres I have tried to show that with the historical novel as with all things else it is not a question of concocting something 'radically new', but – as Lenin taught us – of

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assimilating all that is valuable in previous development and adapting it critically.

It is not for me to judge how successfully or not my intentions have been realized. I have simply wished to put these intentions clearly before the reader so that he should know at the outset what to expect and what not to expect from this book.

However, there is one gap to which I must draw the reader's attention before proceeding. As a result of my personal development I have been able to deal with the Russian historical novel only in translation. This is a serious and painful gap. In the older literature it was always possible to treat Russian literary works of universal importance. But translations of Soviet literature are only sporadic, and my critic's conscience forbids me to draw any conclusions on the basis of such scanty and incomplete material. For this reason I have been unable to deal with the historical novel in Soviet literature. Nevertheless, I hope that my remarks will do something to clarify these important problems for the Soviet reader, too, and hope especially that this gap in my work will be made good by others as soon as possible.

*Moscow, September 1937*

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Classical Form of the Historical Novel

### 1. SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONDITIONS FOR THE RISE OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

THE historical novel arose at the beginning of the nineteenth century at about the time of Napoleon's collapse (Scott's *Waverley* appeared in 1814). Of course, novels with historical themes are to be found in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, too, and, should one feel inclined, one can treat medieval adaptations of classical history or myth as 'precursors' of the historical novel and indeed go back still further to China or India. But one will find nothing here that sheds any real light on the phenomenon of the historical novel. The so-called historical novels of the seventeenth century (Scudéry, Calpranède, etc.) are historical only as regards their purely external choice of theme and costume. Not only the psychology of the characters, but the manners depicted are entirely those of the writer's own day. And in the most famous 'historical novel' of the eighteenth century, Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, history is likewise treated as mere costumery: it is only the curiosities and oddities of the *milieu* that matter, not an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch. What is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age. The great critic Boileau, who judged the historical novels of his contemporaries with much scepticism, insisted only that characters should be socially and psychologically true, demanding that a ruler make love differently from a shepherd, and so on. The question of historical truth in the artistic reflection of reality still lies beyond the horizon.

However, even the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century, which in its portrayal of contemporary morals and



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psychology accomplished a revolutionary breakthrough to reality for world literature, is not concerned to show its characters as belonging to any concrete time. The contemporary world is portrayed with unusual plasticity and truth-to-life, but is accepted naïvely as something given: whence and how it has developed have not yet become problems for the writer. This abstractness in the portrayal of historical time also affects the portrayal of historical place. Thus Lesage is able to transfer his highly truthful pictures of the France of his day to Spain and still feel quite at ease. Similarly, Swift, Voltaire and even Diderot set their satirical novels in a 'never and nowhere' which nevertheless faithfully reflects the essential characteristics of contemporary England and France. These writers, then, grasp the salient features of their world with a bold and penetrating realism. But they do not see the specific qualities of their own age historically.

This basic attitude remains essentially unchanged despite the fact that realism continues to bring out the specific features of the present with ever greater artistic power. Think of novels like *Moll Flanders*, *Tom Jones*, etc. Their broad, realistic portrayal of the present takes in here and there important events of contemporary history which it links with the fortunes of the characters. In this way, particularly in Smollett and Fielding, time and place of action acquire much greater concreteness than was customary in the earlier period of the social novel or in most contemporary French writing. Fielding indeed is to some extent aware of this development, this increasing concreteness of the novel in its grasp of the historical peculiarity of characters and events. His definition of himself as a writer is that of an historian of bourgeois society.

Altogether, when analysing the prehistory of the historical novel, one must break with the Romantic-reactionary legend which denies to the Enlightenment any sense or understanding of history and attributes the invention of historical sense to the opponents of the French Revolution, Burke, de Maistre, etc. One need only think of the extraordinary historical achievements of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Gibbon, etc., in order to cut this legend down to size.

What matters for us, however, is to concretize the particular character of this sense of history both before and after the French