The contemporary historical novel

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Abstract
Although contemporary historical novels share a number of features with the traditional historical novel, as analysed by Lukács (1981), they display a fundamental change in the perception of history, evident in the disappearance of the omniscient narrator, in their choice of significant and representative figures, and scepticism regarding teleology of history or the world-historical role of war and violence. On the one hand, history has become a riddle, and this is reflected in the preference for the form of the detective novel, for which the model is *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1983). On the other hand, there is a clear preference for two historical periods: the collapse of the ancient world and the birth of the modern from the Renaissance to the 18th century.

Keywords
detective fiction, historical novel, George Lukács, *The Name of the Rose*

Historical drama was born with Shakespeare. He was the first, and for a long time the only, dramatist who substituted history for mythology in the tragic drama. The genre we call the novel was born almost simultaneously with the drama, but not as the historical but as the comic novel. Another type of novel, the so-called social or realistic novel, made its appearance in the 18th century. The historical novel, however, appeared only after the French Revolution, simultaneously with the emergence of the grand narratives. Not that it tried to fictionalize the grand narrative itself – that was attempted, rather, in drama, for example in Goethe’s *Faust*, but without establishing a genre in its own right. It was not the content but the vision of the grand narrative which the historical novel and drama shared, at least in one respect. Historical novels portrayed through the vicissitudes of representative characters and situations central conflicts between the old and the new
tied to the birth of modernity. The outcome was the victory of the new, depicted as progressive change, even if the author sympathized with the forms of life and the mores of the victims. Despite all his sympathies with the old Scottish clans or the revolutionary puritans, Walter Scott portrayed their demise as a historical necessity, the condition of the birth of a modern Britain; Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* ends with Decembrist conspiracy against the Tsarist autocracy. It is perhaps because of this shared vision with the grand narrative that traditional historical novels told very similar stories about the past of the present and the historical past. Let me just mention that only in America does the past of the present remain the concern of historical novelists, since America has no remote past. A traditional historical novel like *Gone with the Wind* takes place around the Civil War, whereas a contemporary historical novel, *The Dante Club* (Pearl 2003), is set immediately after the Civil War.

What is the difference between the novel in general and the historical novel in particular, and between the historical novel and historiography? All three are fictions, although different kinds of fiction.

If one includes the novel among the arts, this does not presuppose any necessary link between truth and reality. Truth in art is revelatory truth, *aletheia*, as interpreted by Heidegger. But do we need to include fiction in the category of art? Paul Ernst, for example, referred to the novel as a half-art. However, if we are happy to include novels, as a genre in literature, among the arts, then we have to concede that truth in the novel, as with all kinds of works of art, be it a painting, a sonata or a building, is revelatory truth. Truth as *aletheia* has little to do with the real; a novel is as different from probability, possibility or actuality as a joke. When we read Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* we do not ask whether a realm of dwarfs, giants or horses exists. We do not even ask whether a girl like Elisabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* was modeled on a ‘real’ girl or invented entirely by the author. For it does not make any difference as far as the truth of the novel is concerned.

Although novels are fiction, this is not entirely true in the case of historical novels. Some connection between reality and truth is re-established. A historical novel cannot be entirely self-referential, for it always refers to something external to itself. One can invent in a novel an American civil war in the 16th century, but this would be science fiction, not a historical novel. But this does not make a historical novel into a narrative kind of historiography, since even if some of the characters and their stories are not fictitious, most are. And what is more important, the truth of a historical novel remains revelatory, whereas the truth of historiography can be described with some simplification as aiming for verisimilitude. This is why biographies of representative historical figures cannot be regarded as historical novels, with the exception of those historical figures about whom we know very little, as for instance in the case of the Apostle Paul in James Cannon’s novel (Cannon 2006). Novels written about Moses or Jesus normally focus on the period between childhood and their calling, that is, the years of their lives about which nothing has been written in the Bible. Needless to say, they are not historical novels. Neither are the stories of Biblical heroines like Sarah, Zipporah (Halter 2005, 2006) or Dinah (Diament 1997). Nor are so-called family sagas, like Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* or Galsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga*, even though they portray the essential changes in family life and mores as due to changing historical circumstances. All the
characters in family sagas are fictitious. Satirical novels are sometimes parodies of political conspiracies, as for instance Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild*. Nevertheless, we do not need to know the model of the parody to enjoy the novel.

George Lukács wrote an interesting study on the historical novel (Lukács 1981), in which he discusses some representative structural features of the genre. In spite of all their differences, to which I will presently turn, contemporary historical novels share these structural features with the traditional historical novel. First, the central character of a historical novel stands in the ‘middle’ between the representatives of the two or more main historical forces in conflict. Standing in the middle can mean that the principal character is decent, yet ready for compromise, but it can also be the case that he stands apart from the historical forces in conflict because he has decided to avoid fundamentalism, fanaticism and self-delusion. Having such a main character as the centre of the narrative makes it possible for the novelist to portray all the main historical protagonists from the inside. The young Morton in Walter Scott’s *Old Mortality* stands between puritan fanatics and loyalists to the old world order. In Feuchtwanger’s *Jewish War* (Feuchtwanger 1932, 1936, 1942) Josephus Flavius is placed between the Roman imperial court and the vanquished Jewish community. Or to turn to contemporary historical novels, the heroine of Peter Pranger’s novel *Die Philosophin* (Pranger 2004) is Sophie Volland. Through her story the author introduces us into the company of the Encyclopaedists, especially Diderot, but also into the court sphere of Madame Pompadour. The middling hero of Saylor’s entertaining detective fictions set in ancient Rome is an utterly fictitious investigator, called Gordianus (Saylor 1991). Through him we encounter leading historical actors such as Cicero, Pompey, Catilina, historical protagonists and mortal enemies during the last decades of the Roman Republic. Even the Apostle Paul in Cannon’s novel stands between the Romans and the Jews.

The second structural feature of the historical novel, according to Lukács, is what he calls necessary anachronism. Even if a writer tries hard to remain true to the consciousness and self-understanding of the historical epoch she portrays, she cannot achieve her aim. Unwittingly, the self-understanding of her own age will impede the understanding of the past. There is a difference, however, between the traditional and the contemporary historical novel in this respect. In the contemporary historical novel anachronism is mostly conscious. Sometimes irony indicates the purpose, as in Pamuk’s *My Name Is Red* (Pamuk 2002). Sometimes the author spells it out, like Saylor, who wonders whether his country, America, will meet a fate similar to that of the Roman Republic. Finally, indirect reference to the present can be made obvious by presenting parallel stories from different historical epochs, as Iain Pears does in his *Dream of Scipio* (Pears 2003), where the third and final story takes place in France during the Second World War.

The self-conscious anachronism of contemporary historical novelists, in contrast to the unintended anachronism of the traditional historical novelists, also indicates a fundamental change in the perception of history itself. If history has no telos, if there is no universal progress or regress, things of the past can illuminate the present and vice versa, for things that happened in the past can happen again in the present, not in the same way, yet as far as the fate of individuals is concerned, in similar ways.

The third structural characteristic of historical novels, according to Lukács, is the portrayal of the so-called people, that is, the lowly, excluded, marginal strata or classes.
In traditional historical novels members of those strata or classes are beyond doubt idealized: Platon Karatajev in Tolstoy, the peasant girls, Jews and servants in Walter Scott, or Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. The same classes or strata are also portrayed in contemporary historical novels, but without a grain of sentimentalism or romanticism. In the contemporary historical novel there is no moral difference due to one’s place in the social hierarchy.

All representative contemporary historical novels share a common vision of history and of the possibility and worth of historically relevant actions. Although in all probability none of the writers has ever read Hegel, they constantly polemicize with Hegel’s understanding of the role of reason in history, not because they know that there is no reason in history, but because they believe that, if there is one, we can know nothing about it, and that it is therefore of no significance for us. From this it follows that they view very skeptically all so-called world-historical individuals. In Hegel’s philosophy of history the main world-historical individuals are Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon. No doubt, he had good reasons to select exactly those three. It was they who, through their conquests, spread the then highest cultural achievements to the widest territory of the known world.

The authors of contemporary historical novels do not share Hegel’s judgement. In their minds it is not the warlords but an entirely different kind of people who played the most significant role in humanity’s histories. They were artists, traders, cartographers, philosophers, scholars. The most important events were not wars but civil wars, scientific discoveries such as blood transfusion, even the South Sea Bubble. And even less can contemporary historical novelists share Hegel’s understanding of the world-historical role of evil, because nothing plays a world-historical role in their works. Modern novelists write about histories in the plural, never any kind of world history. Moreover, they do not believe that evil can play a great role, even if evil is understood in a perspectivist manner. One can accept, if one is a perspectivist, that every kind of new, unusual action or idea is regarded from the perspective of the old world as intrinsically evil. Yet even if we reduce the concept of evil to this perspectivist minimum, we no longer accept the tenet that the new as evil advances history to the better. In the eyes of Cicero, Caesar was evil, the man who destroyed the Republic. Although Gordianus, Saylor’s main character, does not share Cicero’s perspective, he nevertheless has a low view of Caesar and his machinations.

The authors of contemporary historical novels have very different images of men. The Hungarian writer György Spiro has a philosophical anthropology that is extremely gloomy. There is not a single person in his universe who is not either wicked or a naïve imbecile. In Pearl’s historical universe there are a few exceptions: the decent men and women. And there are also others who have not lost the capacity for regret or repentance. The world of Liss is very forgiving (Liss 2001, 2004a, 2004b). Humans are frail and they are treated with understanding within limits, among them also the central character of two of his novels; Liss, or better, his main character, is unforgiving, however, if someone crosses the limit twice. Harris for his part makes allowances for shrewd manipulation if he finds there to be at least a grain of unselfishness or of simple empathy, as in Cicero and his secretary Tiro, the narrator in *Imperium* (Harris 2006). And he admires without reservation the men who are possessed by the unselfish passion for science, for truth, like Pliny the Elder.
Although their image of men can be very different, their image of history is rather similar. There are stories which always repeat themselves. Men and women vest their hopes in some cause or thing. They cherish the conviction that if they try hard, if they achieve this or that, the world will turn into a better place. Sometimes their passions are invested in vain, their world collapses and so do their hopes. Sometimes their dreams come true, but only to become unlike their dreams. All passions are tied to illusions which finally fade away. The world does not change even though it constantly changes. We are presented with a kind of *corso e ricorso*. Of course the story of lost illusions is not new. It is as old as the realistic novel itself and the novel of education, the *Bildungsroman*. The classic novels of the 19th century, from Stendhal, Balzac and Dickens onwards, are full of stories about lost illusions. But the lost illusions relate to personal ambition in love, politics, public success. In the contemporary historical novel, or at least in those I know, no one has illusions about her- or himself. The main characters are basically decent, not particularly interested in their personal advancement to the top; indeed most of them already occupy the place best suited to them, which may be at the top. The Dante scholar wants to remain a Dante scholar, the engineer a water engineer, the investigator an investigator.

The emotional colouring of this shared vision of history depends mainly on the writer’s image of men and of his heroes. For Harris and Pearl, for example, and even for Saylor, what has been in vain was nevertheless not in vain. For it is a great thing to embrace a cause, such as the successful defense of someone wrongly accused, to observe a unique natural phenomenon or to find the murderer of one’s father, and to embrace this cause sincerely, to put your life at risk for it, yet spare the lives of others. It is a great thing to believe, to cherish hopes, even in phantoms, if one does not hurt innocent people on purpose, because to live in peace with oneself is not nothing. The morality, the decency of men and women, one’s involvement in discovering the truth about something is of value. It counts. Among all the contemporary writers of historical fictions that I know, only Spiro’s novel *Captivity* ends in total resignation (Spiro 2005). But it is not just the vision of the world and of men that distinguishes the contemporary from the traditional historical novel. Irrespective of their quality as novels, contemporary historical novels also depart in several other respects from the grand narrative.

The omniscient narrator disappears in contemporary historical novels (as in most contemporary novels in general). The stories are frequently told in the first person singular, as in the novel of Liss, in *Pompeii* by Harris (2004), in Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1983). In Harris’s *Imperium* the narrative is presented as a biography of Cicero written by Tiro, his slave, scribe and friend (Harris 2006). In Pears’ *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (Pears 1998) the same story is told from four different positions; in his *Dream of Scipio* the stories are deciphered from old manuscripts, in Pamuk’s *My Name Is Red* (Pamuk 2002) even a painted horse or a colour tells a part of the story. Where the author occupies the position of a narrator, he or she writes from the standpoint of the main character and tells only as much as the main character witnessed with her eyes or ears.

A novel is a novel. It needs to be teleologically constructed. Through all its contingencies, the story finds its way to its end. Whether the end is happy or unhappy, it is the end of a particular narrative. The reader can phantasize about the possible
continuation of the narrative, but she must believe the author. One can interpret a great
novel in a thousand different ways, but one can only interpret what has been written.
A great traditional novel is a world, a closed world. However, this is not the case in the
contemporary novel, and especially not in the contemporary historical novel. Since there
is no omniscient narrator, the reader can always experiment with alternatives. For
example, Tiro, the scribe, writes about Cicero. He is a loyal friend and slave. How do
we know that the story he describes is true, that he has not kept a few secrets? What
might these secrets – if they are secrets – be? Must we believe that Yuri in fact met
Christ in the prison cell (Spiró 2005)? The question is not whether Christ could have
been in a prison cell in Jerusalem (for that is an unresolvable historical question) but
whether Yuri’s story can be believed in its own right. One should not forget that
memory is always distorted; observed and experienced events are fixed in memory in a
quasi-distorted manner. In contemporary novels the reader therefore does not get the
narrative readymade, she reads the narrative critically. She experiments with alterna-
tive stories, she tries to unmask the lies and misunderstandings of the writers. In other
words, she is constantly involved in puzzle-solving.

The first well known contemporary, postmodern historical novel was written by a phi-
losopher, Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1983), which established a new tra-
dition. Contemporary historical novels written since *The Name of the Rose* followed in its
footsteps. Some are far better novels than their model, but aesthetic judgement is not the
question here. *The Name of the Rose* begins as a kind of thriller. Murders are committed in a
monastery, and two men, the storyteller and his mentor, like self-appointed detectives,
decide to catch the murderer. As it turns out later, even though other murders follow, they
will lose their significance. At the end of the novel we even lose interest in the detective
work, or rather, another kind of detective work, relating to conflict between the Church and
the Throne, heretics and punishment, replaces the initial investigation. There is a murder
case or there are several murder cases also in Pears, in Liss, in Pearl, in Saylor, Pamuk, Harris
and Spiró. And in each case the murder riddles are nothing but manifestations of other ridd-
dles, of other ‘cases’. Who are the real perpetrators? Perpetrators of what crimes? Such and
similar questions will cast their shadow over the initial case.

I do not think that the thriller aspects of modern historical novels are just tricks or
attention-catching devices. The message is philosophical. As I mentioned, in the contempo-
rary historical novel all the stories or segments of stories are riddles, for we do not know
whether the memory of the storyteller is precise, and if he errs, which we presuppose any-
how, what has been distorted and to what extent? Sometimes, when the same story is told by
several persons, one distortion might correct the other, but we still lack certainty. For exam-
ple, the last storyteller of *An Instance of the Fingerpost* unmasks all the others as liars by
revealing himself as the real murderer. However, his real story sounds far more fantastic than
the stories unmasked by him. Finally, we throw in the towel. We do not know. The contem-
porary historical novel cannot be closed with the satisfying words ‘The End’.

In a traditional historical novel there is no essential difference between the past of the
present and the remote past. Narrating a story from the past of the present and the remote
past were perceived as being equally ‘historical’. This is no longer the case. We do not
perceive novels about the past of our present as ‘historical’. A novel about the Second
World War, for example *The Naked and the Dead* (Mailer 1948), is not a historical novel.
Even less do we perceive novels about the Holocaust, for example *Fateless* by Imre Kertész (1992), as historical novels. Lukács’s necessary anachronism is impossible in novels about the past of our present. It is not just that we perceive a past story as relevant for the present, but the past of the present is deeply, unmistakably present in our present. It is not a closed chapter. I could add not yet, but I think that as far as Holocaust novels are concerned it never will be.

The contemporary historical novel does not cover the whole range of the past. All significant historical novels, perhaps also the less significant ones, concentrate on two historical periods. First, they concentrate on stories of Rome from the last century of the Republic up to the final collapse of the Roman Empire. Among the novels I mentioned this period is covered by all the books of the ‘Sub Rosa’ series by Saylor, the first story in Pears’ *The Dream of Scipio*, by Harris’s *Pompeii* and *Imperium* and by Spiró’s novel *Captivity*. The renewal of interest in this period of Rome began earlier in Robert Graves’ Claudius novels, which belong to the genre of biographical fiction. It is worth noting in passing that even during the period of Graecomania in philosophy, no historical novels were written on the Greeks. Second, they concentrate on stories about the emergence of the modern world from the late medieval period onwards until the age of Enlightenment. The historical novels that treat the post-Enlightenment period are confined to American history. Both of Pearl’s novels take place in the 19th century (Pearl 2003, 2006).

Among the novels I mentioned, the following deal with the period of the emergence of modernity: the second part of Pears’ *The Dream of Scipio*, the three novels by Liss, *The Name of the Rose* and the novels by Rey, Sarah Dunant, Pranger and Lohner. Several stories take place in the same period and in the same country or city, for example 17th- and 18th-century England, London and Oxford, 17th- and 18th-century France, Versailles, Paris, and 15th- and 16th-century Florence. I know, for example, of three novels which centre around the murder of Giuliano Medici, the revenge of Lorenzo il Magnifico, the rebellion against the Medici, the rule and the fall of Savonarola. Of these, *The Birth of Venus* (Dunant 2004) is to my mind the best. I can think of four reasons for writers to choose this period and city. The first reason is that the ‘murder’ motive is here intimately related to the political. The question is not why Giuliano was murdered, because this is obvious, but who murdered him, who was behind the conspiracy. Second, this event opened the possibility of moving philosophers (like Pico della Mirandola) and artists to the centre of the novel. The cult figure of Leonardo da Vinci plays an entirely fictitious part in three of these novels. Third, one of the major conflicts of modernity, a conflict we still feel today, made its first appearance in Florence after the murder of Giuliano Medici. Savonarola was not just a fanatic, he was perhaps the first conscious fundamentalist ever. He hated modernity in the making, the liberal treatment of religiosity combined with an unscrupulous quest for luxury, and he was ready to throw not just the paintings of nudes but also their collectors on the bonfire of vanities. In addition, the main targets for punishment beside the rich were so-called loose women and homosexuals. Since difference had already made its appearance, the outlawing of difference could be put on the agenda.

So in sum, the collapse of the ancient world and the birth of the modern world are the ‘periods’ of special interest for contemporary historical novelists. A world goes down in violence and a world is born in violence. There is no historical novel without violence. The contemporary historical novel is no exception. But there is an essential difference
between the kind of violence portrayed in traditional and contemporary historical novels. In traditional historical novels violence asserts itself in war, war between us and them, as Carl Schmitt described it. Wars against so-called natural enemies, wars that were mostly regarded as just from the perspective of the main character, but also civil wars. It is in the situation of war that a person can show his worth, display his courage or cowardice, defend his honour or go down in shame. The main characters of traditional novels are men, who are, of course, in love with women. War is public but women remain in the private sphere. The main characters belong generally to the upper classes, to the aristocracy or the gentry, for they are the ones who must defend their honour. But, as I already mentioned, the so-called lower classes, especially peasants, can also play an important role, replacing the chorus of the ancient Greek drama.

In novels which concentrate on the age of the birth of modernity, war plays no role at all. Certainly, there are references to previous wars, especially civil wars, if the secret of one or the other main characters lies buried in the past, as in An Instance of the Fingerpost or The Dante Club. In novels about the end of the Roman Republic wars are portrayed by Saylor. They are, however, depicted as entirely senseless. Moreover, the wars are external to the development of the main narrative and particularly to showing the moral worth of the protagonists’ character. None of the other Roman novels (of Spiró, Pears or Harris) tells a war story. Nevertheless, violence is omnipresent. What kind of violence? Proscription, lynching, pogroms, witch hunts, the hunting down of heretics, the murder of political enemies. Violence is played out in the open, as with mob action, incited by the vested interests of the rich and mighty, or in the dark, perpetrated by conspirators. The main act of violence in the Roman stories is proscription and the unpunishable murders it licenses. As this kind of violence shows, the thriller-like character of many contemporary historical novels is not a trick but belongs to the heart of the stories told. The targets of violence are mainly the innocents, the usual scapegoats, against whom mass hatred can be easily mobilized. Thus the main characters in many contemporary historical novels are women, Jews and heretics. But the protagonists of these novels are in general Roman citizens. I know of one exception. The central character of the novel Captivity by Spiró is a Roman citizen who is also a Jew. In this novel violence is omnipresent, yet it is also, so to speak, ‘civil’. In contrast to Feuchtwanger, Spiró does not portray the Jewish War. The main scenes of violence in his book are pogroms: pogroms against Jews, against Christians, especially the infamous and well documented pogrom of Alexandria.

Let me now turn briefly to the second, and perhaps major, period covered by the contemporary historical novel. Women branded as witches are burned at the stake in two novels (The Name of the Rose and Die Philosophin). Witch hunts against heretics also play a major role in the second part of The Dream of Scipio. Women suffer from persecution for their ‘loose morals’, especially in the novels on Florence. In five of the novels I have mentioned, Jews are the main characters or one of the main characters, who are mostly targets of hatred and persecution. For example, a Jew is the central character in the three novels by Liss. Liss presents the stories of Sephardic Jews in London and Amsterdam, who, even if politically marginal, play an essential part in trade as well as in the early world of banking. The hero of A Conspiracy of Paper (Liss 2001) is a marginal Jewish man, a former boxer, who returns home to expose his father’s murderer, but finds
himself confronted by the famous gangster Jonathan Wild and becomes entangled in the South Sea Bubble, which he helps after several adventures to unmask. In the other novels with Jewish protagonists, Jews and women are the victims of violence. Almost all the stories told in these novels are also known from history books. The success of at least two of those novels is due to the way they draw the interpretation of historical events into the presentation of interesting characters and moving personal fates. I have in mind The Master of the Compasses (Rey 2004) and The Jewess of Trent (Lohner 2004). The first is also a story about the Sephardic Jews who drew the first reliable map of the sea, absolutely necessary for successful navigation. Their work and person were supported and lavishly rewarded by the King of Aragon, whom their leaders met personally. Aragon was as yet spared the pogroms in Castile. The disaster came unexpectedly as a terrible surprise. These people had felt themselves esteemed and safe.

What is called necessary anachronism is obviously felt in reading the novel. Even if we know that this indeed happened at Palma de Majorca, we still think of the prosperous German Jews at the time of the rise of Hitler. Nevertheless, a novel is a novel. The pogrom is, so to speak, the ‘condition’ or the ‘occasion’ to present two young men, two friends, who only get to know their inner selves in a time of great trial. The serious and religious youth will convert to Christianity to save his life, whereas his rough, ambitious and sometime cynical friend chooses to jump to his death from a tower in Barcelona rather than abandon his faith under duress. If the pogrom does not come as a surprise for the reader, the actions or reactions of the characters do.

Lohner’s The Jewess of Trent is about a blood libel in Trent roughly at the time of Savonarola. A child is found dead and declared to have been murdered by a Jewess. (As we know from the preface, this child will become a saint of the Catholic Church two decades later.) Jews are coerced to confess and convert. The novel develops around two centres. First, the Jewess and the Jewish community. Second, the Catholic Church, more exactly, three representatives of the Church. One of them, who initiated the trial of the Jews, is a fundamentalist fanatic, the second stands for something we would now call a ‘liberal’ position, the third, the pragmatist, for the renewal of the Church but without abuse. The three priests conduct a long philosophical discussion. Although this discussion could have been conducted before Luther, it could have also been conducted the day before yesterday.

My comments must remain unfinished, because new historical novels are constantly appearing. There are several that I failed to mention, because too many examples obscure the argument. I return briefly to the issue I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. My judgements are not aesthetic. Among the books I referred to there are very good novels and also just good novels. Let me enumerate the very good ones: An Instance of the Fingerpost, A Conspiracy of Paper, Captivity, The Dante Club, My Name Is Red. Take this, please, with a grain of salt, for the judgement reflects my taste. The other novels I have mentioned are good in their genre. A good novel is easy to recognize. If a book is good in its genre one would like to read it again. True enough, taste and sense of quality are not identical, but through frequent and varied reading, reflective reading, one can slowly acquire a sense of quality in addition to taste. Outstanding historical novels have perhaps never been written. I have doubts even in the case of War and Peace. Whether excellent historical novels will be written in the future we do not know. But we enjoy
what we have: the very good and, occasionally, the good ones. And we are pleased that
the novel, this half-art, has not died out but has been given fresh life, and that whenever
we visit a bookshop there is the expectation of a new, great, positive surprise.

References


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