

WOMEN AND THE HISTORICAL NOVEL: “GIVING UP THE GHOST”¹?

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Abstract. This article aims at identifying the major changes in the genre of the historical novel, which are specifically connected to women’s unstable social status and their underrepresentation in culture and historical records. The literary canon of the genre is undergoing a significant shift, utilizing spectral and gothic elements while sticking to the genre’s initial objective of factual representation of history. Contemporary women’s historical novels often employ the ghost metaphor which is frequently used in order to reexamine women’s place in history, as we can see in the works of S. Waters, P. Barker and, especially, H. Mantel, as their novels dwell on the themes of spectrality, ghosts and literary heritage. In their novels, the category of the spectral creates a dissonance within the historical novel as a literary genre, as well as the cultural memory of Britain and, in this way, the historical novel opens up new meanings in history through dialogization. Thus, historical novels become a more complex genre that moves away from the postmodernist paradigm to the new potential of late 20st century realism. These new changes consist in the implementation of the fantastic into the fabric of the literary work, amplifying the level of intellectualization of fiction, introducing more literary experiments with form and narrative and depicting the thinking mind of the character with scientific precision. This helps create a multi-dimensional, complex vision of reality, in which the spectral is an instrument for facilitating a new understanding of the individual, national, and gender identity, etc.

Key words: women’s literature, historical novel, haunting, spectrality, dialogization, contemporary British novel

¹The article is written in memory of the late Hilary Mantel and in reference to her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003).

When you turn and look back down the years, you glimpse the ghosts of other lives you might have led; all houses are haunted. The wraiths and phantoms creep under your carpets and between the warp and weft of fabric, they lurk in wardrobes and lie flat under drawer-liners.

Hilary Mantel, “Giving Up the Ghost”

The new millennium is especially preoccupied with the past, and many historical events keep haunting our present days, distorting our concept of time as well as our own ability to “produce” the past. The upsurge of nostalgia is definitely conspicuous: the rising number of TV-show and movie remakes has skyrocketed in the past several years, the fashion industry is running out of the decades it wants to re-create, songs often use old samples and tunes reminiscent of the past, the very nature of social media trends is to do the same thing someone else has already done. Starting from the 1990s, scholars begin to notice that memory has become “a central concern in contemporary culture and politics in all societies on a global scale” [Martínez-Alfaro, Pellicer-Ortín: 1]. Many researchers call it “the spectral turn” [Dziuban; Peeren; Del Pilar Blanco; Arnold; etc.]; R. Luckhurst specifically identifies a “spectral turn” in contemporary literature [Luckhurst: 527], as our culture is haunted with its past, and navigating our cultural memory becomes a great objective in order to make sense of the “ghosts” of history.

In many cases, scholars studying this issue inevitably refer to the famous work of J. Derrida *Specters of Marx* (1993). The French philosopher dissects the contemporary capitalist world showing that it can only create something by bringing back ideas, works and objects from the past (even the most immediate past). J. Derrida’s theories formed what is now called Hauntology, or the spectral studies, which is essentially a new way to study history and culture. For example, M. Fisher, a British cultural theorist, suggests that we are haunted by the possible futures that never took place. The spectre becomes a new form of knowledge [Ganteau] and it “facilitates an encounter with the past, in the hope that it will shape our understanding of the present, and of the future” [Shaw: 8].

The aim of our research in particular is to find out how the historical novel, especially its version created by women writers, can be interpreted from the perspective of hauntology, taking into consideration the genre’s already established importance to cultural memory studies and memory studies in general. J. Wolfreys identifies spectrality as a feature of modernity [Wolfreys: 2], and the rise of historical fiction in the 21st century is proof of that. The historical novel is a novel that, through retrospection, comprehends the past by combining the themes of societal issues and the private life of the protagonist. Through retrospection, the genre brings back what is no longer alive and present – and reproduces something that is neither dead nor alive

– i.e. the spectres. This coincides with the way the historical novel may be viewed as a mode through which temporal layers come in contact – the novel represents the past incorporating the present point of view during the writing process, so that the final result provides the reader with a perspective on the future.

Due to their nature, ghosts break up the traditional tripartite division of time: “by collapsing the binary opposition of presence and absence, they express an even more comprehensive challenge to traditional forms of ordering the world” [Funk: 91]. Hence, historical novels become a more complex genre that relies on the new possibilities of realism, including broadening the themes and problems raised, implementing the fantastic and the gothic into the fabric of the literary work, amplifying the level of intellectualization of the works, deconstructing postmodernism, introducing more literary experiments with form and narrative and representing the thinking mind of the character with scientific precision. The above-mentioned characteristics help to concoct a multi-dimensional, complex vision of reality which, in turn, necessitates an array of critical approaches in order to fully comprehend the work, yet the writer’s vision could still be as ambivalent and vague as in many post-modernist texts.

K. Shaw suggests that the spectre may serve as “a metaphorical trope through which to disrupt the certainty of temporality and to open up meanings” [Shaw: 9], which is what the new historical

novels are up to. A. Gordon also adds that the act of haunting may be an analytical tool for understanding “modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression” [Gordon: xv]. All of these thoughts have much in common and welcome the spectral studies to the discussion of the historical novel.

Asserting that all fiction can be related to the spectral, one critic writes that “writing, textuality <...> and haunting are not only interrelated; they are inseparable” [Castricano: 29]. Hauntology problematizes the notion of textuality itself and “the reciprocal nature of the intertextual haunt functions to create dissonance rather than harmony, throwing new light on the original writing as well as its unresolved connections to later texts.” [Shaw: 9]. Realizing these connections, Hilary Mantel, for example, centers her works around the themes of textuality and haunting. The dissonance K. Shaw mentions is in tune with M. Bakhtin’s term “dissonance” which he introduces within his framework of dialogism. By dialogism the Russian scholar understands a mode in which “there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” [Bakhtin: 426] and determines that “[t]he word, breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words and variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others, is able, in this dialogized process, to shape its own stylistic profile and tone” [Bakhtin: 277].

The achievement of the contemporary historical novel lies in the dialogization of history, wherein history is treated as a dialogue in which the new meanings of historical realia can, in turn, condition other meanings, including those connected to the present and the future. This way, the historical novel provides a comment upon historical narratives, questioning the existing interpretations of historical figures and events. Like M. Bakhtin's word goes through the process of dialogism, so the spectre can strike a dissonance with the existing conceptions of time, history and culture and create new meanings and new conceptions.

The first historical novels written by women were gothic, with the chronotope located in the Middle Ages, encompassing scary castles and fortresses. Besides, the gothic often demands fantastic elements, or at least a speculation about something supernatural happening; consequently, women's historical novels followed this convention. D. Wallace states that "critics of the historical novel have traditionally turned to Marxist approaches, aligning the genre with the nineteenth-century realist novel by excluding texts which use fantastic elements" [Wallace: 4] connected to the gothic and fantastic novels about history that women write. S. Brantley also agrees that "privileging of realism over fantasy is common in criticism about historical novels, and it has strong gender ramifications" [Brantley: 76].

D. Wallace highlights the similarities between women's position in history and the gothic im-

agery: "the metaphors women historians often use to figure women's relationship with history – of women being 'outside', 'underneath' or 'hidden from' history – are Gothic images of a past which is obscure, dark, buried, needing to be unearthed" [Wallace: 6]. The gothic has often been preoccupied with ghosts, and ghosts are a recurrent trope of gothic fiction. Ghosts are usually hard to spot, they are hidden within the walls of haunted houses or cemeteries, and they only appear when it is dark and no one is around. The inclusion of ghosts in fiction means that the author is adding a fantastic element to his or her work, same as the inclusion of women in history is deemed as a fantastic element.

Yet, realism has evolved over the years and is expanding its limits and possibilities. The period of the closing years of the 20th century through the dawn of the 21st century has been facing a change in the historical novel's canon thanks to the works of many prominent British writers like Hilary Mantel, Pat Barker, Sarah Waters, Rose Tremain, Antonia Susan Byatt, Helen Dunmore and a few others. These women-writers, as opposed to W. Scott's model of the historical novel, often opt for using spectral elements in their historical novels and their works are still considered to be realist. The realistic method allows depicting and criticizing historical and present-day realities and cut into the problems with a surgeon's knife's precision. And the increased interest in ghosts points to the problems of our identity, as "[i]t is to ghosts we turn in order not to become

too ghostly to ourselves” [Funk: 88]. The spectral may serve as an instrument of developing new understandings of the individual, national, gender identity, etc.

The phenomenon of ghosts, haunting and spectrality in Hilary Mantel’s historical novels is generally recognized by scholars, who note that “spectrality and the motif of the ghost preoccupy Mantel’s work, both formally and textually” [Arnold: 1]. The British writer started out as a social satirist writing about the vices of contemporary English society. She was first introduced to the reading public with the *Every Day Is Mother’s Day* series (*Every Day Is Mother’s Day* (1985); *Vacant Possession* (1986)) – a story about a widowed spiritualist named Evelyn Axon and her handicapped daughter Muriel. Besides, in *Fludd* (1989), *Beyond Black* (2005) and other works of the author, people and places are haunted. In her published memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003), H. Mantel states the purpose of her “ghosts”: “[i]t is necessary to understand that the dead are real, and have power over the living. It is helpful to have encountered the dead firsthand, in the form of ghosts” [MacFarquhar].

When H. Mantel emerged on the literary scene, postmodernist writers were still experimenting with genres and techniques, playing with the reader in various ways. Yet the writer’s understanding of the dead and the living has “recast the critical descriptors of historiographic fiction mobilized to describe the work of authors such as Peter Ackroyd or A. S. Byatt” [Bavidge: 415].

Regarding H. Mantel’s literary method, S. L. Knox asserts that “the Gothic seems too small a handle for Mantel’s work” [Knox: 313]; and indeed, her use of the gothic mode is “often ironic” [Bavidge: 418]. J. Bavidge suggests the term “super-realist”, or, in other words, “fantastically real” to characterize Mantel’s style, as “[h]er use of hauntological paraphernalia is never only about the supernatural but always about the unmythologised, unromanticised real” [Bavidge: 418].

In the collective monograph entitled *Reading Hilary Mantel* (2019), the first book of the Thomas Cromwell trilogy (and we may say the same about the rest of the trilogy) is described as “a text which displays a ‘complex self-consciousness’ about writing itself through a dramatization of the linkages between textuality and spectrality” [Arnold: 11]. That, along with the theatricalization of the novels’ action, creates a fictional world where people (the dead and the living), as well as texts, are playing their parts.

Another key feature that is identified in one of the chapters of another monograph, *Hilary Mantel: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2018), is the memory techniques Mantel uses in *Wolf Hall*. Siobhan O’Connor suggests that Hilary Mantel uses Simonides and the collapsing hall together with the memory theatre of Giulio Camillo as metaphors and turns Cromwell into “the ‘wolf’ who can ‘chase the dead’ and ‘rewrite their lives’” [O’Connor: 27]. Memory and identity are closely intertwined and cannot exist independently of one another, and Mantel’s intense interest in

ghosts, the spectral and cultural memory mirrors society's distortion of identity, as "identity is always under threat, by the living in the form of oppressive relationships or an uncaring society, or from the dead and the weight of history" [Bavidge: 416].

In contrast to H. Mantel, another writer, Sarah Waters, has consistently written historical fiction, all of her novels dealing with a certain historical period in England's past. The first three novels – *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002) – are set in the Victorian era, while the last three – *The Night Watch* (2006), *The Little Stranger* (2009), *The Paying Guests* (2014) – focus on the First and Second World Wars and the interwar period. One might say the writer chose the epochs that the British are the most haunted by. S. Waters and H. Mantel have been compared before, namely in E. Peeren's *Spooky Mediums and the Redistribution of the Sensible: Sarah Waters's Affinity and Hilary Mantel's Beyond Black* [Peeren], but not in the way they approach the historical novel with the help of the spectral.

S. Waters's most conspicuous spectral novel is *Affinity*, in which one of the central characters is a medium. Selina Dawes is jailed for supposedly killing a lady during a séance. She is kept at the Millbank prison, which was a real prison designed by J. Bentham as a panopticon. Panopticon is a project that is based on the concept that all prisoners are observed by a single jail officer without them knowing whether or not they are being watched. The panopticon is thoroughly theorized

in M. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and Sarah Waters utilizes his theories in the novel. According to the French philosopher, the panopticon "functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men's behaviour; knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised" [Foucault: 204].

T. Kontou asserts that Waters uses the spectral metaphor of "apparitional women" to emphasize the invisibility of certain types of women [Kontou: 188–189]. For that purpose, British novelist uses the so-called "marginal", popular genres such as sensation fiction, prison narratives, and spiritualist memoirs "to create a kind of counter-history, the antithesis of the 'great lives' and 'great works' of men", and in this way creates "phantasmal matter" [Kontou: 172–175]. The writer makes use of such inferior "popular" genres to once again point to the subordinate unprivileged role of women's history as compared to men's history, and how women's works, the themes they raise and the plots they describe are often tarnished as trivial and insignificant. The result of such genre mixture is not another post-structuralist experiment but, according to O. Kohan, "an opportunity to fully reflect the manifold complex of emotional and social relations in the era she is studying, to move away from both simplified models and typical heroes of a popular crime novel, and from the historical fabrications of postmodernism" [Kохан: 147].

Dramatization of the ties between intertextuality, textuality and the spectral (as we've witnessed in Mantel's case) is also evident in Sarah Waters's novel *Affinity*: "*Affinity* is not only concerned with the close relationship between women and spirits but also with the intimate, sometimes hidden ties that connect different forms of texts and narratives, the links between Victorian and contemporary preoccupations about the recording of history and the articulation of female desire" [Kontou: 174]. The way Waters explores these relationships is through her specific treatment of space in the novel. J. de Groot recognizes ghosts, objects and spaces to be "central concerns for Waters' fiction" [de Groot: 66–67].

Pat Barker is another massively popular and critically acclaimed historical novelist who is often associated with the spectral. At first, she wrote novels on the struggles of English working-class women and was branded as a "feminist" writer. After the publications of *Union Street* (1982), *Blow Your House Down* (1984), *The Century's Daughter* (1986), P. Barker turned to writing historical novels about the First World War, so most of her protagonists there are men. The *Regeneration Trilogy* comprises the novels *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995). In the trilogy, the writer shows how the war is affecting British soldiers both physically and mentally and reveals the psychiatric practices used for their treatment.

Barker uses arguably the deepest trauma in European history that is "constitutive of the

nation's identity" [Knutsen 2005: 162], as the main theme of *The Regeneration Trilogy* – the First World War – is "one of the central subjects of British memory and cultural appreciation" [Moseley: 44]. With the help of the spectral, P. Barker "draws our attention to the "displaced temporality" of the First World War and its consequences for the way we experience life today" [Hubble: 154]. In K.P. Knutsen's dissertation, the term "reciprocal haunting" is applied to Barker's technique for examining spectrality within historical fiction. In the scholar's opinion, *The Regeneration Trilogy* "illustrates not only how the past returns to haunt the present, but also how the present reciprocally haunts perceptions of the past" [Knutsen 2010: 3]. P. Barker creates the haunting quality in her writings by employing a complex pattern of intertextuality. Here we see the parallels with how H. Mantel and S. Waters dramatize the links between textuality, intertextuality and the spectral. In relation to P. Barker, these tendencies are enhanced by the inclusion of the category of the traumatic, which has been relatively recently introduced into literary studies, and P. Barker's historical fiction is preoccupied with how "traumatic events become temporally dislocated" [Knutsen 2010: 11].

All the three British writers – H. Mantel, S. Waters, P. Barker – have already been analyzed in the spectral paradigm but they have never been put together, compared and studied as a literary phenomenon of historical fiction. All three authors started out as what the critics and the

reading audiences call “feminist” writers, yet, they later moved on to study the concept of masculinity and to find out how society has influenced men, for learning about women requires learning about men as well. Their decision to turn to the historical novel brought them even more success and recognition. Mantel, Waters and Barker have shared central themes in their novels. Psychology of men and women dominates in their narratives, they depict human consciousness and mental processes, which become their narrative strategy. Besides, British women-writers are interested in how class and gender play out in the life of every person. Their novels are further preoccupied with the treatment of the body and the problems of corporeality which the authors see as a politically charged question. Their use of haunting is politically charged too, highlighting women’s societal historical trauma, and their exploration of spectrality disrupts temporality and traditional historiography. Their representation of ghosts is ambiguous, as the authors never make it obvious whether the ghosts are real or not.

Women’s historical novel can become a great source material for developing the theory of intertextuality, focusing on “haunting as a concept that can elucidate the politics of intertextuality” [Boehm: 252]. Historical fiction dramatizes vulnerability and the traumatic with the help of the spectral [Ganteau], as there are many similarities between the manifestations of trauma and haunting. Yet these writers have their own peculiarities that make them stand out: H. Mantel inserts her

ghosts in the historical novels ironically or even casually; S. Waters emphatically points to class and social differentiations and spatial aspects of societal practices showing how they affect the recording and erasing of history; P. Barker, in her turn, pays thorough attention to the medical effects of psychological trauma.

The title of this article is, of course, ironic because as women are reclaiming history and their cultural identity, they are using the ghost metaphor, so, at the same time, these women writers are both surrendering and holding onto the ghost. The achievement of the new historical novel lies in the dialogization of history. Women’s historical fiction has the power to fill the cultural repositories with women’s history, the discourse about the historical contingency of femininity and masculinity. Regarding the works discussed, the functioning of the spectral in them creates a dissonance within the established literary genre and the cultural memory of Britain, thus, disrupting traditional methods of historiography. The historical novel opens up new meanings of history through that dialogization. Employing spectral elements in historical fiction also, in a way, pays tribute to the gothic roots of the genre. At the same time, realism as a literary method is broadening its capacities, allowing for more variety and inventiveness.

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ЖЕНЩИНЫ И ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ РОМАН: ПРИЗРАКИ НА СВОБОДЕ?

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Аннотация. Цель статьи – выявить основные изменения в жанре современного исторического романа, обратившись к его образцам, созданным женщинами-писательницами. Частотное использование мотивов призраков располагает к осмыслению проблемы сквозь призму так называемых *спектральных исследований*. Литературный канон жанра претерпевает значительные изменения за счет вплетения спектральных и готических элементов в ткань произведений, но при этом современные образцы жанра основываются на исторических фактах и придерживаются принципа правдоподобия повествования. Современные женские исторические романы используют метафору призрака, которая часто служит для того, чтобы переосмыслить место женщин в истории, что мы можем наблюдать в романах С. Уотерс, П. Баркер и, в особенности, Х. Мантел; их произведения исследуют темы призрачности, призраков и литературного наследия. В их романах спектральное создает диссонанс внутри исторического романа как литературного жанра, а также культурной памяти Британии, и, таким образом, исторический роман открывает новые смыслы в истории посредством диалогизации. Исторические романы отходят от постмодернистской парадигмы и исследуют новые возможности реализма позднего XX в. (внедрение фантастического в ткань литературного произведения, усиление уровня интеллектуализации произведений, использование большего количества литературных экспериментов с формой и повествованием и представление сознания персонажа с научной точностью). Это помогает создать многомерное, усложненное видение реальности, в котором спектральное становится инструментом для исследования индивидуальной, национальной, гендерной идентичности в новом ключе.

Ключевые слова: женская литература, исторический роман, призрак, спектральность, диалогизация, современный британский роман

