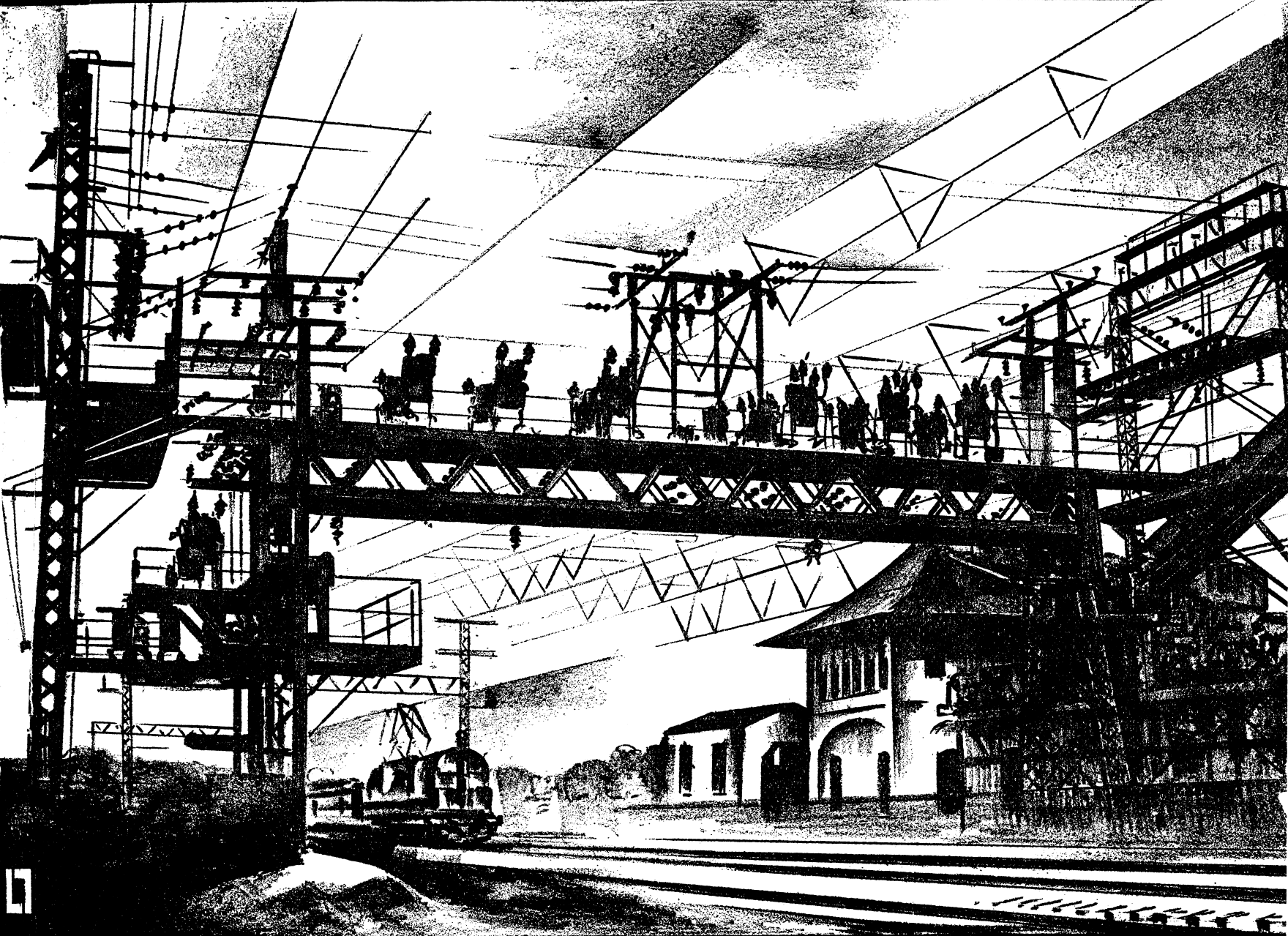


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The Historical Novel

Its utility as a weapon against those who would mask the meaning of events is here set forth by a noted British historian and critic

By Jack Lindsay

THE writing of history is a revolutionary product. Only the awareness of social change creates the feeling that the bare chronicle of events is insufficient; the priestly list is warmly filled out with the consciousness of change, conflict, process. Herodotus worked amid the rapid social changes and commercial expansion after the Hellenic rout of the East under Xerxes; he took an active part in the revolt against the tyrant Lygdamis in his native town Halicarnassos. Antiquity produced no historical novels—indeed no novels at all except the freaks *Satyricon* and *Metamorphoses* (*Golden Ass*), which appeared during the period of Roman bourgeois ease. But its history remained almost openly a class product; Roman history (as distinct from chronicles) began with Sallust's pamphlets, the work of a plutocrat liberal seeking to guide the Cæsarian revolution away from extremist policies; Livy fictionized republican Rome from the reactionary standpoint of pure-race theory and the glamorous past; Tacitus carried on this work with more intellectual incision, seeking to blackguard the Empire because of what internationalizing tendency it possessed. Here throughout history runs the tradition of rhetoric. The historian has no compunction in coloring events to suit his propagandist purpose, or in inventing dialogue

and speeches. The work of Tacitus is (omitting the question of different ideologies) as much historical fiction as, say, Vinogradov's *Black Consul*. Indeed, considering that it is based on distortion, it is much more fictional.

It will be clear then that there was little reason for historical fiction and history to separate as different *genres* in antiquity. There was even less reason during the medieval period, when all conception of process vanished and the only order of events was God's timeless will, the moral lesson. Hence, the way that a medieval writer picks his historical instances from any period or setting and huddles them all together under moral categories. History began with the Renaissance; stirred in Dante's secular passion for the Empire; grew subtler in Petrarch's worship of Cicero; developed a sense of fact and process as the bourgeoisie expanded; got its first real glimpse of development as mercantilism broke up under the solvent of liberalism (Gibbon, Diderot, etc.); and came to something like full stature with the French Revolution. Yet the medieval attitude, rationalized, persisted through the eighteenth century. Hume wrote: "You wish to know the sentiments, inclination, manner of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the morality and actions of the English and French. Humanity is so much the same in all

ages and lands that in this respect history gives us nothing new or unusual."

It was as a product of the French Revolution that the historical novel arose; it came straight out of the new sense of history created by the social turmoil. Scott is the greatest figure, and it is an error to think of him only as the reviver of feudalist fantasies. He would have slight value if that was all he did. Scott, despite his apparent legalistic complacency, saw something of the nature of historical conflict; and though his worst work, such as *Ivanhoe*, has been the most popular, he went deeper in his novels dealing with the Jacobites and the Covenanters. Though, of course, lacking the materialistic dialectic, he was nevertheless aware of history as a conflict of old and new forces and conditions of life. (And his humanist shrewdness filled out these abstractions, giving his novels the quality lacking in his imitators.) That it was his perception of development which created the effect of his novels on his generation is witnessed by Coleridge, a good witness, since he was very jealous of Scott's success:

The essential wisdom and happiness of the subject consists in this—that the contest between the loyalists and their opponents can never be obsolete, for it is the contest between the two great warring principles of social humanity; religious adherence to the past and the ancient, the desire and the admiration of permanence on the one hand; and the passion for increase of knowledge, for truth, as the offspring of reason—in short, the mighty instincts of *progression* and *free agency* on the other.

Edwin Muir has suggested that it was the suppression of Scottish nationality which turned Scott's thoughts backwards in time; there is certainly a truth in this, but we must remember how Balzac yearned in his early years to emulate Scott and throughout his life turned to medieval fantasies in the *Contes Drolatiques* as an escape from his depiction of the contemporary bourgeois. It is noteworthy that all the best novels of the bourgeois period deal only with matters a generation or two back. For instance, the greatest of all historical novels, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, deals with events in which Tolstoy's own grandfather took part. One cannot imagine Tolstoy writing an equally successful novel dealing with, say, the Renaissance or the Cæsarian revolution. For, while dealing with periods still directly affecting his own, the bourgeois writer found his own intuitive sense of social forces sufficient to enable him to produce a truthful picture; when he stepped out of that area, his lack of a consciously dialectical understanding proved his undoing. The idealist



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falsifications then took charge. Thus, Scott's Covenanters impress us powerfully as real historical actors; the characters of his medieval novels are mere cardboard.

What is significant about *War and Peace* is that in order to get so close to the truth Tolstoy was forced to work out a thesis which really exploded all bourgeois preconceptions and which in fact he could not fully incorporate in the novel. This is the thesis of mass force as the decisive element in history. The ponderous diatribes in which he expounds this thesis would destroy a work of less vitality. Their value for us lies in the fact that they prove that even for the bourgeois historical novel to reach its culmination it had to invoke a perception that really exploded the shell of bourgeois ideas. If we analyze the diatribes we find that they are inchoate attempts to express a thesis of mass determination which becomes ridiculous in Tolstoy's imposed religious form, but which is perfectly comprehensible once we see in it a crude half-statement of dialectical materialism. *War and Peace* is therefore the halfway house between the bourgeois and Marxist historical novels.

Since Marxism is above everything concerned with the dialectic of history, it was inevitable that the proletarian revolution would produce a new development of the historical novel. Indeed, in a sense, the distinction between the contemporary and the historical novel disappears. For the Marxist applies the same criteria in analyzing human development in the present as in the past. Novels like Gladkov's *Cement* or Leonov's *Skutarevsky* are not novels of the abstracted individual but of social process expressing itself through various selected individuals. They therefore take an essentially historical attitude to the contemporary scene. When Alexei Tolstoy turns from the present to the days of Peter the Great, he uses the same method as he used in *Darkness and Dawn*.

Not, of course, that the material is the same. Thus, I think that Michael Gold takes a static and mechanical viewpoint when he writes:

Scott was the poet of feudalism. The past was a glorious myth he created to influence the bourgeois anti-feudal present. On every page of history Eugene Sue traced the bitter, neglected facts of the working-class martyrdom. He wove these into an epic melodrama to strengthen the heart and hand of the revolutionary workers, to inspire them with a proud consciousness of their historic mission.

Certainly the Marxist novelist dealing with the past must always show how exploitation ruled and how the workers were kept down; but he has a more complex job than the schematic opposition of laborer and parasite. He has to show also how in the past the key to the productive mechanism did not lie in the hands of the workers; he must pay tribute to the energy of the exploiting classes in so far as they were creating an expansion of production and ultimately making possible the classless society. Thus, Alexei Tolstoy would not get far with his Peter if he were only concerned emotionally with the horrible sufferings of the

Russian peasants; he has also to show the positive effects of Peter's demoniac energy in kicking Russia out of feudalism.

An instructive comparison may be made between A. Tolstoy's book and Merezhkovsky's *Peter and Alexis*. The latter has much delicate analysis of character; one might even wish that Tolstoy had some of the nuances of Merezhkovsky; but in the last resort Merezhkovsky's picture is vague and ineffective, Tolstoy's is richly memorable. The former leaves us with a problem, a mystery of unattached good and evil; the latter makes us perceive what Peter did and why he did it and why he could do nothing else. Here we see the basic quality of the Marxist historical novelist. Whether he is dealing with the last generation or with ancient Egypt, he has the clue to the conflict of ideologies, he can directly relate the past to the present—not by the evasion that human nature has always been the same, not by translating past issues into



Darryl Frederick

modern terms, but by clarifying the past issues by his mode of presentation, the form of relationship in which he reveals them. (It is interesting that Merezhkovsky, reacting to the Revolution with hate, has taken to writing historical novels in which his last grip on reality is gone, in which his idealist ideology determines everything without the slightest regard to fact.)

It is perhaps not too much to say that the historical novel, in Marxist hands, becomes the highest form of historical composition. For since Marxism seeks always for wholes, the method that expresses the past conflicts with the maximum of roundness and richness becomes the best definer of history. History returns, in a sense, to the propagandist methods of antiquity, but not with sectarian distortion. It follows that Marxist fiction must in no way falsify the past, not even in the smallest detail. Its method must be that of the realizing imagination, not of fanciful redecoration. Given the facts, it must treat them with the utmost respect, seeking only to realize them in their human fullness.

The general influence of Marxism, of the revolutionary present, has to a certain extent raised the sense of responsibility, the perceptive faculty, among even bourgeois novelists.

We can bring out the meaning of these remarks by considering three novels on a similar theme, slave-liberation. *God's Angry Man*, by Leonard Ehrlich, reaches a high level of creative virtue by strength of sheer pity and indignation. Here again we have the spectacle of a novelist who, though not working from the dialectical viewpoint, is able to give a truthful picture of events that occurred in the near past. *The Black Consul*, by Vinogradov, a Marxist novel, has less creative richness, but it shows a surer intellectual grasp of relations, and therefore supplies a stronger foundation for method. *Spartacus*, by Leslie Mitchell, has

as much pity and indignation as *God's Angry Man*, but Spartacus lived a long while before John Brown and it is therefore harder to realize the conditions among which he lived, unless one has command of dialectics. Mitchell (emotionally a Communist, but lacking Marxist discipline) wrote a very moving book; but, besides having a vast mass of errors in detail, it showed no knowledge of what Spartacus was actually up against, it worked from the purely emotional viewpoint. It therefore failed as a historical novel.

The Marxist historical novel, started on its way by A. Tolstoy, Vinogradov, and Tynyanov, has already made an excellent beginning. But there is yet much more to do. I have above suggested something of the part that it can play in bringing out the full content of human development, in sifting and absorbing all that is positive in past achievement, in establishing the continuity of tradition in Marxist terms and stabilizing culture. Its educative value can be made enormous.

And there is an immediate value that it can have for us in the fight for the classless society. It can be a great weapon in the class struggle. Consider the value that a really powerful Marxist novel about, say, Abraham Lincoln, could have in the U.S.A.—or similar novels about the great moments in the struggle for freedom: John Ball, the Levellers, the Chartists, in England. Now, with fascism raising everywhere demagogic cries of reactionary nationalism, there is no task more important for the Communists in each country than to make clear that they stand for the true completion of the national destiny. To wrest from the fascist demagogues the great figures of the past national struggles is a pressing need, and what can do it better than adequate historical novels? Dimitrov has put the issue admirably:

The fascists are rummaging through the entire history of every nation so as to be able to pose as the heirs and continuers of all that was exalted and heroic in its past, while all that was degrading or offensive to the national sentiments of the people they make use of as weapons against the enemies of fascism. . . .

Mussolini makes every effort to capitalize the heroic figure of Garibaldi. The French fascists bring to the fore as their heroine Joan of Arc. The American fascists appeal to the traditions of the American War of Independence, the traditions of Washington and Lincoln. The Bulgarian fascists make use of the national liberation movement of the seventies and its heroes beloved of the people. . . .

Communists who suppose that all this has nothing to do with the cause of the working class, who do nothing to enlighten the masses on the past of their own people . . . who do nothing to link up the present struggle with its revolutionary traditions and past—voluntarily relinquish to the fascist falsifiers all that is valuable in the historical past of the nation, in order that the fascists may bamboozle the masses.

In England an admirable start has been made by Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*, though the revolutionary section here deals with France; Montagu Slater's play on Connelly is on the right track. The historical novel is a form that has a limitless future as a fighting weapon and as a cultural instrument.