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History and the Novel after Lukács

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English translations of Georg Lukács's *The Historical Novel* and *The Theory of the Novel* were published in 1962 and 1971, respectively, five years before and four years after the founding of *Novel*. (*Studies in European Realism* had appeared in English in 1950.) This cluster of publications inaugurated one of the major developments in North American novel criticism of the past half century: the turn to Continental theory for an identification of the novel with the philosophy of history. That identification may now have reached a terminus, as the shared understanding of history as a humanly accountable process, supported by the postwar liberal social-democratic consensus, has come undone. But for fifty years the novel became a choice instrument for reading "History as such" (Jameson 267), making analytically accessible the dynamic interactions of psychic and collective life, charting its internal flows, stresses, and contradictions as conventional historiography (fixed on objective data) could not. Alternative models for a historicist theory of the novel—Foucauldian, Bakhtinian, postcolonial, feminist, queer—would follow from the late 1980s. The Foucauldian turn, in particular, shows ways in which Lukács's Marxism sustained a humanist account of history as a progress of the species, a *Bildung der Humanität*, coterminous with the classical phase of European realism. Its key tenets—"the unbroken upward evolution of mankind," "the complete human personality," "the organic, indissoluble connection between man as a private individual and man as a social being" (Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* 3, 7, 8)—were established well before Marx in the philosophical anthropology of Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schiller, and G. W. F. Hegel, the touchstone for which would be the work often singled out as prototypical of a new, distinctively nineteenth-century kind of novel, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.

Lukács's project remains current in the career of Fredric Jameson, whose recent *Antinomies of Realism* (2013) revisits *The Historical Novel* in its closing chapter, "The Historical Novel Today, or Is It Still Possible?" The revisitation, explicitly posed as such, is at odds with the new account of realism, drawing on and modifying recent work in affect theory, which occupies the first (major) part of the book and bears the same title, "The Antinomies of Realism." Jameson reaffirms Lukács's main claim or premise, that an authentic realism is one that reveals the dialectical form of history. Only now, the content of that form—the terms of the dialectic—are changed. A new antinomy, between "narration" and "affect," replaces Lukács's "man as a private individual and man as a social being" (or as Jameson, marking their dialectical relation, puts it in the historical novel chapter: "the dimension of collectivity, which marks the drama of the incorporation of individual characters into a greater totality" [267]). And to change the content is to change the form, so that the relation between the new terms and the old is by no means clear. Their apparent disjunction casts the return of the old dialectic, in the essay on the historical novel, into crisis, in a formal analogue to the crisis of genre that is the essay's occasion. The question becomes not so much whether the historical novel is still possible today as whether

the dialectic can still serve as an instrument for grasping history—and whether history has ceased to make sense as an anthropomorphic project, as the medium of human progress.

Jameson's late turn to *The Historical Novel* illuminates the preceding "Antinomies of Realism" as a reworking of Lukács's early, pre-Marxian *Theory of the Novel*—more precisely, as a reconsideration of that book's Romantic genealogy. The new antinomies, narration (or *récit*) versus affect, express competing temporalities. "The time of the *récit*," writes Jameson, is "a time of the preterite, of events completed, over and done with, events that have entered history once and for all" (*Antinomies* 18); within the dialectic of realism, this registers as "an inauthentic and reified temporality," an "irrevocable" past (19) that empties the present and deadens the future under the sign of "destiny or fate" (21). Affect, in contrast, designates "the impersonal consciousness of an eternal or existential present" (25), the emanation of "generalized sensations" (28) or "nameless bodily states," floating loose from the chronological time of before-and-after in a dissolution of the classical "system of named emotions" (32). Affective states become autonomous, exceeding the claims of narrative and other time-regulating representational systems (e.g., sonata form) in the avant-garde arts of the mid-nineteenth century (Baudelaire, Flaubert, Wagner). In its emergent phase, affect is borne on what Jameson calls a "scenic impulse" (11), the suspension of narration for extended passages of scenic description that evoke a pervasive, global, unnamed and unanchored, often anxious or melancholy or uncanny atmosphere or mood. Students of British Romanticism may recognize in this description a central aesthetic device of Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, or the dialectic of romance and history that structures Walter Scott's *Waverley*, or, for that matter, the overcoming of narrative time for atemporal moments of lyric vision or introspection ("spots of time") in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Romantic suspense, in short, is the harbinger of realist affect. (And once affect becomes formally autonomous, suspense is captured by narration, in turn, in the plots of Victorian sensation fiction.)

Jameson's antinomies, emergent in Romanticism, correspond with the contemporaneous redistribution of the aesthetic field proposed by theorists of the lyric. "The fundamental characteristic of lyric," writes Jonathan Culler, is "the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special 'now' of lyric articulation," pitched against narrative's chronological drive: "The bold wager of poetic apostrophe is that lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the 'now' in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur. Fiction is about what happened next; lyric is about what happens now" (226; see also 283–95). As narrative verse cedes cultural high ground (marked by the claim on epic) to the novel, poetry, by the end of the eighteenth century, invests instead in lyric as the medium of Jameson's "impersonal consciousness of an eternal or existential present"—a pure semiosis that exceeds the mimetic constraints of history. This "literary absolute," as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy call it in their extended commentary on Friedrich Schlegel and the Jena circle, is the premise of Romanticism as less a historical period than an aesthetic ideology—an ideology

that would swallow the period, however, in the Cold War-era installation of Romanticism as an academic program. M. H. Abrams, one of the architects of that installation, tracks the “illuminated moment,” topos of an epiphanic breach in chronological time, through the “greater Romantic lyric” of William Wordsworth, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Percy Bysshe Shelley (385–90) across its eclipse in the drab interim of Victorian realism (skipped over by Abrams) to its reappearance in the Modernist experiments of Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, which emancipate the novel, at last, from prose into poetry (418–22).

The crux between lyric and narrative comes into view in the prototypes—*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and *Waverley*—of the “new genres or sub-genres characteristic of realism” (Jameson 145), born in the “novelistic revolution” of European Romanticism (Moretti 19–21): the bildungsroman and the historical novel. Not coincidentally, these are the case studies upon which Lukács builds, respectively, *The Theory of the Novel* and *The Historical Novel*. Both novels make a claim on lyric as an aesthetic practice distinct from their own governing protocols. *Wilhelm Meister* opens a formal antithesis between the low-gravity, episodic, underdetermined narrative of Wilhelm's adventures and the lyric interpolations, expressive of a generalized, ontological longing (*Sehnsucht*), of Mignon and the Harper, fugitives from the order of plot. The closing chapters reveal them as refugees from a traumatically overcharged back-story, which recoils tragically upon them. This sacrifice of its avatars, Mignon especially, makes absolute the division between lyric's aesthetic intensity (pure affect, close to music) and the meandering drift of the story (one thing after another) by endowing the latter, at last, with purpose: motivating Wilhelm's accession to the biopolitical order of family life *instead of* his achievement of a vocation (homologous with a public mission, with national history) at the end of the novel. Acquisition of a family substitutes, in other words, the progressive plot of *Bildung* that we are expecting to read (conditioned by two centuries of bildungsroman criticism more than by the novel itself) but that never arrives and is deferred through a sequence of stand-ins (the Tower Society; paternity; betrothal) into a belated, still more aleatory and heterogeneous, sequel, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*.

Alluding to it but not naming it, Hegel cites *Wilhelm Meister* as paradigmatic of the novel as a degenerate case of the “romantic form of art” on the grounds of this invocation, and then sacrifice, of poetic affect. Incapable of realizing the aspiration of spirit to an ideal, the novel rehearses instead “an ‘apprenticeship,’ the education of the individual into the realities of the present” (2: 593), comprising, in a famous phrase, “the prose of the world”—the “world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity,” of “external influences, laws, political institutions, civil relationships” (1: 149–50). Hegel formulates as a philosophical principle the antithesis between the poetic (expressing spiritual potential) and the novelistic (the prose of the world) that will undergird twentieth-century studies in Romanticism. The touchstone against which Hegel measures the novel, however, is not lyric but epic. The “modern popular epic” (i.e., the novel) expresses the historic disintegration of the “world-situation” of ancient epic, in which actors and events occupied a spontaneous, organic relation to “the whole

of [the] age and national circumstances" (2: 1092–93). Hegel's critique laid the foundation for *The Theory of the Novel*, in which Lukács contrasts epic's "organic" infinity, its formal capacity to represent a totality of human life, with the "bad" infinity of the novel, a constitutive formlessness ("lack of limits"). "The novel overcomes its 'bad' infinity by recourse to the biographical form" (81)—in other words, the bildungsroman—in the attempt to "[reconcile] the problematic individual, guided by his lived experience of the ideal, with concrete social reality" (133) even as modern social reality makes such a reconciliation impossible. The "dissonance special to the novel, the refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life" (71), impels at best the compensatory resort to "creative irony" (71) at the close of *Wilhelm Meister*, a "fantastic apparatus" (the Tower Society) that can only disclose its own "playful, arbitrary and ultimately inessential nature" (142)—a play of mere form, empty (to quote Hegel again, 1: 51) of "sensuously particularized" content.

Twenty years later, Lukács celebrates a successful reclamation of epic in "the classical form of the historical novel" established by Scott (*Historical Novel* 23). *Waverley* and its successors achieve a synthesis of individual and social life, realized in the representation of character as historical type, unavailable to the biography-based form of the bildungsroman. The *nation*—emergent in nineteenth-century Europe as a progressive historical force against the absolutist empires (exemplified, Lukács says, by the revolutionary *levée en masse*), supplies the horizon of totality: yielding the "soul-nation allegory of emergence" that commentators have viewed as normative for the modern bildungsroman (see Esty 39–40), but that does not quite take hold (despite a tradition of commentary saying it does) in *Wilhelm Meister* itself. *Waverley* subsumes the bildungsroman plot of individual sentimental and moral formation to the plot of national history. The defeat of the 1745 Jacobite Rising, the novel's historical topic, completes the political absorption of Scotland into the new United Kingdom: modern nation-state formation, structured by the progressive scheme of Enlightenment historiography, curbs the potentially chaotic energy of *Bildung* and gives form to the novel's chronically malleable ("wavering") protagonist—or rather, to put the case more accurately, it stabilizes his internal formlessness (a characterological trait Scott's hero shares with Goethe's). National history (as though in confirmation of Benedict Anderson's well-known thesis) gives Edward Waverley's life story a shape, a settlement, an end, in his domestication into modern civil society.

In an equivalent formal operation, Scott's novel cites lyric voices, utterances from Scots and Gaelic popular life, in order to subsume them too—collecting them as museum pieces, exhibits in the archive of national history that the novel sets itself to compile, relics of a safely closed past. Consider the contrasting fates of the claimants on the role of heroine: Rose Bradwardine, elected to the marriage plot, is a genteel curator of local songs and ballads, whereas Flora MacIvor seeks to channel "Highland minstrelsy" for the insurgent cause—and is sacrificed, like Goethe's Mignon (packed off to a convent instead of killed, however). Meanwhile Scott's narrative takes over the aesthetic capital of lyric, reinvested as Jamesonian affect, under the sign of romance, which it reclaims via a ceremonial disavowal (as stigma of

developmental immaturity). “Romance” designates an aesthetic object—a literary genre and its conventions—as well as a subjective state of aesthetic excitement: “He had now time to give himself up to the full romance of his situation,” Scott writes of Waverley’s entry into the Highlands (84), characterizing the psychic attunement (*Stimmung*) of the hero’s romantic imagination to the outward “scenic impulse” (see Jameson, *Antinomies* 38). Jameson’s new antinomies, narration and affect, thus capture the dialectical relation by which Scott—invoking the formal totality of national history—is able to overcome the modal opposition between lyric and narrative rehearsed by Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister*, deplored by Hegel, and confirmed as a premise of Romanticism’s aesthetic ideology by Abrams and Culler.

In Lukács’s account, the Waverley novels founded the great tradition of European realism, brought to its full development by Honoré de Balzac, “who writes, not historical novels, but contemporary novels which are profoundly historical” (Jameson, *Antinomies* 264) and which frame their situation “as social reality rather than historical event” (274). That tradition is compromised by the bourgeois class’s abdication of progressive historical agency after the failure of the 1848 revolutions. Uneven development allows Leo Tolstoy to achieve a late perfection of realism in post-Emancipation Russia, while Gustave Flaubert’s novels provide a sensitive barometer for its decline in mid-century France, before it sinks to outright decadence in the naturalism of Émile Zola. Recapitulating Lukács’s realist canon (Goethe, Scott, Balzac, Tolstoy), Jameson also enlarges it, adding George Eliot, Pérez Galdós (uneven development again), and, provocatively, Zola. His delight in Zola’s flights of sensuous description makes for some of the most brilliant passages of *Antinomies of Realism*: as though a major justification for the new antinomies is their aesthetic redemption of the author who typified, for Lukács, the betrayal of the realist project.

Jameson’s abandonment of the dialectic of narration and affect when he turns to the historical novel itself is all the more striking for its potential to illuminate Scott’s achievement—more convincingly, perhaps, than the Lukácsian terms he recapitulates for his actual discussion of Scott: “The historical novel as a genre cannot exist without [the] dimension of collectivity, which marks the drama of the incorporation of individual characters into a greater totality, and can alone certify the presence of History as such” (Jameson, *Antinomies* 267). What begins as an extended paraphrase and commentary on Lukács’s classic study issues in a confrontation with the historicity of the present. “History as such” is the problem: it is not so much that the terms of the dialectic may have changed in adaptation to new historical conditions as that the dialectic itself may not work anymore—may no longer be adequate to parsing the relation of human agency to its material conditions of existence. Jameson’s choice of contemporary examples of the genre is a bit of a letdown. “Collectivity” disappears from the analysis of Hilary Mantel’s *A Place of Greater Safety*, a historical novel of the French Revolution (no less); its political contribution, according to Jameson, is to have made Robespierre “a believable character,” that is, to humanize the Jacobin leader, bugbear of conservative and liberal historiographies, by making his “politics of Virtue” psychologically plausible—available, in other words, to our liberal act of sympathy (277–79). This goes against

the grain of Lukács's denunciation of the factitious resort to "biographical form" and psychology, as Jameson himself admits (268–69, 276). Mantel's later novel *Wolf Hall*, arguably the most successful English-language historical novel of recent years according to a consensus of sales figures, reviewers' plaudits, international literary prizes, and prestige theatrical and TV adaptations, is a masterpiece of the deliberate flattening of history as a dynamic of collective life into individual psychology, via Mantel's virtuoso management of that quintessential technique of realist narration, free indirect discourse. Her totalization of the technique, far from making Thomas Cromwell and his historical situation open and transparent to us, makes them strangely oblique, opaque—the more so for our knowledge of the fates that await the principal players in the story—and elusive to sympathetic reclamation. We can never know Cromwell so well as he knows himself, and knows what he is capable of. (The technique is belied in the BBC adaptation, in which Mark Rylance's sensitive eyes track the reassuring persistence of a human soul.)

From this residually humanist reclamation of the genre, Jameson turns to a more ambitious proposition, the "historical novel of the future," which must span a planetary-scale grand narrative exceeding the conventional measures of human history. "The Marxist philosophy of history is a comprehensive doctrine dealing with the necessary progress made by humanity from primitive communism to our own time and the perspectives of our further advance along the same road," Lukács had written; "as such it also gives us indications for the historical future" (*Studies in European Realism* 3–4). But the old dialectic between individual and collective life has withered away: the individual is reduced to little more than psychology as a by-product of style, while the collective is no longer organized by, hence can no longer be interpreted through, the realist categories of nation or even social class (or rather, social class as articulated within a national history, as distinct from its global redistribution by the forces of neoliberalism). Jameson invokes science fiction, the genre that has assigned itself the task of writing future history and the topic of his earlier *Archaeologies of the Future*—only to settle for David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, a sort of middlebrow parasite of science fiction. The pastiche of "literary" genres in *Cloud Atlas* lacks stylistic flair, while its simulation of a popular genre, in the "airport thriller" sequence, is perfunctory to the point of cynicism. The central future-history episodes are more convincing (and less condescending to their models), although they do nothing that science fiction itself has not done before. Kim Stanley Robinson, mentioned in Jameson's essay (and his book's dedicatee), has given us some powerful examples. Robinson's 2312 (part of a longer sequence, including the *Mars* trilogy [see *Archaeologies of the Future* 393–416], last year's *Aurora*, and this year's *New York 2140*) tracks the political crisis of a solar-system diaspora following the continued meltdown of earth's civilization and ecosystem: "[T]he space diaspora occurred as late capitalism writhed in its internal decision concerning whether to destroy Earth's biosphere or change its rules. Many argued for the destruction of the biosphere, as being the lesser of two evils" (124). Robinson is riffing on Jameson (writing about J. G. Ballard and Ursula K. Le Guin): "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (Jameson, "Future City" 76).

Science fiction asks what happens to “the incorporation of individual characters into a greater totality” when that totality is no longer human. In Scott and Balzac, national life could plausibly mediate between the vastly disparate scales of individual life and the life of the species: making “historical time,” in Paul Ricoeur’s formulation, an intelligible interface between “the time of the soul” and “the time of the world” (101). The post–Cold War “end of history” heralded the disintegration not just of ideological alternatives to neoliberalism, as its proponents boasted, but of the institutional framework for those alternatives, the nation state as bulwark of a social-democratic consensus—one that might sustain the will of a people against the inhuman imperatives of capital. Instead the world, meaning the earth itself as at once material object and dynamic system, has loomed into view as the sublime horizon of historical totality—meaning that it has come into view as a limit: the end of history, the end of man, the end of nature. The revelation is of a system too enormous and complex for the reckoning of human agency—our own ultimate “hyperobject,” in Timothy Morton’s phrase—and at the same time catastrophically vulnerable to it; driven toward collapse as a by-product of our accumulated actions yet exceeding the capability of the political institutions supposed to represent our collective will, rooted in the governmental unit of the nation state, for effective intervention. The predicament makes a mockery of “History” as the medium of human progress, articulated in the classical form of the historical novel by a dialectic between individual and social life that charges both with ontological value. The resurgence of nominally nationalist movements in the United States and Europe sharpens the mockery, as those movements set about dismantling what is left of social-democratic governance in the name of pseudo-primitive idols of the tribe: religion, ethnicity, race.

If the historical novel as we have known it needed that “cohesive aggregate of rights-bearing individuals,” the nation (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 353), let us look elsewhere for new forms of the novel as well as new forms of history. We can turn, in one direction, to so-called world literature in English or to fiction from what was until recently called the “developing world,” where the historical novel still finds work to do, sifting the ruins of empire, traversing the war zones and migration paths of empire’s wake. Once again the world intrudes as limit: Amitav Ghosh, having completed his trilogy of novels on the nineteenth-century imperial opium trade (exemplary in their reach beyond national borders to grasp the jagged formation of a world-system), addresses the failure of “serious fiction” (i.e., realism) to engage the “unthinkable” future history wrought by climate change (*Flood of Fire; Great Derangement*). In another direction, Colson Whitehead recombines the shared genetic code of science fiction and the historical novel in *The Underground Railroad*, taking up a countertradition initiated nearly four decades ago by Octavia Butler. In Butler’s *Kindred*, a disavowed national history, far from being over and done with, wrenches the protagonist back into its maw—bodily, not just psychologically, since slavery defined its subjects as bodies. Here too is a history too monstrous for realism to realize: that of peoples whose exclusion from the category of property-owning, rights-bearing individual—citizen of the modern nation, classical protagonist of the novel—was one of that category’s conditions. The historical novel is not done yet.

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