

**EXAMPLES OF EPIC TENDENCIES IN EARLY TWENTIETH-
CENTURY EUROPEAN PROSE FICTION**

By

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Abstract

The primary aim of this thesis is to review and analyze three examples of grand literary narratives in early twentieth-century European prose fiction, namely Romain Rolland's *Jean-Cristophe*, Martin Andersen Nexø's *Pelle the Conqueror*, and Aleksandr Serafimovich's *The Iron Flood*. Its secondary aim is to compare them with selected contemporaneous theories of the novel, with a special emphasis of György Lukács's contribution to the field. Through this the thesis would like to contribute to not only the present theoretical discourse on the novel as genre, but also to the debate on the connection between history and the artistic form, which concerns one of the core problems of modern Aesthetics.

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Introduction: The Landscape of Large-Scale Epic Forms of European Prose Literature in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

“No, I’m... I’m in the midst of doing my thesis.”

“On what?”

“Political commitment in twentieth-century literature.”

“You... you... you’re like New York, Jewish, left-wing, liberal, intellectual, Central Park West, Brandeis University, the socialist summer camps and the... the father with the Ben Shahn drawings, right? And the really, y’know, strike-oriented kind of, red diaper... Stop me before I make a complete imbecile of myself.”

“No, that was wonderful. I love being reduced to a cultural stereotype.”¹

In the literary circles of the continental part of the *fin-de-siècle* Europe a strong perception of disintegration was present: universal impression of a certain and general inability to capture social realities by larger forms of prose. After literary examples of the past century, which were already regarded as classics like Honoré de Balzac’s famously prolific output and his younger compatriot, Émile Zola’s in comparison moderate, but still considerable literary undertakings, or Lev Tolstoy’s grandiose *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877), Fyodor Dostoevsky’s eleven novels from the other side of the continent etc. the European literatures became seemingly exhausted, fragmented, and disintegrated.² Already Zola himself describes this inability in length in his novel *His Masterpiece* (1886):

This century, which has already thrown so much light over the world, was bound to finish amid the threat of a fresh flow of darkness—yes, our discomfort comes from that! Too much has been promised, too much has

¹ *Annie Hall*. Directed by Woody Allen. West Hollywood: United Artists, 1977.

² The dates attached to titles are referring to the initial publication of the mentioned texts, not their time of creation.

been hoped for; people have looked forward to the conquest and explanation of everything, and now they growl impatiently. [...] It is as if the century had become bankrupt, as if it had failed [...]. We are not the end, we are but a transition, a beginning of something else.³

Just as the most well-known composers of nineteenth-century Europe surrendered to the “mythical ninth” after the innumerable symphonies of Josef Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, famous and critically acclaimed writers of novellas like Gottfried Keller and Guy de Maupassant struggled to produce their only novels. The cause of this phenomenon, however, was soon theorized by many, and probably the most recognized among them, György Lukács characterized it as a sign of a period of transition.

[T]he novella makes its appearance either as the harbinger of some new conquest of reality by large-scale forms, narrative or dramatic, or else at the close of a period, by way of rearguard or postlude. It appears, that is to say, either at the moment of *not yet* in the subduing by the creative imagination of some particular social epoch in its entirety, or at the moment of *no longer*.⁴

From authors connecting this presupposed emergence of the new epic with the expansion of Marxist ideas to Oswald Spengler speculating in his *The Decline of the West* (1918–1922) that his generation is living in the “winter” of the “Faustian” culture of Europe numerous contemporary accounts of both authors and theoreticians described and tried to explain this phenomenon. Nevertheless, this common perception was inseparably accompanied with the unanimous expectation that the novel will return in a renewed form and become again the representative prosaic genre of the European literary landscape, the apotheosis of which will be its most epic versions.⁵

³ Emile Zola, *His Masterpiece*, trans. Ernest Alfred Vizetelly (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, 2009), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15900/15900-h/15900-h.htm> (last retrieved June 16, 2020)

⁴ Georg Lukács, “Solzhenitsyn and the New Realism,” trans. M. A. L. Brown in *The Socialist Register* vol. 2, ed. Ralph Miliband and John Saville (London: Merlin, 1965), 197.

⁵ This view got its probably most famous expression in Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), although in his later work Lukács took a Marxist turn, which did not only mean recanting his first theory of the novel but also working out a new one during his exile in the Soviet Union and permanently postponed the “promised” emergence of the new type of epic prose, which was later heralded by him in the 1930s and then still expected in the 1960s.

In my understanding and in the broadest sense of the word, the epic quality of a text presupposes—among other things, but most prominently—narrativity and monumentality. By the previous I mean that it has to tell a story with a focus on the narrated events (rather than on the narrator himself, as opposed to e.g. the lyric); by mentioning monumentality I do not refer to simply grandeur in a quantitative manner, i.e. the physical lengths of the narrative, the plenty of described event and/or its participants etc., but I understood it as being a “monument” to an age, which will be always the writer’s own, regardless to the historical dimension of the plot. And this latter enables us to understand these narratives as a manifestation of certain comprehensive views of the world and the place of humans in it.

Multivolume novels, novel series, cycles, *suites romanesques*, *romans-fleuves*, *tableaux*, *fresques* etc. soon started to be produced by the authors of the realist tradition, and throughout the first half of the century representatives of the contemporary Marxist literary criticism, like Andrejs Upīts, Yelena Usiyevich, Ernst Fischer, Ralph Winston Fox, Mikhail Lifshits, Lucien Goldmann, and others started to formulate different visions of the novel in regard to this tendency. Upīts’ *Problems of Socialist Realism in Literature* (1957) is somewhat overlooked by recent scholarship despite being one of the most comprehensive studies on Soviet literary history and the theoretical foundations of the so-called socialist realism, with a special emphasis on the role of the novel. Usiyevich is mostly known for her contributions to the Soviet literary journal *Literaturny kritik* in the 1930s, but her writings on novelists like Maxim Gorky, Nikolay Ostrovsky, Wanda Wasilewska, and others are unique sources of the debates around the novel. Fischer’s contribution to the question is more “fragmented” as he mostly dealt with the different aspects of the novel as a part of his works on Aesthetics in general; his famous *The Necessity of Art* (1959), highly popularized by John Berger in the Anglophone world, or *Art and Coexistence* (1966) can be named as his most important contribution, but probably the most influential one is the concept of

“realism without shores”, which he developed together with Roger Garaudy shortly after the famous 1963 Kafka Conference in Liblice. Fox mostly is not known as a literary scholar, nevertheless his posthumously published *The Novel and the People* (1937) was a very influential study on political engagement in novel writing, extensively, but not undeservedly popularized mostly by the Soviet scholarship. Lifshits was probably the most authentic Soviet literary scholar; he developed a lifelong friendship and cooperation from the 1930s onward with Lukács, and I would mention his *The Crisis of Ugliness* (1968) as his major contribution to the questions rose in this thesis. Goldmann published on the novel extensively and it is hard to over evaluate his contribution to the research of its sociological aspects; his major work is *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1963).

Despite this seemingly abundant number of contemporaneous theoretical writings, the complexity of the relationship between its theories and the actual literary production has not been fully explored yet by means of historical comparison: according to the best of my knowledge, neither review, nor comparison of monographic ambition was published about these theories in respect to their views on these large scale epic forms yet; also the lack of any conventional terminology make it difficult to describe this epic tendency as a continent-wide phenomenon.

For this reason the aim of my research is to examine the chronologically first examples of the realist tradition of large-scale epic forms of European prose literature in the first half of the twentieth century and its comprehensive contemporaneous theories with a special emphasis on the role of social commitment and political ideology present in these narratives. The outcome of the research could shape the understanding of continent-wide processes in European literatures, highlight some of those socio-political factors, which influenced the production of these large scale epic forms, and contribute to the debate on the

connection between history and the artistic form, which concerns one of the core problems of modern Aesthetics.

Moreover, many authors of “the great European novels of the twentieth century” were socially and politically engaged to some extent, but it is unreasonable, if not impossible to group them together by their political views, although they almost exclusively occupied “progressivist” standpoints on the political palette, in the widest sense of the word. This affiliation was accompanied by a bond to a broadly understood humanism, which was formulated as an antithesis of the perceived dehumanization of exploitation, total war, and other cataclysms witnessed by the century. As Arnold Zweig, author of a hexalogy, *The Great War of the White Men* (1927–1957) wrote:

The novel has to be understood as a form, in which the structure of being is transformed into the structure of plot [...]. Nothing is present in the productive entities embedded in human imagination, which sooner or later cannot be realized if we create the conditions in order to find a way of transforming our coexistence. That is why the writing of novels has or, at least, have an essentially transforming and cultivating meaning of social significance. Although, it is far from me to bring any educational element into art. [...] The more transparent we make the fate of an Effi Briest, the clearer it will be for people to behave more meaningfully and therefore more humanly with their fellow human beings. And *the humanization of human beings is a task, for which no art is too noble*.⁶

Despite the similarity, it was by no means a continuation of the tradition of the European novel of earlier centuries, neither Fieldingian “comic epic in prose”, nor Stendhalian “walking mirrors”. It was qualitatively different from earlier examples, because of the extent into which the mature form of capitalism developed in European societies. But what is already present in Zweig’s *ars poetica* and later found its theoretical articulation in the chapter on the defetishizing function of art in Lukács’ *The Specificity of the Aesthetic* (1963).

⁶ Arnold Zweig, “Die Vermenschlichung des Menschen” [The Humanization of Human Beings], in *Romantheorie: Dokumentation ihrer Geschichte in Deutschland seit 1880*, ed. Eberhard Lämmert et al. (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1975), 294–295.

Today the economical and societal alienation cannot be objectively escaped mentally or institutionally. [...] And again, important contemporary writers of this day come up with creations terminating alienation, manipulation, de-ideologization in their own way and start to follow the way of rehumanization of human beings. [...] Nothing is a reminiscence of the writing technique of the nineteenth century in most of these works. “Just” that little detail that characters created in this way renounce the power of alienation in their own lives, take part in the struggle of man against his “trollness”, for being human, and against the mere immediate particularity opposing the human kind.⁷

Somewhat ironically (but speaking strictly in terms of quantity) these tendencies showed themselves in their greatest extent in the broadly understood Soviet literature, especially in the Stalin era (1927–1953). For this period, and particularly during late Stalinism, the novel became the most representative and most common literary genre: 51% of all literary works awarded with the most prestigious literary award, the Stalin Prize between 1941 and 1952 were considered prose fiction (*khudozhestvennaya proza*), and two-thirds of these texts were characterized as novels, and among them many were novel sequences, e.g. Oles Honchar’s *Standard-bearers* (1946–1948), Anna Karavayeva’s *Motherland* (1943–1905), Wanda Wasilewska’s *Song on the Waters* (1940–1952).⁸

However, the vastness of this topic, combined with the limits of my possibilities and this thesis, allow me only to focus, review, and analyze the earliest examples of this tendency. For this reason I have chosen three cycles of three authors: Romain Rolland’s *Jean-Christophe*, Martin Andersen Nexø’s *Pelle the Conqueror*, and Aleksandr Serafimovich’s first and only volume of his planned, but never finished epic novel (*roman-epopeya*), *The Iron Flood*.⁹

⁷ Georg Lukács, “Lob des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts” [Praise of the Nineteenth Century] in *Sachen Böll. Ansichten und Einsichten*, ed. Marcel Reich-Ranicki (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1968), 330–331. The mentioned “trollness” (*Trollhaftigkeit*) is a reference to Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* (1876).

⁸ Although, it necessary to say that these figures and the used taxonomy of genres follow the criteria laid out by the back-then contemporary literary context, and some of these genres like *rasskaz*, *poema*, *ocherk* etc. do not really have exact equivalents in English.

⁹ Knowing that Serafimovich’s work was never finished as he attempted to write a whole cycle of novels one important note should be added here: it must be noted that one of the distinctive features of these twentieth-

This selection can serve as a representative basis for my research: authors were selected in order to provide access to the origins of the arch-like feature of this epic tendency. Chronologically, their time span (both of their creation and plot) covers the first decades of the twentieth century until the end of the Russian Civil War, and they are distributed geographically from the “West” to the “East”.

However, this distinctive Realist tradition, to which these narratives belong without exception, was not the sole one on the field of literature, but accompanied by various tendencies ranging from the avant-garde movements to the long narratives of such writers as Proust and Joyce, who are often grouped together by employing the umbrella term of “literary modernism”. Even though the antagonistic dichotomy of the opposing concepts of “modernism” and realism is the heritage of the Cold War—which approach was mobilized on both sides of the Iron Curtain—, there is indeed a divergence into two different directions of the novel and its most grandiose forms. As the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk pointed out in her Nobel Lecture in 2019:

We live in a reality of polyphonic *first-person narratives*, and we are met from all sides with polyphonic noise. What I mean by first-person is the kind of tale that narrowly orbits the self of a teller who more or less directly just writes about herself and through herself. We have determined that this type of individualized point of view, this voice from the self, is the most 4 natural, human and honest, even if it does abstain from a broader perspective. Narrating in the first person, so conceived, is weaving an absolutely unique pattern, the only one of its kind; it is having a sense of autonomy as an individual, being aware of yourself and your fate. Yet it also means building an opposition between the self and the world, and that opposition can be alienating at times.¹⁰

century realist narratives is their “unfinishedness”: after the publishing three volumes of *The Roads to Freedom* Sartre abandoned the ambitious project and the fourth book is only consisted by two chapter and fragments, Andersen Nexø worked on expanding the original narrative of *Pelle the Conqueror* for almost a half century, yet the third volume of its sequels, *Jeanette* was unfinished, Fadeyev published the first two book of his *The Last of Udege*, but the titular character only makes his first appearance in the very last pages of the unfinished manuscript of the third book (after more than five hundred pages of the previous ones), Déry decided not to finish his trilogy *The Answer* after his forced self-criticism etc.

¹⁰ Olga Tokarczuk, *The Tender Narrator. Nobel Lecture*, trans. Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Stockholm: Swedish Academy, 2019), <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2019/12/tokarczuk-lecture-english-2.pdf> (last retrieved June 16, 2020)

In framework of the dominantly Hegelian tradition of understanding the novel as a “carrier” (*Träger*) of a certain world-view¹¹, the realist tradition provides a general ideological conception in the form of a “world-like” narrative, in contrast to the “textualness” of modernism, which became a more dominant feature of the genre in the second half of the twentieth century; the previous usually employs non-self-reflective strategies, e.g. well-organized storyline, omniscient narrator etc. However, naturally, these are not two different and distinct sets, but two extremes, to which the produced literary texts were polarized; the interplay of these texts and the connections—both direct and indirect—between their authors are able to prevent us to imagine two isolated text-universes.¹²

There were several plausible attempts to create an explanation for this divergence in the genre, most of them can be divided into two groups: some tend to interpret it as a “particular version of global modernist culture” (Groys)¹³, others argue that it was simply a “disaster of middlebrow taste” (Dobrenko)¹⁴, while most of the contemporaries of the epic tendency (both authors and theoreticians) interpreted work as substantially new feature on the literary landscape of Europe, which is based on the internalization of the literary heritage of previous generations (especially the “early” and “critical” realists of the nineteenth century) and is the carrier of the tradition of a broadly defined humanism. While the previous group’s arguments can be summarized as an accusation of anachronistically and intentionally “making the nineteenth century longer” in the field of literature, the other side

¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel elaborated this view in his famous *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1818–1829), however, according to the best of my knowledge, the most detailed and comprehensive definition of this understanding is provided by Goldmann in his introduction to *The Hidden God* (1964).

¹² For example, in the heritage library of Ostrovsky, the author of *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1934) one can find the first two volumes of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1919), which is one of the most significant and grandiose epic examples of the literature, which was labelled as “bourgeois modernism” in the Soviet Union. In my interpretation it is a further proof for the dysfunction of the popular concept which based on the common belief of the isolated history of Western and Soviet literature.

¹³ Boris Groys, “A Style and a Half: Socialist Realism between Modernism and Postmodernism” in *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 76.

¹⁴ Evgeny Dobrenko, “The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste, or, Who ‘Invented’ Socialist Realism?” in *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, 135.

argues that the realist tradition preserved the above mentioned humanist values against the inescapable elitism of modernist tendencies.¹⁵

For this reason it comes as no surprise that in *Eduard and God*, one of short stories in Kundera's collection *Laughable Loves* (1969), the titular character is advised by his school directress to read Rolland's *The Enchanted Soul* in order to educate himself and get rid of his religious beliefs, for which there are no grounds in the society of the socialist Czechoslovakia.¹⁶ In a more sophisticated way the same conflict manifests itself in Paolo Sorrentino's film *The Great Beauty* (2013): in a scene of a rooftop gathering a tense conversation between Jep, the one-book author of a modernist novelette and Stefania, "a socially committed writer" of eleven novels takes place. Stefania describes Jep's book as "a narrow-minded, frivolous book and pretentious too, like its title" and replies him saying "I said is true, it's what I am, what I believe in". This truth and commitment is contested by Jep in his monologue questioning their nature.

"These harsh damning judgments of yours hide a certain fragility, a feeling of inadequacy and above all a series of untruths. [...] We also know our untruths and for this, unlike you, we end up talking about nonsense, about trivial matters, because we don't want to revel in our pettiness. [...] You wrote about the Party because you were its leader's mistress. And your eleven novels, published by a small publishing house subsidized by the Party, reviewed by minor Party-affiliated newspapers, are insignificant, everyone says so. I'm not saying my novelette was any better, I agree with you there. [...] These are the untruths and fragility I'm talking about. [...] Instead of acting superior and treating us with contempt, you should look at us with affection. We're all on the brink of despair, all we can do is look each other in the face, keep each other company, joke a little... Don't you agree?"¹⁷

¹⁵ cf. "A moment has passed, the moment of committed literature. The end of the Sartrean novel, the imperturbable indigence of socialist fiction, the defects of political theater—all that, like a receding wave, leaves exposed a singular and singularly resistant object: literature" (Roland Barthes, "Kafka's Answer" in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard [Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972], 133.).

¹⁶ Although, one may criticize this approach to Rolland's work on the basis that he was not a representative of *littérature engagée* in the sense as, for example, Andersen Nexø or Serafimovich was, but his œuvre and its extreme popularity throughout the entire continent was certainly instrumental for the building of the "socialist realist" narrative of literary history. Kundera's sarcastic choice of Rolland's work serves as a precursor towards his theory of "totalitarian kitsch", a comprehensive analysis and elaborated refusal of the modernist, mostly "leftist" metanarratives ("The Grand March"), which he later elaborated in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984).

¹⁷ *The Great Beauty*. Directed by Paolo Sorrentino. Rome: Medusa–Indigo–Babe, 2013.

One of the most important features of this tendency is how the focus changes in these novels from the form of *Bildungsroman*, which focuses on one hero, to a possible depiction of masses, because the three literary works are representatives of the selected more or less distinctive trends in the realist novel of the twentieth-century Europe:

- (1) The first kind of it can be labelled as a preservationist or “quasi bourgeois” attempt to save the tradition of the European *Bildungsroman* for the twentieth century: the narrative usually focuses on an outstanding, understood in the widest possible sense of the world, personality, whose individual development serves both as a plot and as a device to depict the social reality, in which this growth can be possible: the protagonist can be a king (Heinrich Mann’s *Henri Quatre*), a humble working woman (Andersen Nexø’s *Ditte, Child of Man*), a musician (*Jean-Christophe*), “a simple-minded though pleasing young man” (Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*) etc.
- (2) The second one is one of the direct ancestors of the aforementioned nineteenth-century examples of *roman-fleuve*; this novels usually depicting social realities through the prism of a family (most of T. Mann’s novels, Władysław Reymont’s *The Peasants*, Anton Tammsare’s *Truth and Justice*, Roger Martin du Gard’s *The Thibaults*, to some extent Aleksey Tolstoy’s *The Road to Calvary* etc.).
- (3) The last and aesthetically the most problematic one attempts to put the masses as such in the center of its narrative. This feature can be achieved through many compositional ways: the story is told as the narrative of the “evolution” of an isolated or semi-isolated group (Anton Makarenko’s *Pedagogical Poem*), similarly to the generations of the above mentioned family novels by the involvement of many interacting groups of characters (Ilya Ehrenburg’s *The Fall of Paris*, *The Storm*, and *The Ninth Wave*, Béla Illés’ *Carpathian Rhapsody* and *Conquest*), or by the complete eradication of any kind of main character, like in the case of Serafimovich’s novel, which I will analyze in the third chapter.

Andersen Nexø’s *Pelle the Conqueror* was an enormous success through the whole continent thanks to the German translation following its domestic success. Later on it was lauded as a precursor of socialist realism and as one of the most important works before the October Revolution, which can be compared only to the works of Gorky. In comparison with Rolland, Andersen Nexø was able to combine the traditions of *Bildungsroman* and *Tendenzroman* with his own social democratic views in order to provide a new form of

expression of a world-view. Although by Andersen Nexø the novel, just like in the case of Rolland's novels, was still "built around" one exceptional personality, the titular working class hero, but the main achievement of the novel was the depiction of the appearance and organic growth of class consciousness on individual level.

Serafimovich was among the very first authors, who successfully tried to break with this tradition, but remain in the framework of realist depiction.¹⁸ He was probably the first widely known author, at least in the Soviet literary context, to intentionally start to use the framework of already known epic works to depict contemporaneous events. His rather unusual choice of topic, namely the successful escape from encirclement and retreat of the Taman' Army in 1918, was depicted in a brand new narrative manner, most notably by employing a tale-like narration (including e.g. unrealistically exaggerated death tolls, almost expressionist descriptions of natural and military phenomena etc.) and replacing the traditional hero by "elevating" the *mass* as such into the central role.¹⁹

However—with a reference to the above mentioned debate on the nature of the tendency, which produced these literary works—the real question is not whether there is a literary equivalent of the Hobsbawmian concept of the "long nineteenth century" or not, but to contribute to the questions regarding the connection of artistic form and history, by reviewing and analyzing this tendency (and the theoretical output parallel to it) in the light of the historical experience of the twentieth century.

The question lies between those still prevalent assumptions asserting that the twentieth century Realist literary production (especially its Soviet version) was doomed to be derailed *because* of historical necessity, or others claiming that there are still chances for

¹⁸ This can be illustrated easily by comparing *The Iron Flood* with another socialist classic, Dmitry Furmanov's well-known *Chapayev* (1923), which, unsurprisingly after reading the title, focusing on one "exceptional personality", the titular legendary military commander Vasiliy Chapaev.

¹⁹ Although it is necessary to say that he was not a path-breaking inventor in this field, but rather a successful adaptor of Gerhart Hauptmann's ideas, par excellence his technique of representing the mass on stage (like in his seminal play *The Weavers* (1892).

such grand literary narratives of social importance to come into existence in the “postmodern condition”, “late capitalism” etc.; it is also important to note that the production of this kind of grandiose works was only initially a European phenomenon, later they became prevalent to some extent in almost everywhere in the world.²⁰ However, the task of is twofold: even if this study could not categorically prove and/or support any of the above mentioned statements, the aim of the research is also to understand the reasons for and the nature of the partial vanishing of a so-called “cultural literacy” of this tradition, which started to leave the collective awareness by reaching the twenty-first century. This process leads to lose the ties not only to the cultural heritage of the both revolutionary and totalitarian past of Europe and its historical experience, but also to the intellectual legacy of many great thinkers and authors of this tradition, who were defenders of intellectual freedom in a turbulent century. This precious heritage could become incomprehensible and obscure for the contemporary discourse, but a “fresh” reading of these works may provide a better understanding of them, and it may tell something about the future and possibilities, or more importantly about the social role of literature, or the lack of it in the twentieth century and nowadays.

²⁰ This trend can be called as characteristic to our times, but sporadically there are also remarkable examples of (experimental and partial) reuse of traditional epic “tools”, e.g. the expanding cycle of Irvine Welsh’ novels from the recent decades (*Trainspotting*, *Porno*, and *Skagboys*; also, characters of these novels appeared in his other works too), the Austrian *Kollektivroman* (Natalie Deewan et al., *Wollen schon* [Wien: Zaglossus, 2016].), although their narrative structures are usually non-linear compositions. Also, the continuity of the realist novel can be traced in works of Vasily Grossman and Dos Passos to some extent, and also, among others, in the novel-cycles of Lawrence Durrell, Jonathan Franzen, and Elena Ferrante.

I. Romain Rolland and the Birth of the *roman-fleuve*

I do not know that the ongoing creation of new society will create a new art of its kind. But I know a thing: if this art will not be realized then no living art will be ever.²¹

Probably the most ambiguous, both in terms of aesthetics and literary history, of the three “case studies” presented in this thesis is the chronologically first one, namely Romain Rolland’s *Jean-Cristophe*.

Rolland was born into a notary’s family in a Burgundian town, Clamecy in 1866. He got accepted to the prestigious École normale supérieure in the age of twenty and—after spending two years in Italy—received a doctoral degree at the Sorbonne in 1895. In the following one and half decade he became an established expert on the history of European music: he returned to his *alma mater* to teach art history in 1897 and between 1902 and 1912 he was also lecturing at the Sorbonne. In parallel to his studies and subsequent professional career, Rolland soon started to write fiction; one of the main impetus to realize his artistic ambitions was came from the already mentioned Tolstoy, who replied in a relatively long letter with “tears in his eyes” to the twenty-one-year-old *normalien*:

The prophet is not that one who receives the education of a prophet [*éducation d’un prophète*], but the one who has the intimate conviction [*conviction intime*] of what he is, must be, and cannot be. This conviction is rare and can only be tested by the sacrifices that a man makes for his calling.²²

Not only Rolland’s biography of the Russian writer (*The Life of Tolstoy*; 1911), but also the very nature of his œuvre reflected his conviction in Tolstoy’s above quoted words. Nevertheless, Rolland’s political commitment manifested itself rather in the form of a desire

²¹ Romain Rolland, *Le Théâtre du peuple* (San Francisco: Internet Archive, 2008), <https://archive.org/details/lethtredupeu00rolluoft/page/14/mode/2up> (last retrieved June 16, 2020)

²² Tolstoy’s letter to Rolland on October 4, 1887 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2007), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k963541/f219.image> (last retrieved June 16, 2020)

of synthesis, than in active politicization of literary works as the other two author discussed in this thesis did. Rolland himself was aware of the irreversible historical shifts of bourgeois society occurred in the decades leading up to the age of the “highest stage of capitalism”. And these changes were those which eventually led Europe to the tremendous “Great War”. Rolland, however, still preserved certain bourgeois values revolving around the axiomatic importance of the humanistic ideal of individual despite his awareness of those modulations. As in 2000 Peter Sloterdijk pointed out in his ironically titled lecture *Remembrance of Beautiful Politics* at the Laeiszhalle in Hamburg that the behavior characterized by a certain humanistic attitude, what he calls the “beautiful politics”:

[A] memory of that phase of history in which individuals made themselves the media of what they believed to be the dreams of mankind [*Menschheitssträume*] with their private ability to dream.²³

However, as Sloterdijk points out, contrasted with the actual historical realities this attitude inevitably led to what he calls the “catastrophe of the beautiful politics.”²⁴ Nevertheless, the most of Rolland’s work cannot be reduced to mere artifacts of its own age since, despite their origins, his views were formulated in a way that they possess a social perspective. And this property is more than obviously apparent in his *Jean-Cristophe*.

For this reason, his choice of “artistic” biography—a creative commitment to a certain form what he shared with his lifelong friend Stefan Zweig, who is considered to be a master of writing biographies—was not a simply thematic and/or compositional decision, but a conscious one in order to find means to interpret the artists’ historical and his own contemporaneous social reality.²⁵ More importantly, this statement was not reserved only

²³ Peter Sloterdijk, “Erinnerung an die Schöne Politik” [Remembrance of Beautiful Politics], in *Der ästhetische Imperativ: Schriften zur Kunst* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 33.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Zweig later went on writing a biography of Balzac as his *opus magnum* (published posthumously in 1946), but he was also the biographer of “the masters”, namely Dickens and Dostoyevsky (1920), Stendhal and Tolstoy (1928), and even Rolland himself (1921).

for his biographies of actual artists, but also for his famous characters like the titular one of his already mentioned *Jean-Cristophe*. As the third edition (1979) of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* points out that the novel “is the culmination of a quest for a broad epic form in the spirit of *War and Peace* and echoes Tolstoy’s ideas about artistic creativity as a selfless activity for the good of the people.” Also, as Rolland himself pointed out after writing his both commercially and critically successful biography of the German composer (*The Life of Beethoven*; 1903), the story of Jean-Cristophe is “putting Beethoven to his age”.

Rolland was neither idiosyncratic, nor as an author among his contemporaries. Just like in case of Zola, France, and others he was alarmed by the Dreyfus affair (1894–1906) and its consequences in French society: just like many of his contemporaries, he strongly believed that writers should take the role of public intellectuals, but their task should be fulfilled by their literary output. For this reason Rolland looked for the exemplary individual and found his heroes mostly in the field of art. Nevertheless, just as he wrote the biography of Gandhi, he also “created” a hero: Jean-Cristophe as a modern Beethoven, i.e. the synthesis of the *aesthetic* and the *ethic* dimensions of creating art.

Jean-Cristophe is indeed a monumental work, but it is also has the significance of a watershed: to some extent it is a late successor of the continental tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, it bears undeniable resemblance to the French Naturalism, especially Zola’s works in its descriptive style, and shares the ambition of Tolstoy’s great novels in term of representing the totality of the society, in the context of which it was born. Nevertheless, or more precisely despite the novel’s faded popularity in comparison with its initial success *Jean-Cristophe* is not simply a “mixture” or quality work of a well-trained craftsman. The urge for this synthesis is clearly outlined by Lukács in his *The Theory of the Novel*:

“This is why Goethe in Wilhelm Meister steers a middle course between abstract idealism, which concentrates on pure action, and Romanticism, which interiorizes action and reduces it to contemplation. Humanism, the

fundamental attitude of this type of work, demands a balance between activity and contemplation, between wanting to mould the world and being purely receptive towards it.”²⁶

Jean-Cristophe consists ten volumes published between 1904 and 1912: *The Dawn*, *The Morning*, *The Youth* (all three in 1904), *The Revolt* (1905), *The Fair on the Square*, *Antoinette*, *In the House* (all three in 1908), *The Friends* (1910), *The Burning Bush* (1911), and *The New Dawn* (1912). Rolland not just himself described is as not a novel, but a “novel stream” or a “novel-river” (“*Jean-Christophe* has always seemed to me to flow like a river”²⁷), but used the metaphor of river in many times in the novel itself. Rolland received a Nobel Prize in 1915 “as a tribute to the lofty idealism of his literary production”. Just like the main heroes of his most grandiose works, during the First World War Rolland found shelter in Switzerland; while staying there he began to take the role of one of the most famous pacifist publicists.

After the war Rolland developed some kind of an *odi et amo* relationship with the Russian Revolution and its immediate results in the 1920s, nevertheless partially thanks to his friendship with Gorky, and while maintaining his commitment to nonviolence, he visited the Soviet Union in 1935. In the time of the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of France Rolland spent his remaining years in Vézelay; until his death in 1944 he worked on his various projects ranging from his memoirs and his monumental, seven-volumes-long monograph on Beethoven (*The Great Creative Epochs*).

Jean-Cristophe is an outstanding, but not standalone piece of Rolland’s œuvre: the most important work of him, namely another roman-fleuve *The Enchanted Soul* and his lifelong project of a book about Beethoven. Knowing the different historical period in which those work were written their similarities and parallel features became more significant: *The Enchanted Soul* is just as a pendant of *Jean-Cristophe*, as the latter is the literary

²⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin, 1970), 135.

²⁷ Romain Rolland, “Préface,” in *Dans la maison* (Paris: Ollendorf, 1908), 490.

interpretation of Beethoven's life and work (as opposed to the "historical" one); nevertheless, the story of Anette Rivière is the last work of Rolland as a storyteller.

Rolland, however, despite all of his ever growing commitment to the leftist ideals in general (and to the Stalinist policy in particular), he always upheld his right to have a different opinion (unlike the other two authors, whose works are examined in this thesis). Also, the choice of a female heroine in *The Enchanted Soul* can be easily interpreted as a self-reflective and critical turn to analyze the gender aspects of human emancipation by telling the story of a woman in the back-then contemporary European context. But before the First World War it is not really surprising that in an increasingly militaristic atmosphere Rolland dedicated his *Jean-Cristophe* to "the free spirits of all nations, who suffer, fight, and will win".

Just like in Andersen Nexø's *Pelle the Conqueror*, the reader can follow the gradual growth of Jean-Cristophe's consciousness in his childhood: what is "conquering" the world by exploring it in Pelle's case is the reach of Jean-Cristophe's senses:

The little world known to the eyes of the child, all that he can see from his bed every morning as he awakes, all that with so much effort he is beginning to recognize and classify, so that he may be master of it—his kingdom is lit up.²⁸

This situation is even complicated by the very specific choice of the main character, more precisely their original identity: Pelle is a son of a Swedish immigrant, who is a Swede in Bornholm, a peasant in Copenhagen, until he becomes the leader of its own class as a "naturalized" Dane; on the contrary, Rolland's Jean-Cristophe Krafft is German, though he

²⁸ Romain Rolland, *Jean Cristophe*, trans. Gilbert Cannan (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, 2005), <http://www.dominiopublico.gov.br/download/texto/gu007979.PDF> (last retrieved June 16, 2020)

has Flemish ancestry, while bearing a French given name, but throughout all the volumes, he always perceived by others as the “other.”²⁹

But this intellectual development is paired with the primary influence of certain principal characters: from time to time Jean-Cristophe became temporarily, but in the same time heavily and formatively influenced by one person. In the beginning the source of this influence is his paternal grandfather, Jean-Michel—who discovers his grandson’s talent and help him to start his career as a musician until his eventual death (*The Death of Jean-Michel*)—and maternal uncle, Gottfried. The first “stage” of his individual development is characterized mostly by internalizing ethical imperatives and lectures of integrity.³⁰ However, since both Jean-Michel and Gottfried are temporarily present in the plot, later on, especially during his adolescence his relation with influential people became more or less equal as the moral development is replaced by an emotional one. In the pages of *The Morning* Jean-Cristophe meets several females, most importantly Minna von Kerich and her mother, Josepha, Sabine, Rosa, and finally, Ada and her girlfriend, Myrrha (their real names are Adelheid and Johanna, respectively).³¹

²⁹ It is worth to consider that the choice of name was intentional in order to make it speak for itself: Krafft means “strength” or “power” in German, while his given names could be interpreted as reference to two important Christian saints, John the Baptist (conversion) and Saint Christoph (crossing).

³⁰ A good example of this is Jean-Michel’s desperate cry to Jean-Cristophe (“You will remember me? Later on, when you are a good musician, a great artist, who will bring honor to his family, to his art, and to his country, when you are famous, you will remember that it was your old grandfather who first perceived it, and foretold what you would be?”; *The Dawn*, III), or Gottfried’s lesson about one’s integrity (“You want to make beautiful songs, so as to be a great man; and you want to be a great man, so as to make beautiful songs. You are like a dog chasing its own tail.”; *ibid.*).

³¹ Among these the case of Jean-Cristophe’s friendship with Otto Diener (*Otto*) is somewhat unique: although it is presented as an innocent and definitely asexualized friendship between two teenagers, the intimacy of their style used in the quoted personal letters can be and actually mistaken by other characters (most notably by members of Jean-Cristophe’s close family) for homoeroticism, which eventually lead to the dissolution of their friendship (cf. “[A] new love, of which this had been only the forerunner, took possession of Jean-Cristophe’s heart, and made every other light seem pale by its side”; *ibid.*). Another not less important episode is Jean-Cristophe’s unsuccessful sexual assault on a peasant girl (“He blushed [...] for what he was thinking himself. The sudden unconscious act filled him with terror. What had he done? What should he do? What he was able to understand of it all only filled him with disgust. And he was tempted by his disgust. He fought against himself and knew not on which side was the real Christophe. A blind force beset him: in vain did he fly from it: it was only to fly from himself. [...] He remembered that delirious moment when he had held her by the throat. Everything was possible. All things were worthwhile. A crime even... Yes, even a crime... The turmoil in his heart made him breathless”; *The House of Euler*).

However, most of these encounters are serving to “give him a lesson”: they might end with the death of the influencing person (like in case Jean-Michel and Sabine) or by their gradual disappearance (like in case of Otto, Minna, and, to some extent, Gottfried). Halfway of the novel the recurring feeling of solitude caused by this fluctuation leads Jean-Cristophe to think about his relationship with God thoroughly:

He saw that life was a battle without armistice, without mercy, in which he who wishes to be a man worthy of the name of a man must forever fight against whole armies of invisible enemies; against the murderous forces of Nature, uneasy desires, dark thoughts, treacherously leading him to degradation and destruction. He saw that he had been on the point of falling into the trap. He saw that happiness and love were only the friends of a moment to lead the heart to disarm and abdicate. And the little puritan of fifteen heard the voice of his God:

“Go, go, and never rest.”

“But whither, Lord, shall I go? Whatsoever I do, whithersoever I go, is not the end always the same? Is not the end of all things in that?”

“Go on to Death, you who must die! Go and suffer, you who must suffer! You do not live to be happy. You live to fulfil my Law. Suffer; die. But be what you must be—a Man.”

During the course of the rest of the novel, Jean-Cristophe tried to fulfill this task by his subsequent self-realization as a composer (to some extent, in a “picaresque” way by visiting several other countries and, most notably, Paris). This is the critical point in which the Kantian moral imperatives are revulsed into a primordially Christian form (“the” Law). This is also a strong reference to the already mentioned parallels to Beethoven and his thought: the German composer is known to have Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* among those few books what he took when he left his birthplace for Vienna in the age of twenty-two. Only a few years before his death he was still convinced: “[T]he moral law within us, and the starry heavens above us’[.] Kant!!!”³² But this is not some kind of a “self-

³² Ludwig van Beethovens *Konversationshefte* I, ed. Günter Brosche et al. (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1973), 235. In this 1820 entry of one of his famous *Konversationshefte* (conversation books, which he use to communicate with others as his hearing worsened) Beethoven quotes one of the most famous passage of the mentioned *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

Christianization” of Rolland’s narrative, rather to provide at least a partial solution on the literary plane of the deep crisis articulated in Lukács’s cited work.³³

But another factor, namely the treatment of time is also a crucial aspect of the narrative. While Rolland wrote *Jean-Cristophe* as an intransigent pacifist and believer in an all-conquering humanism, his novel lacks the political dimension (and this may be a partial answer to the question of why his works were extremely popular in their own time and why most of them lack a needed “actuality” only a few years later). What is a conscious compositional decision by Andersen Nexø, who tends to be “utopian” in terms of departing from the author’s own historical present in order to achieve a representation of a possible future in *Pelle the Conqueror*, this happens to Rolland not because of the political perspective of the narrative, but the attempt to depict the totality of an exceptional life. This causes is somewhat of an ironic turn for today’s reader, since both of Rolland’s *romans-fleuves* were finished shortly before a world war, which should have culminated in both narratives since each of them ends with the main character’s death in an advanced age.

Jean-Cristophe is a symptomatic work of his own age: its monumentality and attempted depiction of the totality of an entire human life were both adequate, but not sufficient answers to the immediate problems of that age. Nevertheless, even lacking a clear or even a vaguely outlined political dimension the novel was self-aware in admitting those problems and while it showed that even an exceptional individual doomed to be isolated without acting.

However, Rolland’s later work, especially *The Enchanted Soul* only made its audience aware of another problem of the century, namely the paradox of the engaged literature, what one can clearly see in Andersen Nexø’s directly political answer in the form of *Pelle the Conqueror*.

³³ “In truth, if Jesus appealed to him, Beethoven did no less.” (*The House of Euler*)

II. Martin Andersen Nexø and the “Conquest of Reality”

My grandmother keeps watch over an air-raid siren at every public holiday. She sits in the roof-top reading *Pelle, the Conqueror*. She’s been reading it for years.³⁴

Martin Andersen Nexø’s (1869–1954) four volume of *Pelle the Conqueror* is one of the most interesting literary experiments of the *fin de siècle* European literature. From a historical distance, especially its success (both critical and political) seems a bit of improbable for several reasons: how the “impractically long” story of a Swedish immigrant becoming the leader of the Danish working class written by a moderately successful rural journalist became a *Jahrhunderterzählung*, one of the self-evident elements of the core canon of politically engaged literature of the twentieth century?³⁵ Obviously, Andersen Nexø’s work is not like Pallas Athena, it was not born from the head of its author, however, it is a somewhat standalone work in the literary landscape of its own time. *Pelle the Conqueror* is indeed a unique work, but part of this feature is the product of being a heterogeneous both in political and aesthetical sense. It is by no accident that Lukács stated the following:

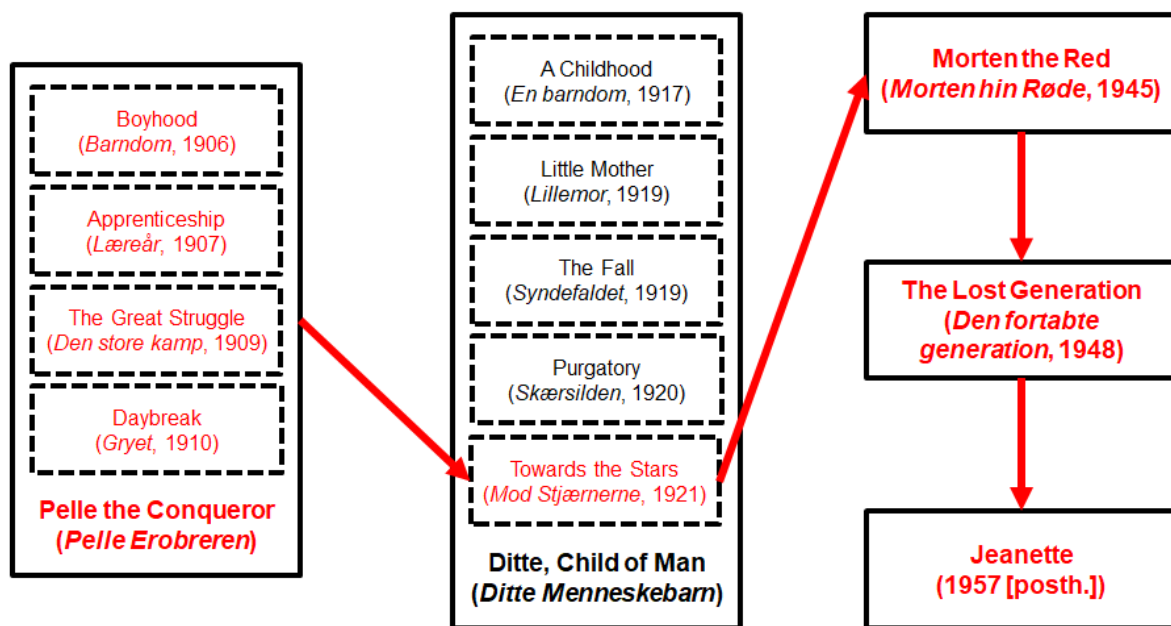
“I considered—and still consider—Martin Andersen Nexø’s *Pelle the Conqueror* the most important forerunner of socialist realism with Gorky’s *The Mother*; however, I have to confess that the second part of the book became palling after Pelle’s arrest, in my opinion. What I can say about other works of Nexø is that most of them cannot be compared to *Pelle the Conqueror*, especially its sequels.”³⁶

³⁴ *Szamárköhögés*. Directed by Péter Gárdos. Budapest: Hunnia, 1987.

³⁵ This very particular German expression (vaguely translatable as “narrative” or “tale of a century”) was used by Reich-Ranicki to describe Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* as a literary work which is characteristic of its own century (cf. “They recognized themselves in this tale of the century: the lonely, the abandoned and the disadvantaged, who have difficulties in finding their place in society or not find it at all, those who are extraordinary and have a hard time with themselves, those who are not in harmony with God and live in a world in which they feel contrary to the ordinary and the usual.” etc.; Marcel Reich-Ranicki, “Eine Jahrhundert erzählung: »Tonio Kröger«” [A Tale of a Century: “Tonio Kröger”], in *Hefte der Deutschen Thomas-Mann-Gesellschaft* 6/7 [Lübeck: 1987], 38.); from the point of view of political commitment, I think that the same is true for *Pelle the Conqueror*.

³⁶ Lukács György, “A skandináv irodalom szerepe fejlődésében” [The Role of Scandinavian Literature in My Evolution], trans. Révai Gábor, in *Curriculum vitae*, ed. Ambrus János (Budapest: Magvető, 1982), 274.

One of the most important features of Andersen Nexø's novel sequence (and the main reason behind limiting this analysis only to the *Pelle the Conqueror*) is fragmentation. By this *fragmented feature* I do not mean unfinishedness (although the last piece of this chain of novels, *Jeanette* was indeed left unfinished because of the death of Andersen Nexø in 1954), but rather a significant caesura between the pieces. Andersen Nexø worked on and successfully finished both *Pelle the Conqueror* and *Ditte, Child of Man* roughly in the time of the First World War, more precisely, between 1906 and 1921.³⁷ After the domestic and then their following success in German translation, Andersen Nexø mostly returned to writing journalism and short stories and in the following two decades up until the second half of the 1940s, he only produced a satirical novel *In an Iron Age* (1929) and started to work on his autobiography.



The textual history of Andersen Nexø's novel sequence

³⁷ However, it must be noted that *Ditte, Child of Man* is not a direct sequel of *Pelle the Conqueror*: Pelle and his close friend Morten appear only in *Towards the Stars*, the last book of *Ditte, Child of Man*; on the basis of this and both Morten's and Pelle's prominent presence (especially of the previous) in later books made me to interpret the novels as a sequence in the sense of their resemblance to the compositional technique of both Balzac's and Zola's *romans-fleuves* (or as nowadays people tend to speak about anthology television series, e.g. *Black Mirror*, Andersen Nexø's novels share the same "universe").

The most common trend present in the canonical interpretation of Andersen Nexø's novels is that they are mostly written on the basis of firsthand life experiences and can be understood as a masked autobiography and/or as an idealized self-portrait. While to some extent it is reasonable to comparatively read Andersen Nexø's fiction and his autobiographical texts as two Venn diagrams sharing the intersection of the empirical "raw material" for those narratives, it is insufficient to conclude answers to the aesthetic questions (e.g. Why did he wrote a "masked", but also a "real" autobiography? But most importantly, why did he "splitted" his own experiences between different characters of different novels [Pelle's childhood in Bornholm, the writer's figure in *Ditte*, *Child of Man*, Morten's carrier and travels in the interwar period etc.]?). But these questions are not merely of referential nature, but also questions regarding to the choice of form, which is crucial since Andersen Nexø attempted to continue his *roman-fleuve*. I think that Lukács' Hegelian distinction between the *extensive* and *intensive totality* manifesting itself in a literary work of art is one of those key concepts, which can help to better understand Andersen Nexø's artistic decision of writing in an epic form.

One of the main "technical" sources of Andersen Nexø's novel is the tradition of the Bildungsroman, i.e. a novel depicting the protagonist personal development and character formation (e.g. Goethe's *Wilhelm-Meister*-novels, Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* etc.). This is self-evident since the protagonist is not only the main character in some dramaturgical sense (by the "time spent on stage"), but also whose consciousness is made transparent by the narrator's attention. But this choice can be understood as a synthesis because of the political nature of the work: as it is made obvious in the very first chapters, Pelle's "conquest" is synonymous with the knowledge gained by discovering the world's (initially only) physical reality. But Andersen Nexø does not stop here and makes a step further by the portrayal of the awakening consciousness of Pelle,

which ultimately “outgrows” itself and enables him to become the leader of his own class, just as *Pelle the Conqueror* is not merely a late successor of a certain nineteenth century novel form, but an attempt to renew it.

The “time” of both the *sujet* and *fabula* of *Pelle the Conqueror* and *Ditte, Child of Man* was identical with the historical time of its writing and because of certain “utopian” tendencies (which are strongly present in each work’s last books), it can be compared to what was called as *Zukunftsmacherei* (“future-making”) in the dominant Social Democratic workers’ movement of the Germanophone parts of Central Europe and the bordering countries (like Denmark and Austria-Hungary) affected by it. While the word *Zukunftsmacherei* indeed possess a certain diminutive feature, if not strongly negative connotations, in the prewar years it was a direct reaction to the “ossification” of the Social Democratic movement which, though, after several clashes, found its *modus vivendi* in the post-Bismarckian system of the German Empire, the standpoint of which can be characterized by the catchphrase of the influential leader of the movement, Eduard Bernstein: “The so-called ultimate goal of socialism is nothing to me; the movement is everything.”³⁸ Even as a citizen of a country remaining neutral in the Great War, Andersen Nexø’s worst fears turned to be true, when even the extraparlamentary Social Democratic parties were willing to support national governments in their participation in the war, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the Second International.

This concise historical outline does not serve as a backdrop to any kind of psychological approach to interpret Andersen Nexø’s work, but more as a political compass to understand the above mentioned fragmented feature, or more precisely, the “schism” of his novels sequence through the modifications of the writer’s world view (*Weltanschauung*), which manifests itself in them. While *Pelle the Conqueror* and *Ditte, Child of Man* was

³⁸ Eduard Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* [The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy], ed. Günther Hillmann (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984), 201.

written and took place in Andersen Nexø's "present", both *Morten the Red* and *The Lost Generation* are retrospective works, i.e. the novels' time belongs to the historical past in comparison to the time of their creation (the stories took place in the interwar period, while they were written during and after the Second World War). After Ditte's death and Pelle's turn into a corrupted Social Democratic minister, the writer Morten became the central character of both sequels, focusing mostly on his private life during the interwar period. Morten's life, deeds and thoughts are closely reflecting to Andersen Nexø's own in the same period, leading many to an overly referential way of reading the novels as entirely or semi-autobiographical writings.

The political modulations of the narrator's point of view show slow, but progressive move from an abstractly utopian Social Democratic view to a more concrete Communist one. In the time of writing the last three novels of the *fleuve* Andersen Nexø became already a radical in comparison with his previous beliefs, not to mention that he decided not to return to Denmark (after escaping to the Soviet Union from Nazi imprisonment upon the country's occupation in 1941 and Denmark's joining to the NATO in 1949) and became citizen of the German Democratic Republic (Andersen Nexø died in Dresden in 1954). However, *Pelle the Conqueror* raises many vital questions about the possible future of the workers' movement: for example, in *The Great Struggle* Pelle has a conversation with one of the "old guards" who became a strikebreaker:

"It's a pity about him," said Stolpe; "he's an old mate of mine, and he's always been a good comrade till now. Now they'll give it him hard in the paper—we *are compelled to* [emphasis mine]. It does the trade no good when one of its representatives goes and turns traitor." [...]

"I know that well enough," said the man, nodding to himself. "You needn't begin your lecture—I myself have been in the movement since the first days, and until now I've kept my oath. But now it's done with, for me. What do you want here, lad? Have you a wife and children crying for bread? Then think of your own!"

"We don't cry, Hans," said the woman quietly.

"No, you don't, and that makes it even worse! Can I sit here and look on, while you get thinner day by day, and perish with the cold? To hell with the

comrades and their big words—what have they led to? Formerly we used to go hungry just for a little while, and now we starve outright—that’s the difference! Leave me alone, I tell you! Curse it, why don’t they leave me in peace?” [...]

“You’ll be put in the paper to-morrow,” said Pelle, hesitating. “I only wanted to tell you that.”

“Yes, and to write of me that I’m a swine and a bad comrade, and perhaps that I beat my wife as well. You know yourself it’s all lies; but what is that to me? Will you have a drink?”

No, Pelle wouldn’t take anything. “Then I will myself,” said the man, and he laughed angrily. “Now you can certify that I’m a hog—I drink out of the bottle! And another evening you can come and listen *at the keyhole* [emphasis mine]—perhaps then you’ll hear me beating my wife!”³⁹

Just like Père Roque in Gustave Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* (who shoots down an imprisoned young man with cold blood just because he was asking bread and then he goes home to have dinner) is the unmissable precursor of yet-to-be-come fascism, the above cited scene is also shows the how the fear of being observed appears if the private and political planes of the individual’s life clash; this fear, for example, manifested in its fullest extent through the phenomenon called “doorbell scare” (*csengőfrász*) in the Hungary of the 1950s.

Undoubtedly, *Pelle the Conqueror* mostly remembered as the basis for Bille August’s homonymous Academy-Award-winning movie adaptation of 1980. However, as a monument to its age, *Pelle the Conqueror* is not only of literary historical merit and significance: since it is one of the first literary work of epic scale, in which representatives of working class became main and dominant characters, the novel employs various tools and methods to create a fresco-like description of the Danish peasantry and urban proletariat at the *fin de siècle*.

One of the most important features of the novel, that “volume by volume” its titular character, Pelle moves to another location: *Boyhood* starts with his arrival from Sweden to Bornholm with his father, then he moves to the town on the island in the beginning of *Apprenticeship*; the plot of the sequel, *The Great Struggle* takes place in Copenhagen, while

³⁹ Martin Andersen Nexø, *Pelle the Conqueror* (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, 2003), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7795/7795-0.txt> (last retrieved 16 June, 2020)

the ultimate novel tells the story from his release from prison to the construction of a workers' cooperation in the titular outskirts of the capital called "Daybreak" (Gryet). All of these shifts mark quantitative changes in Pelle's income and the living standards of his family.⁴⁰ One of the most important, if not the most important element of the novel's narrative is the social democratic projection of the future of a "secondary society", which will peacefully grow in parallel with the capitalist economy, and (as it was exemplified in the previous parts of the novel) step by step, but ultimately it will defeat it. However the details of how this collectivist economic plan will work in the long term remains rather unclear, because we only able to read about the victorious and promising first steps.

Andersen Nexø's step towards an (at least, yet) imaginary solution for solving socio-economical contradictions of capitalism is an adequate answer for the ambiguities and social democratic, or more contemporaneously, "revisionist" reinterpretations of the Marxian vision of communism. Pelle's visionary collective in Gryet, as we can see on those pages, preserves many features of capitalist society, moreover, it

- (1) even participates in its commodity exchanges as a part of the market,
- (2) does not depend on partial or general socialization of the means of production (and, as a consequence, the state is untouched),
- (3) there is private property (to some extent), and
- (4) a firm-like *centralization* in its framework.

As it is presented in the novel, the whole project is based on a presupposed, but rather slow transition from capitalism to some kind of horizontal collectivism, a unionist socio-political narrative of a possible *Zukunftsstaat* ("state of the future"), therefore the project presented by Andersen Nexø as such is a clear departure from the "original" Marxist vision and

⁴⁰ Obviously, these changes are not exclusive ones and always accompanied many other ones, shaping Pelle's socialization: his move from being an *Swedish* immigrant to be the leader of the *Danish* workers' movement, his transition from being the member *peasantry* to being the part of the *working class*, the gradual change of a *rural* place of living to a more and more *urban* setting etc.

subsequently creates another utopia. Andersen Nexø resonates to, sometimes clearly employs concepts from both the Gotha (1875) and Erfurt programs (1891), especially the latter's concept of "economy as a single factory", which is literally put into practice by the writer in form of the workers' cooperative firm described in the novel.⁴¹ Therefore the novel based on a clearly social democrat platform in both political and economic senses: there is no (or not necessarily) place for revolution as a point-like turn in history, but a gradual process and transition will lead to the classless society "on a higher level".⁴²

However, in the novel, all of these need an impetus in order to begin this process: this is the reason why Andersen Nexø included the figure of Cornelius Brun in the very last chapters of *Daybreak*: Brun is a librarian and he is introduced as "a bachelor," who is "said to be very rich" and a "last descendant of an old, decayed family, which had been rich for many generations".⁴³ "On many points he agreed with the lower classes, not only theoretically but purely organically; and Pelle saw, to his amazement, that the dissolution of existing conditions could also take place from the upper grades of society."⁴⁴

Andersen Nexø's solution for the problematic question of future, which he was probably able to detect, is somewhat contradicts, but in the same time still depends on Marx' ideas. He consequently, but in the same time also "silently," as it is never articulated and/or stated that clearly, rather in the forms of references, accepts the fact that in order to put the original conception into practice, one has to accept the central role of capital and its

⁴¹ cf. „Only the transformation of the capitalist private ownership of the means of production [...] into social property and the transformation of the production of goods into socialist production carried on by and for society can cause the large enterprise and the constantly growing productivity of social labor to change for the hitherto exploited classes from a source of misery and oppression into a source of the greatest welfare and universal, harmonious perfection." (*The Erfurt Program*, trans. Thomas Dunlap, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1891/erfurt-program.htm> [last retrieved June 16, 2020])

⁴² Ironically, the only clearly revolutionary moment in the novel is the mass protest at the end of the *The Great Struggle*, which, and this is a telling momentum, ends with the arrest of Pelle.

⁴³ *Daybreak*, VII.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

accumulation. As Brun puts it as a kind of sarcastic reply to Pelle's mention of money as something "makes you dependent:"

"Not always [...] In my world people borrow and take on credit without a thought: the greater the debt, the better it is; they never treat a man worse than when they owe him money. On that point we are very much more emancipated than you are, indeed that's where the dividing line goes between the upper classes and the common people. This fear of becoming indebted to any one, and carefulness to do two services in return for one, is all very nice and profitable in your own world; but it's what you'll be run down by in your relations to us. We don't know it at all; how otherwise would those people get on who have to let themselves be helped from their cradle to their grave, and live exclusively upon services received?"⁴⁵

But the most striking feature of this envisioned plan is its justification on scientific basis, since the whole cooperative project based on the assumption that the capitalist environment not only makes it possible to build and function such thing, but also presupposes it as an organic outgrowth from the working class.⁴⁶ In Pelle's interpretation of the evolutionary theory applied to society, the "poor man must stick to the *union idea* [emphasis mine]". As I previously suggested, Pelle's Gryet is depicted as a firm-like centralization, although I still think that it should be considered as more of a horizontal collectivist idea, especially because of the role of workers, who are shareholders.

'Do you think the capable workman will submit to sharing equally with those that are less capable?' asked Brun doubtfully.

'He must learn to!' said Pelle firmly. 'How could he otherwise maintain that all work is of equal value?'

'Is that your own opinion?'

'Most decidedly. I see no reason, for instance, for making any difference between a doctor and a sewer-cleaner. It's impossible to say which of them is of the greater use in matters of health; the point is that each shall do what he can.'

'Capital!' exclaimed Brun. 'Capital!' The old philosopher was in the best of spirits. Pelle had considered him awkward and unpractical, and was astonished to find that his views on many points were so practical.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ cf. "One day Brun brought him a book. 'This book,' he said with a peculiar smile, 'has satisfied many who were seeking for the truth. Let's see whether it can satisfy you too!' It was Darwin's 'Origin of Species.'" (*Daybreak*, IX.)

‘It’s because this is something new,’ said the old man, rubbing his hands. [...] We two have found *the place* from *which the world can be rocked* [emphasis mine], my dear Pelle; I think we’ve found it! And now we’ll set to work.’”⁴⁷

But as the progress begun we can clearly see that the whole situation turns out to be a clash of economic interests between the “manufacturers” and the workers led by Pelle. But—and this aspect is of crucial importance—this is not a dramatic depiction of the binary opposition of class struggle (or if, only on the surface), but a *market competition*; it might be interpreted as something driven by the ideological prejudices of the “manufacturers”, but what actually cause the problem that is the emergence of a new competitor in the market, although, this time it is not represented by an individual entrepreneur, but a community of workers.

“It at once put a little more life into things; there was always plenty of material. They now produced much more than they were able to sell in the shop, and Pelle’s leather shop made the small masters independent of private capital. Many of them sold a little factory foot-wear in addition to doing repairs, and these now took their goods from him. Out in the provinces his boots and shoes had already gained a footing in many places; it had come about naturally, in the ordinary sequence of things. The manufacturers followed them up there too, wherever they could; but the consequence was that the workmen patronized them and forced them in again to the shops of which they themselves were the customers. A battle began to rage over Pelle’s boots and shoes. He knew, however, that it was only the beginning. It would soon come to a great conflict, and were his foundations sufficiently strong for that? The manufacturers were establishing a shop opposite his, where the goods were to be sold cheap in order to ruin his sales, and one day they put the prices very much down on everything, so as to extinguish him altogether. [...] Pelle was troubled, however, at this fresh attack. Even if they held out, it might well exhaust their economic strength.”⁴⁸

Although the problem is later overcome by the workers’ collective as it is always, but not immediately, happened in case of the previously depicted scenes of clashes of the novel (e.g. in form of strikes etc.), but the ultimate move, the definitive answer to the inner

⁴⁷ *Daybreak*, X.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

contradictions of capitalist society is the almost biblical moment, in which it is decided that the workers' collective *should leave the city and build its own*:

"It's really pretty here," said Brun. "See how nice the town looks with its towers—only one shouldn't live there. I was thinking of that last night when the child was lying there with her cough. The work-people really get no share of the sun, nor do those who in other respects are decently well off. And then I thought I'd like to build houses for our people on the ridge of the hill on both sides of 'Daybreak.' The people of the new age ought to live in higher and brighter situations than others. I'll tell you how I thought of doing it. I should in the meantime advance money for the plots, and the business should gradually redeem them with its surplus. That is quite as practical as dividing the surplus among the workmen, and we thereby create values for the enterprise. Talking of surplus—you've worked well, Pelle! I made an estimate of it last night and found it's already about ten thousand (£555) this year. But to return to what we were talking about—mortgage loans are generally able to, cover the building expenses, and with amortization the whole thing is unencumbered after some years have passed."⁴⁹

The main economic problem with this kind of cooperation that it is not only participates in capitalist society, but also reproduces it. Also, it has to involve an "all of a sudden"-type element since the city of workers cannot come into existence on its own, the recurring *injections of capital* provided by Brun. It is a bit similar to another literary example, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and its analysis by Pierre Macherey, in which the myth of the bourgeois, who is reproducing his own society by producing wealth "from the nothing", without any connection to that society, is deconstructed on the basis of motifs and other sub-elements contributing to these acts performed by Robinson, e.g. conveniently found tools washed ashore etc.; as Macherey concludes, Robinson *not reproduces, but extends his society*, with which actually he never lost the contact.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "It must be remembered that *Robinson Crusoe* [...] is not simply an adventure story but is the instrument of an inquiry, the theme around which an ideology has been progressively established (at least, one of the themes; there are others which are perhaps of equal importance). This 'story' is an early embodiment, an advance popularisation of the concept of origin. Marx and Engels were not mistaken when they repeatedly cited it as the exemplary specimen of an economic ideology." (Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall [Boston–Henley–London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978], 241.)

Also, the socio-economical context, in which this structure exists *still has state and market*, two components, which affect the functioning of the cooperative, which has not transformational impact of them (I am not counting the “swallowing” of the capitalist order by the cooperative’s planned gradual, but constant growth). And here the historical experience of the first half of the twentieth century, unfortunately, can help us to show that how these circumstances pose a real and substantial threat on real communities similar to Andersen Nexø’s imagined one: primordially the fall of the “Red Vienna” (1934), which was governed by somewhat similar social democratic principles, was the consequence of *the rise of fascism*; however the limits of this chapter do not allow me to deal with these issues, although I consider them important from the point of view of discussing the future of social engineering, of which the novel is a clear example.

For all of the above mentioned circumstances it is not really surprising that Denmark did not become the world’s first socialist state and not only because the *Pelle the Conqueror* is a work of fiction and not an economic study of collectivism. In this sense the novel is nothing else, but a good example of *Zukunftsmacherei* from an economical point of view, however, as a work of literature it is constituted by way more parts, than to be able to reduce it to one of them.

However, despite the economic “fogginess” of the plan it is worthy of further inquiry since it is a rather unconventional approach towards the given problem of collectivism (and, subsequently, market socialism), although literary works not only can employ the means of imagination in order to foster further inquiry, but also can be good examples of what Macherey calls as “ideological inconsistencies”, which can serve as an important contribution to the examination of the feasibility of such economic plans. As Lukács points out in his unpublished *What Is the New in Art?*:

[A]s an indeed important realist, he places little emphasis on the exact description of the technological side of work. He is interested in the social and human reflections of the activity, the human conditions and consequences of the specific work process, its economic environment and social consequences. By Nexö, the work in the life of each of his characters is presented as the most important aspect in life, but only as a moment of life that is in constant technical interaction with the other aspects.⁵¹

To some extent the first half of this novel could be called an “educational novel”, since various social spheres of work (child labor at the estate, apprenticeship in the cobbler's workshop in the rural town, factory work and trade union movement in the capital) are the decisive stages of this form of education. And Nexö is successful in portraying, especially in case of representing the dissolution of small craft business.

Andersen Nexø was not able to solve the contradictions inherent in his work, but he provided a literary form of them; this is convincing, but not because of some Naturalist precision of descriptions and their details, but because the portrayal of the organic awakening of class consciousness in an individual. And this step is a path breaking one in the history of portraying the masses in European literature: treated not as a compositional, but as an ideological problem to be solved.

As in was outlined in the introduction, one of the key concepts of Lukács’ understanding of the epic quality is what he called the “conquest of reality by large-scale forms”: as Pelle’s innocent perception of the physical world leaves its potential to be an intensive totality, by engaging with political action the novel consequently became an epic work encompassing that extensive totality, which is waiting to not be interpreted, but changed.

⁵¹ György Lukács, *Was ist das Neue in der Kunst?* [manuscript], MTA Lukács Archívum, http://real-ms.mtak.hu/21625/1/Lukacs_kez_35_280.pdf#page=86 (last retrieved June 16, 2020)

III. Serafimovich and the Emergence of Soviet Epic

But as the shout kept getting louder and nearer, as the successive ranks that came up all began to run at full speed toward the ranks ahead that were one after another joining in the shout, and as the shout kept growing far louder as the number of men grew steadily greater, it became quite clear to Xenophon that here was something of unusual importance; so he mounted a horse, took with him Lycius and the cavalry, and pushed ahead to lend aid; and in a moment they heard the soldiers shouting, "The Sea! The Sea!" and passing the word along.⁵²

Aleksandr Serafimovich Serafimovich was born (as Popov) into Cossack captain's family in Nizhne-Kurmoyarskaya on January 19 (or on January 7, according to the Julian calendar), 1863. He spent his childhood in Poland until 1874, when the family moved to Ust'-Medveditskaya. From 1883 he studied Mathematics and Physics at the University of Saint Petersburg, but in 1887 he was arrested along with Lenin's later executed elder brother and exiled to Arkhangelsk Governorate; during this time spent in Mezen and Pinega he began to write.

Upon returning to his native city in 1890, he started to publish short stories (*The Switchman* etc.). In 1901 he moved to Moscow, where he joined the literary group *Sreda*, in which he met Gorky and started working for the publishing house *Znanie*, which published his series of short stories dealing with the Revolution of 1905 in the year after the actual events. In 1912 he published his first novel, *The City in the Steppe*. During the First World War he worked as a war correspondent and in the subsequent civil war he wrote for *Izvestiya* and other Bolshevik newspapers as a war correspondent; he became the member of the communist party in 1918.

⁵² Xenophon. *Anabasis*, trans. Carleton L. Brownson (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 364–365.

His novel *The Iron Flood* (1924) became his most widely known work, and later it was hailed as a classic of Soviet literature. As it mentioned above, the plot is based on real events, namely the successful retreat of the Taman' Army in 1918, under the command of Yepifan Kovtyukh (named as Kozhukh in the novel). Although Serafimovich planned to expand his work to a more ambitious cycle under the title *Struggle*, finally, he abandoned the idea and returned to producing works of smaller prosaic forms.

Between 1926 and 1929 he worked as the chief editor of the literary journal *Oktyabr*. His seventieth birthday was marked with renaming Ust-Medveditskaya to Serafimovich and with honoring him with the Order of Lenin. In 1943, in addition to the Order of the Red Banner of Labour, he was awarded the most prestigious literary award of the time, the Stalin Prize for his “many years of outstanding achievement in literature” in 1943. He died in Moscow on his eighty-sixth birthday, and by that time his works were published in seven million volumes in forty languages.

In comparison with Rolland and Andersen Nexø, even with the consideration that both of them is less popular author nowadays than they were in their lifetime, Serafimovich never enjoyed a fame comparable to theirs. Although he was a relatively well-known author in the Soviet Union during its existence, even there he was mostly counted as a one-book writer in the right of *The Iron Flood*.

In comparison with other well-known works of the same period, *The Iron Flood* and his œuvre in general fell into obscurity. But it is not only the ungrateful posterity who treats his works without any special attention, which he seemed to deserve knowing his initial success or that he was named by the Nazis among those authors, whose books have to be burned in the same time as, in less than a decade after its publication, the Central Committee called his novel a “classical work” (*klassicheskoye proizvedeniye*).⁵³ It is somewhat

⁵³ Приветствие ЦК ВКП/б/ тов. Серафимовичу А. С., РГАСПИ. Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 914. Л. 44., <http://istmat.info/node/58576> (last retrieved June 16, 2020)

surprising that his work in most of the Soviet literary scholarship only has a reserved place reserved in enumerations of great literary undertakings of the NEP period, among those as Yuri Libedinsky's *A Week* or Furmanov's *Chapayev* etc. (both of them were published in the same year as *The Iron Flood*).

Serafimovich was already a “veteran” of Russian literature by the time of the October Revolution, and published *The Iron Flood* in the age of sixty-one: not counting Dzhabul Dzhabaev, who became a known writer much later than Serafimovich, he was the Methuselah of the emerging Soviet literature, being only a few years older than Gorkiy and just a bit younger than Chekhov. Serafimovich was very far from either being controversial in his choices of topic or radical in style.⁵⁴ He was definitely more of a late representative of the nineteenth-century literature, i.e. an epoch, authors of which doomed to be “thrown overboard from the Steamship of Modernity” by the younger generation. While Lenin expressed his opinion in a letter sent to Serafimovich how “the workers and all of us” need his work⁵⁵, in his famous contemporaneous essay *The Hamburg Score* (1928) the famous literary critic, Viktor Shklovsky voiced his opinion as “Serafimovich and Veresayev do not exist at all.” A year before Walter Benjamin considered Serafimovich, without an intention to evaluate, a naturalist chronicler in his *The Political Groupings of Russian Writers* (1927) and the most recent history of Russian literature published in Hungary is somewhat

⁵⁴ Although this did not prevent him from being up-to-date and employ some stylistic elements of expressionism borrowed from his younger colleagues; I will discuss this feature in the third part of this chapter.

⁵⁵ “But your books, and what my sister has often told me, have aroused a profound affection for you in me, and I very much want to say to you how *necessary* your work is for the workers and for all of us, and how essential it is now for you to be firm, in order to overcome your grief and force yourself to return to work. Forgive me for writing in a hurry. Once again, I shake you very warmly by the hand.” (“Lenin to A. S. Serafimovich [May 21, 1920],” in *Collected Works* 35 [Moscow: Progress, 1973], 448, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/pdf/lenin-cw-vol-35.pdf#page=458> [last retrieved June 16, 2020])

unsympathetic towards him, since the authors only mention him *en passant* in two sentences.⁵⁶

In addition to this, Serafimovich was not a prolific writer: his collected works were published only in four volumes, which is a minuscule in comparison with his contemporaries and younger authors of the twentieth century, whose collected works often fill numerous bookshelves. What makes his works a suitable subject for the analysis of epic tendencies in the twentieth-century European literature is that his *œuvre* as a whole, in my interpretation, *synecdochically* represents not only the already mentioned disintegration of the bourgeois grand narratives, but also the emergence of the new tendency towards the epic features.⁵⁷ As the Hungarian saying goes, it can serve as a good “veterinarian horse”, i.e. an sufficient example for all “symptoms”.

Katerina Clark argues in her path-breaking study, *The Soviet Novel* (1980) that *The Iron Flood* belongs to “a core group of novels that are cited [in the addresses that opened the congresses of the Union of Soviet Writers] with sufficient regularity to be considered a canon,”⁵⁸ that in the Soviet literary historical consensus it was cited “as evidence that Socialist Realism had evolved before 1932,”⁵⁹ and—along with *Chapaev* and Fadeyev’s *The Rout*—it was “adopted in the thirties as official model of Socialist Realism” and became “important in shaping the master plot as a parable of the triumph of ‘consciousness’ over ‘spontaneity’.”⁶⁰

Serafimovich’s works can be divided chronologically to three distinctive creative periods. The first one is a sum of works in short prose characterized by *description* (in the

⁵⁶ “Aleksandr Serafimovich is considered a one-book author, although his ‘Marxist-based’ novel *The City in the Steppe* is also noted in literary history. His *Iron Flood*—a stirring heroic epic in prose narrated with repetitions full of pathos and rhetoric questions—became a classic work of Soviet literature.” (*Az orosz irodalom története a kezdetektől 1940-ig*, ed. Zsuzsa Zöldhelyi [Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 1997], 54.)

⁵⁷ “Very generally this tendency may be described as a *tendency towards epic*.” (Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell [Lincoln–London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983], 347.)

⁵⁸ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000), 4.

⁵⁹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 27.

⁶⁰ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 84.

Lukácsian sense of the word) until the Revolution of 1905, while the second one is consisted by his works, in which a move towards *narration* can be observed.⁶¹ The third and last one is mostly a tale of struggle to grow and reach the epic quality as a chain of events from the creation of *The City in the Steppe* until abandoning the idea of writing a multivolume novel, of which the first part would have been *The Iron Flood*. Although Serafimovich remained an active writer for another quarter of a century, his literary output after the publication of *The Iron Flood* is merely a sum of insignificant ruins of the grandeur of an ambitioning past, in the sense of being confined exclusively to shorter forms of prose.

Shortly after his return from deportation, but especially after his move to Moscow, Serafimovich gained a considerable fame as a writer of short stories depicting the hardships of people from the lower strata of Russian society with a special regard to children, who were frequently portrayed in his works of short prose throughout his whole life (e.g. *The Little Miner* [1895], *The Snake Puddle* [1905]).

He was considered a follower of Gorky and consequently as a representative of authors highly influenced by the French literary school of naturalism, more precisely by the works of Zola and de Maupassant. In his *The City in the Steppe* Serafimovich even ironizes on this topic in a dialogue between a mother and her daughter:

“Imagine, the mademoiselle says that they hardly read any Flaubert, and even Maupassant in France. Mom, mom, imagine... they hardly read them.”

“Really?”

“Yes, madame.”

“But what do they read there?”

“Various newspaper supplements and insignificant magazines, mommy.”

“It is somewhat strange and hard to believe that in the homeland of Maupassant they do not read Maupassant.”

“The *aristocratie intellectuelle* reads him and the other classics, but the masses—the various doorkeepers, sales clerks and others—do not read at all.”⁶²

⁶¹ “Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels.” etc. (Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?,” in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn [London: Merlin, 1970], 127.)

⁶² A. S. Serafimovich, “Gorod v stepi,” in *Sobranie sochineniy* 1 (Moskva: Pravda, 1980), 330.

Although, he also produced “more elaborated” short stories, which can be characterized as *novellas* and often divided into chapters, like *The Stowaway* (1905), *By the Cliff* (1907), *The Kingdom of Mice* (1913) etc. In these writings the plot usually revolves around solely around one dramatic conflict or contains episodic portrayal of different actions.

A particular thematic turn can be observed in his writing during and immediately after the Revolution of 1905.⁶³ The location of his short stories produced around that time *In Presnya*, *Pogrom*, *Funeral March*, and *In the Middle of the Night* (all of them published in 1906) etc.—sometimes stated openly, sometimes it might be supposed—is the district of Moscow commonly known as Presnya.⁶⁴ The narrator’s position is unchanged in these short stories in comparison with his earlier writings, but a strong thematic turn occurred—which was proven to be a lasting effect, since years after the revolution Serafimovich turned back and back again to this subject—by getting closer to social issues. While Serafimovich indeed wrote about social problems before, he did it in a certain *naturalist* manner: like a photographer he immortalized various forms of suffering and loss “in the bottom”, but the revolution marked a shift, after which he began to occupy a *critical realist* position. This manifested itself in various forms of hidden and semi-hidden social commentary, mostly as irony or free indirect speech in the narration. His narrator is still a passive observer of the events and their active participants (from both side), but self-reflective in the sense of observing the group to which he belongs to and the passerby’s passivity. His position, both as a writer and as someone having first-hand experience, could be therefore characterized by Lucan’s words: “The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the beaten cause pleased Cato.”

⁶³ It is also worth to be noted that he chronicled the revolutionary events in Moscow, which makes these short stories somewhat unique in the sense that most of the literary works about the revolution portray events in the back-then capital and initial venue of the revolution, Saint Petersburg.

⁶⁴ The Presnya—officially the Presnensky rayon—was the last part of the revolutionary Moscow to be captured, therefore in the revolutionary legendarium-and, of course, in the literary imprints of the contemporaneous political imagination it played the same role, which was occupied by Belleville in the last days of the Parisian Commune of 1871; as Serafimovich wrote, “everything was crushed in the city, only the deserted Presnya, locked by barricades, gave a last battle gloomily and proudly” (Serafimovich, “In Presnya,” in *Sobranie sochineniy* 2 [Moskva: Pravda, 1980], 310).

One of these short stories, which also bears the properties of the novella, *In the Middle of the Night* has a crucial importance as an element in the arc of Serafimovich's works. Its exposition bears a strong resemblance to *The Iron Flood*: a group of rural people marching towards the city in a winter night, against the background of revolutionary events. Unlike in the novel it never becomes really clear in the story why they are moving actually, however, it is also a portrayal of how revolutionary consciousness grows out as a result not only of a partially successful agitation, but because of the material conditions and forced feature of their journey.

Before creating *The Iron Flood*, Serafimovich wrote only one work of epic scale larger than his short stories and novellas. *The City in the Steppe* was written between 1907 and 1910, and the endeavor to create an epic scope for it is clearly embedded to the novel (for instance, there are ninety-two figures in the novel, who are mentioned by name, appear, or speak during the course of the narrative, which means that a new figure appears in almost every second page). Although the tendentious overinterpretation of previous Soviet scholarship proposed an exclusive reading of the novel as a "revolutionary" work of Serafimovich, it hardly can be considered as such by its content (but still shows a number of interesting elements of political nature incorporated into the narrative). Seemingly the most obvious reading of the novel (supported by the interpretation of the author of these lines) suggest that it narrates the typical capitalist development of the rural parts of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century: it tells the story how the expanding of railway system led to the birth a new city in the middle of the steppe. It is novel of the accumulation of capital and for this very reason it can also be understood as an artistic counterpart of a quasi-

contemporaneous theoretical work, namely Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899).⁶⁵

Despite the surprisingly high number of characters, the episodes are mostly arranged alongside the appearances and interactions of two families: engineer Nikolay Nikolayevich Polinov, his wife, Yelena Ivanovna, their daughter Katyusha, and Yelena's brother, Petya as the first family, and saloon-keeper Zakhar Kasyanovich Koroyedov (mostly called as "Zakharka" in the novel), his wife, their daughter, Kara, and her son, Sergunya (fathered by Zakharka) as the second one. Their figures, who are relatively more elaborated in comparison with others in the novel, can be seen against the backdrop of the above mentioned socio-economic development, therefore the reader will be able to understand the changes in their characters. The circumstances created by this early stage of capitalism functions as a kind of Procrustean bed for them, which turns their worst features out of them. The marriage of Yelena and Nikolay gets shipwrecked as Yelena falls into depression because of jealousy and Nikolay begins to drink after his burnout; Petya, the dedicated revolutionary upon returning from a five-years-long exile in Arkhangelsk gets married and abandons his previous beliefs⁶⁶; Zakharka becomes the wealthiest person of the city, but the disappearance of her daughter and the shame he feels in front of Sergunya poisons his remaining days etc., but despite all of the losses what they suffer, everybody finds a way to settle down in the city in the steppe. As the old Zakharka explains this "law" to his son in the form of an excuse for his past deeds:

⁶⁵ I do not suggest that the two works have any direct relation to each other whatsoever, rather propose a common understanding of both as an intellectual reaction to the socio-economic state of the Russian Empire back then, although, it is clear that Lenin's work is more of a debating piece by definition.

⁶⁶ It is particularly spectacular in Petya's case, since he made a "Pauline turn" from his previous position, which was articulated with the following words: "After all, if you dedicate yourself to the cause, then without turning back... no family, no children." (Serafimovich, "Gorod v stepi," 247.)

I am not a thief, Sergunya, I follow the law, Sergunya! [...] You lie, I am not a beast, I am not a beast, just follow the law of human life, I follow the terrible law in order to keep order.⁶⁷

The episodic feature of the novel can be seen as a proof for that bourgeois narratives are indeed fragmented, and it also corresponds with Lukács' idea about how the social development in Russia was delayed in comparison with other parts of Europe.

Since the steppe as a commonplace motif of the “endless land” was traditionally connected to travelling in Russian literature, most notably immortalized by Chekhov in his famous novella, *The Steppe* (1888), *The City in the Steppe* is an interesting example of how this *moving* background can be turned into a *static* setting for a plot. Moreover, since the city is not named, its location corresponds with the proverbial place of “the provincial city of N” (*gubernskiy gorod N*), which served as a location for many well-known works of Russian literature.⁶⁸

One of the main tools for Serafimovich to represent the mass is to amass fragments of speech, exclamations and other in a typologically dialogue-like manner. The novel also primarily features sexual issues and various forms of violence against women and sexual harassment to some extent: already in the first two chapters (out of eleven) the reader stumble upon a description of the Polinovs' sexual encounter; how a worker named Osip Mitrich beats and closes out his wife after Kara refused his advances; an anecdote of railway workers about how they left behind passengers bathing in a lake during an unexpected stop and saw them running naked to catch the train; how Zakharka forced a peasant girl into

⁶⁷ Ibid., 352. (or as it is later expressed in a less sophisticated way in the form of known proverbs: “Two dogs are biting each other, so the third one should not interfere. Whoever will win, he is right.” [Ibid., 357.]; the English equivalents are “do not go between the tree and the bark” and “might goes before right”).

⁶⁸ I would mention, without being exhaustive, Nikolay Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1836) and *Dead Souls* (1842), Veniamin Kaverin's *Two Captains* (1945), partially Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov's *The Twelve Chairs* (1928) etc. as famous examples of employing this motif.

prostitution after getting her employed in his “institution” (*Zakharkino zavedenie*), and the gossip about his incestuous relationship with Kara.⁶⁹

In the years following the Soviet victory the memory of the Civil War was more and more turned into a myth, and in this process *The Iron Flood* (too) was instrumental. Since the conflict of the vast majority of these narratives are based on a class conflict-based interpretation of the events, with an emphasis on the sacrifices done by the victors. However, as one can see in *The Iron Flood*, in an epic scale it is insufficient to portray individual problems, but conflicts of a whole stratum of a society.

Serafimovich’s most important literary achievement in his novel is that although the portrayal of the exploited masses has many colorful and individual *figures* (Baba Gorpina, Anka, Aleksey, even Kozhukh himself etc.), they are not *types per se*.⁷⁰ This is the reason why *The Iron Flood* became interpreted as the carrier of a possible solution for portraying the masses playing a central role in the framework of a literary narrative. In this sense Serafimovich employs many elements of the classic form of *Bildungsroman*, applied to the portrayed masses: as iron needs to be *tempered*, just like Pavel in *How the Steel Was Tempered*, in order to make it a useable metal, so the mass needs to become a; this is clearly visible in the contrast between the opening and closing chapters of the novel.

From all sides came the din of voices, the barking of dogs and neighing of horses, the ring and rattle of metal, the crying of children, the rough swearing of men, calls of women, and the raucous, drunken singing to the accompaniment of an accordion. As though a huge beehive had lost its queen and was humming in frenzy, man-voiced and discordant.⁷¹

Comrades, we walked five hundred versts, hungry, cold, barefoot. The Cossacks came after us like maniacs. There were no supplies, neither bread

⁶⁹ The word *zavedenie* is actually a euphemism for a brothel in this context.

⁷⁰ Although it is necessary to say that he was not a path-breaking inventor in this field, but rather a successful adaptor of Gerhart Hauptmann’s ideas, par excellence his technique of representing the mass on stage (like in his seminal play *The Weavers* [1892]).

⁷¹ Serafimovich, *The Iron Flood*, trans. Bisti, D. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House), 5.

nor forage. People died, rolled down the slopes, fell by enemy bullet, there we no cartridges, we were barehanded. [...] Children were left in the gorges. [...] And how many of our people lie slain by bullets in the steppe, the forests and mountains, lie for ever, and ever? [...] For whose sake did thousands, tens of thousands of our people suffer torture? For whose sake? [...] For one thing—for the sake of Soviet power, because it is the power of the peasants and workers. They have nothing besides that.⁷²

This elevates the narrative to a mythical tale-like sphere, in which the journey becomes a metaphor for the *process* of creating a community, step by step as the fleeing people becomes an unstoppable “flood of iron” like a natural force.⁷³ (However, it is worth to be noted that Serafimovich already documented another revolution, although a defeated one, in his previously mentioned works of short prose from 1905, but the second time he was writing *after* the historical moment, and not *in* it, and this difference manifested itself in the change in the scope of the works (not to mention that in case of the previous Serafimovich also had to pass through the tsarist censorship). This change enabled the writer to choose a topic (he himself was not present during the march of the Taman’ Army), with which he was able to use the event as a prism, through which he can present the ideological clockwork behind the qualitative change of the masses, namely the appearance of the *revolutionary consciousness*.⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid., 202.; unfortunately the English translation does not illustrate the distinctive dialect (e.g. “дитэй”, “защо” etc.) used by Kozhukh.

⁷³ This is also supported by the deliberate play with numbers in the novel: the journey is described through forty chapters (just like the forty-years-long quest of the Israelites for the Promised Land), the participants of the forced march have to fight with three main enemies (the rebelling Cossacks of Kuban’, the Georgian Menshevik forces, and the German Imperial occupants), and the unrealistically exaggerated number of people taking part of the events (and the connecting death tolls) etc.

⁷⁴ An interesting motif can be found in two of his better-known short stories, which can shape an understanding of Serafimovich’s portrayal of an individual’s world view and its relationship to textuality (as carrier of knowledge). In *The Gangly One* (1922) a mother steadily waits for a letter from his son, who were arrested for his political activity; she becomes gravely ill, when she receives a letter, which “must be from [her] little son” (*dolzhno ot synochka*): “The ill woman did not force her head up anymore, just squinted with happy eyes. The landlady dealt with the housework for a long time and only took a look on her tenant in the evening. She laid still with an eternally joyful smile on her wax face and pressed the *unopened letter* [emphasis mine – K. T.] to her chest with her cold white hand.” In *Little Jackdaw* (1924) the titular character, a seven-years-old girl successfully smuggled a political poster into a factory and witnessed when the foreman ripped it off from the wall, although she neither understood the secret signs she was told to give and receive, nor the poster itself, since she cannot read. These short stories depicting an organic “outgrowth” of consciousness were written around that time, when *The Iron Flood* was created.

Although Serafimovich was not able to finish his higher studies because of his arrest and subsequent exile, as a former university student, he was most probably familiar both with the ancient Greek classics and the sacred texts of Christianity. Therefore the *Anabasis* of Xenophon (which narrates the story of the Persian campaign and the subsequent retreat of ten thousand Greek mercenaries in 401–399 BC) could have been served as a probable source of inspiration (in terms of structural similarities of the plot).⁷⁵ The number of chapters could be also interpreted as a reference to the forty years of the Exodus.⁷⁶ Besides these examples, *The Iron Flood* clearly belongs to a distinctive group of literary works, which narrates journeys “forced” in the sense that the event described in the plot took place, because a certain group of people have to move from point A to point B as a result (mostly, but not exclusively) of pressure from an external force, like in e.g. the first half of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and other works.⁷⁷ To build his narrative, Serafimovich seems to use deliberately many important conventional elements of classic (European) epic poetry:

- (1) although the novel itself framed with the highly resembling first and last scenes, it starts with an *in medias res* style of narration, therefore the politico-historical background story of the ongoing fight is largely unclear up until the 6th chapter, the reader does not really know

⁷⁵ Although I was really proud of myself for “discovering” this probable interpretative connection, actually I am far from being the first, since Pyotr Kogan already compared Serafimovich’s novel to Xenophon’s work (and Dante’s *Inferno*) upon its initial release (cf. “Dés 1924, *Na postu* voyait dans ce livre « la nouveauté la plus importante de l’année écoulée », tant par le thème traité que par la dimension. À côté de *La Semaine*, qui est un long récit, *Le Torrent de fer* fait figure d’« épopée monumentale » et inaugure la série de « larges fresques » que le programme de la MAPP [Moskovskaya assotsiatsiya proletarskikh pisateley; “Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers” – K. T.] appelait de ses vœux. Le critique marxiste Pavel [sic!] Kogan n’hésitait pas à y voir « une *Anabase* moderne », qui fait pâlir l’exploit rapporté par Xénophon, et même « les tableaux de *L’Enfer* de Dante ».”; Jean-Pierre Morel, *Le roman insupportable: L’Internationale littéraire et la France 1920–1932* [Paris: Gallimard, 1985], 68–69.).

⁷⁶ Dobrenko claims the exact same, unfortunately, without employing any references to the text: “Alexander Serafimovich’s novel *The Iron Flood* (*Zheleznyi potok*, 1924), for example, describes how the Red commander Kozhukh leads a detachment of revolutionary partisans out of encirclement. At the same time, the novel also reproduces an Old Testament story: Kozhukh himself is like Moses, and the escape of the Taman division from the encirclement strikingly reminiscent of the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the Promised Land; the text of the novel contains direct indicators of this parallel [emphasis mine – K. T.].” (*The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, ed. Dobrenko [Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 2011], 103.)

⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, these literary narratives are often based on real historical events, like in a late successor of Serafimovich’s work, Aleksandr Bek’s *Volokolamsk Highway* (1944), which is also based on a successful escape from encirclement of a Red Army battalion in 1941, or Louis Aragon’s *Holy Week* (1958), a grandiose novel depicting the flight of Louis XVIII and his court from Paris upon the return of Napoleon in 1815.

anything about Kozhukh until the long description of his previous years in the 7th chapter etc.;

- (2) he himself bears an epithet (*epitheton ornans*) as he is always referred to as “iron-jawed man” (*chelovek s zheleznymi chelyustyami*);
- (3) the course of the narrated events not once changed by a dramatic turn (the offended German commander’s surprising turn against the Cossacks in the 9th chapter, an unexpected victory of the cavalry over the Georgian Mensheviks in the suicide mission described in the 22nd chapter etc.), which can be characterized as examples of *deus ex machina*, i.e. a sudden appearance of an external force unexpectedly saving the previously unsolvable situation;
- (4) the episodic feature of the novel corresponds with the convention of delay or suspension (*retardatio*): many, seemingly “unnecessary” details are revealed in the form of separate storylines, like Baba Gorpina’s life in peace time etc., which are not supporting the main plotline;
- (5) although no actual prediction (*anticipatio*) takes place in the novel, the repetition of the almost impossible feature of reaching the allied troops are by several characters becoming that common that the reader—like in case of the frequent predictions of ancient epics—anticipates that against all odds the journey will end successfully.

Since Serafimovich only episodically focuses on one or another character, the reader has no access to their psychological motivations (except the basic, instinctive ones such as the fear of death), only to the events presented in a chronological order. In this sense, we have to agree with Benjamin, *The Iron Flood* is indeed a late successor of chronicles, because of its monumentality unrespectable of individuals, e.g. it is monumental in the sense of being a monument of its age and the revolutionary struggle itself, and as such it is a historical document too, but only in the sense of providing a highly fictionalized account to a historical event.

This may seem obsolete, but these conditions and feature of the work reflect to a certain sense (or rather feeling) of the “closeness” of history itself. As the flood has a direction, so does history in Serafimovich’s interpretation, and this feature creates gradually that atmosphere among the characters, which shows that the impossible becomes inevitably

possible against all odds because of the historical necessity (the history presented in the novel is “on their side”), or as Serafimovich himself noted in the years of the civil war:

Everyone sees soldiers trading matches, filling streetcars, destroying wagons, breaking into cellars, workers taking out administrative documents on wheelbarrows, peasants ransacking estates. Everyone sees mistakes, incidents, and abuses, but no one sees a colossal creation of people's power, unprecedented in the world before. Not only in the center, not only in the Smolny [the venue of the Bolsheviks' headquarters during the October Revolution – KT], but throughout all the Russian land, in every corner of it. After hundreds of years of slavery, oppression, noose, and destruction of any beginning the gigantically organized Russian people straightened up. Thirty-three years without legs and now it rises.⁷⁸

Serafimovich above mentioned words can be understood as an expression of that certain “feeling” what Marx called the “the indefinite colossalness” of the goals of the proletarian revolution in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852). Note, that not only the military experts, but even representatives of the masses considered the journey a suicide mission (although various examples manifest in the novel of the absence of any other possible choice, e.g. the forced march itself and the dangers associated with it are threats to the people participating in it, however towards the end it becomes more and more clear how the march means the life, since being static equals with annihilation). This point of view of the author is based on the engagement in showing wider connections behind the revolutionary scenes in order to highlight not only the thematic, but also the problematic feature of the revolutionary struggle (like leaving behind the wounded, the execution of the Georgian teenager etc.); this approach provides a “deeper analysis” of the historical situation. This is the reason behind Serafimovich’s choice of employing an expressionist stylistic apparatus: it is necessary not because of a certain appreciation of avant-garde tendencies, but because of the use of the traditional realistic-naturalistic *style* would stop the writer (in this certain case) on the level of description.

⁷⁸ Serafimovich, “V kaple,” in *Sobranie sochineniy* 4 (Moskva: Pravda, 1980), 337.

This is a very important aspect, especially if one takes that into account that the portrayed journey described in Serafimovich's novel is not a military campaign at all, but a flight of army with civilians. Since the formation of masses mostly shaped by the harsh circumstances, demanding the sacrifice not only material goods (like Baba Gorpina's samovar), but human life (leaving behind the wounded soldiers etc.) too, it is substantial to note that the party is completely missing from the novel and therefore the emergence of the collective consciousness is "self-driven" and not guided by any party line. There is no force guiding the mass and/or Kozhukh during the course of events, like in, for example, Furmanov's *Chapaev*, in which indeed an "extraordinary person" commands the soldiers, but both his and his troops' deficiencies are "corrected" by the advice of the political commissar.

Serafimovich's novel is monumental and therefore it clearly belongs to the general epic tendency of the twentieth century European literature, not because of its size, but because of its scope. The Iron Flood is "just" a precursor of what Lukács calls as "the conquest of reality by large-scale epic forms". This will be achieved by a younger writer, who in November 1927 visited Serafimovich and gave him the manuscript of the first part of his work, entitled as *The Quiet Don*.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the selected three examples of grand literary narratives in early twentieth-century European prose fiction proved that an a new epic tendency appeared in the literary landscape of the fin de siècle European literature.

First of all, the various degree of political commitment expressed in these works showed that they mainly focused was on the “organic” or “automatic” emergence of social consciousness. This consciousness was depicted as an individual process in the chronologically first two works discussed in this thesis, while Serafimovich problematized it in another way, connecting compositional questions with the problem of the literary portrayal of mass consciousness.

Further examination of other works of the period would most probably support this statement and support the view that the novel as a genre and especially in its twentieth-century European form had and has a strong connection to history.

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