THE ART OF RESURRECTION: AFFECTIVITY AND AFTERLIVES IN HISTORICAL BIOFICTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which writers of biofiction manipulate the tools of narrative to generate fictional representations of real historical figures and broker an affective relationship between the reader and the protagonist of the text. Narratological perspectives offered by Dorrit Cohn and the methodology of cognitive poetics advanced by Peter Stockwell inform analysis of recent exemplars of the genre, including Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves* (2020), Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet: A Novel of the Plague* (2020), and Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light* (2019). Particular attention is paid to the authors' use of tense, structure, and narrative point of view as practical techniques for 'resurrecting' the dead. I argue that the felt response to the protagonist is part of the immersive experience of fiction generally but biofiction in particular, making the genre a powerful medium for shaping the afterlives of historical figures.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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KEYWORDS

Cognitive poetics—Biographical fiction—Historical fiction—Affectivity—Narratology—Resonance

> *For some people, being dead is only a relative condition; they wreak more than the living do. After the first rigour, they reshape themselves, taking on a flexibility in public discourse.*
>
> – Hilary Mantel, *The Princess Myth*

So claims novelist Hilary Mantel (2017, para 2) writing about Princess Diana on the twentieth anniversary of the British royal's death. These words have weight, not only because they shrewdly point to a public fascination with celebrity – Diana's various reincarnations as saint, goddess and rebel in popular culture illustrate her point – but, penned by the twice winner of the Man Booker Prize, they hint at another phenomenon: the influence of fiction, the power of transforming real lives into cultural products, the potential for afterlife through art. Of course, the ghosts Mantel alludes to are not material but aesthetic, modern reinventions of their namesakes crafted by writers skilled in the practical and imaginative job of resurrection. Such is the enterprise of biofiction, a genre which gives historical curios a heartbeat, taking the past out of the archive and locating it within an idiosyncratic human body. In doing so, these writers bend time, connecting readers with an irretrievable past, offering a subjective, sensory experience of history and an affective relationship with historical figures. Writers of historical biofiction trade in illusion, what is 'real' is spectral, 'the past in suspension [...] probable, but never the case' (de Groot 2015:21), an illusion steeped in research, an informed, immersive imaginary with the capacity to create a persisting emotional resonance beyond the text.

This paper looks at territory insufficiently explored and often unrecognised: the affective impact of historical biofiction and its reach beyond the text to contribute to the subject's afterlife. Drawing upon recent works in this genre, including Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves* (2020), Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet: A Novel of the Plague* (2020), and Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light* (2019), this paper demonstrates that the fictional approximations of known historical figures become 'real' when writers successfully represent the texture of lived experience.

Turning Real Lives into Realistic Characters

Biofiction, or biographical fiction, transforms real lives into realistic fictional characters. Novels in this genre 'take a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity' (Lodge, 2007, p. 8). Peter Stockwell's scholarship on cognitive poetics, in particular the literary processes for creating texture and resonance, alongside Dorrit Cohn's theories of narratology and consciousness,

prove useful frameworks for exploring the techniques used by writers to construct complex characters and, thereby, forge an emotional connection with readers.

Within the fields of narratology and cognitive poetics, it is widely understood that novels function on the principle of affective affinity: they cater to our obsession for interaction with other human beings and 'our predilection for spontaneous common-sense psychology' (Brosch, 2018, p. 58). Our chief concern, therefore, in reading fiction is the interior drama of characters' lives, and in portraying these inner lives the novelist is 'truly a fabricator' (Cohn, 1978, p. 6). Lisa Zunshine (2006) argues readers find pleasure in flexing their cognitive muscles through interpreting the emotions, desires and motivations of characters in narrative. She suggests that:

> Literature pervasively capitalises on and stimulates Theory of Mind mechanisms that had evolved to deal with real people, even as on some level readers do remain aware that fictive characters are not real people at all. (Zunshine, 2006, p. 10)

Readers use their empathetic imagination to inhabit the world of the text, knowing all the while it is constructed. While Zunshine's theory is predicated on an *intellectual* engagement with fictional texts, cognitive poetics has broadened this approach to mind-modelling, going beyond merely acknowledging consciousness to suggest that readers build rich and complex mental pictures of a character's mind and life, an experience which is both rational and *emotional*. Stockwell argues:

> By populating our minds with the projections of other people we are able to form relationships with them of different types, sometimes empathise or understand them, sometimes resist their worldview or identify with them in ways that make the fictional world they inhabit seem authentic or significant back in our reality. (Stockwell, 2020, p. 177)

Historical biofiction compounds this effect as the protagonists of such works are fictional approximations of people who existed in actuality. History tells us what they do, but what we crave is what they thought and felt. There is a pressure, a necessity, as Jay Parini (2016, p. 26) points out, for writers to imagine 'the complex mechanisms of the individual psyche as it copes with, processes, the world around it'. Substituting enigmatic aspects of identity with believable human psychology through focalisation and narrative point of view is the essence of the job.

Cognitive poetics draws on cognitive science, applying the insights of psychology and linguistics to bridge the division between 'artistic sensibility and scientific rationalism' (Stockwell, 2020, p. 71) and to explain the cognitive processes involved in reading. Stockwell (2020, p. 76) proposes that resonance, 'the affective power of an encounter with a piece of literature', is created through the manipulation of attention-resonance attractors such as agency,

empathy, proximity, and intensity. The aligned coordination of such features has powerful literary effects, whereby a character 'lingers in the mind a long time after the text has been folded away' (Stockwell, 2020, p. 70). The texture that Stockwell describes is also noted by historical fiction theorist Jerome de Groot who asserts that 'the historical novel can make the reader understand the bodily and create a kind of corporeal sympathy with the past' (de Groot, 2015, p. 56). It is this feeling of knowing the unknowable, of grasping the irretrievable, of defining the elusive that proves the challenge of the writer and the reward for the reader. It is a kind of magic, a spectral feat of reanimation whereby subjects come alive through narrativity.

Creating Affective Connections

This process of making historical figures 'real' is a symbiotic one; the novelist offers a convincing representation but relies on the emotional response of the reader to ultimately bring the subject to life. I argue that the felt response to the protagonist is part of the immersive experience of fiction generally, but biofiction in particular. The genre transforms our thinking by blending the fictional uncanny with the factually accurate. This complex relationship biofiction has with its subject is precisely the appeal and power of the genre. Regardless of motivation or authorial agenda, texts in this genre are united by their capacity to 'voice ghosts within the now, echoes and revenants' (de Groot, 2015, p. 21). It is an appeal to emotion in contrast to rationalism where novelists exploit empathy for deep emotional engagement. In fact, this desire to raise the dead, to be convinced of their humanity and materiality, exists alongside the reader's awareness of the impossibility of truly knowing them. This paradox is what de Groot (2015, p. 21) labels the 'peculiar doubleness of the genre' and Catherine Padmore aptly describes as:

> A sophisticated movement within readers (and perhaps writers) [...] where two contradictory or opposing views can be held – an awareness of the 'trick' of the genre and also a felt response, a sense of the story and characters coming to life within a reader, despite the impossibility. (2017, para 23)

There is a knottiness caused by the dance between real life and fiction that is intrinsic to the genre's appeal. Perhaps, in a post-truth world, readers hanker for the real, knowing all the while it is an illusion. Biofiction reflects this ambivalence: it relies on subjectivity while simultaneously testing epistemological limits of what it is possible to 'know' about the figures resurrected. While Clendinnen (2006, p. 22) correctly claims that writers cannot know the imaginations of historical figures because they use their own imaginations to conjure it, Layne (2020, p. 9) argues the genre's openness about such flexibility with the truth 'provides a kind of certainty in a sea of information pollution'. Max Saunders (2019, p. 92) concludes that in harnessing the subjectivity of fiction, biofiction has the 'quality of a thought

experiment', offering versions and possibilities instead of absolutes and certainties, thereby enabling readers the pleasure of contemplating the 'what if?' of history and human agency. In chasing the dead, therefore, we substitute knowledge (slippery and perhaps inaccessible) with a narrative which imbues solidity and cohesion.

While character may be our most intrinsic reason for reading novels (Zunshine 2006, p. 17), the characters of biofiction are not only figments of the author's imagination; they have cultural currency in a world that recognises their exploits and achievements as significant. As Cora Kaplan (2007, p. 65) explains, 'the "bio" in biofiction also references a more essentialised and embodied element of identity, a subject less than transcendental but more than merely discourse'. Thus, their legacy persists in both the long-term, material consequences of their actions and the subjective ways in which they are remembered. The latter is not fixed, but flexible and, as a result, historical figures become mobile signifiers, part of a chain of representation. As Marie-Luise Kohlke (2013, p. 5) posits, biofictional subjects 'partake of an uneasy liminal existence, an inter-subjective half-life between self and other, fact and fiction, embodiment and textualisation'. Creatively representing historical figures is to trade on their reputations, playing with common perceptions and offering new insights. Writers make such figures appear real and vital to readers in the present by fostering an affective relationship between subject and reader, ultimately influencing public perception of that figure.

According to Stockwell (2020, p. 184), for a reader to form an emotional connection with a fictional character, an attentional thread must be created across the 'ontological boundary between reality and text-world'. In this case, 'text-world' is the mental space in which readers represent the story (Gavins, 2007, p. 2). Readers must disregard their own situation, or temporality, to run the psychological labyrinth belonging to richly imagined and complex characters. Historical biofiction readily crosses the boundary between reality and text-world because it occupies the liminal space between biographical truth and imagination. The subject of its creative endeavour is both a figure from the past – familiar to us and predicated on composite knowledge from different sources – and a construction in the narrative. De Groot (2015, p. 22) too registers this embodied engagement with fiction, describing the brokering of binaries as a historical 'sensibility', the 'reconciling of sense/intellect, physical/rational, emotion/thought'.

In the following examples, the novelists' manipulation of focalisation, structure and tense resurrect the subject-protagonist as an experiencing mind and a sensing and feeling body. The result is a weakening of temporal boundaries, as the interaction between the text and the experiencing consciousness of the reader disrupts the 'now', lending such works a persisting power beyond their endings.

Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves*

Kate Grenville, in her research for *A Room Made of Leaves*, found the real Elizabeth Macarthur's correspondence fertile ground for character construction, but less for what was written there and more for what was omitted. The letters mask a reality of deprivation and violence in colonial New South Wales with genteel civility, falsified accounts that are lifeless and impersonal. Yet one line, according to Grenville, where Macarthur purports to have blushed at her error in assuming herself capable of astronomy lessons with Lieutenant William Dawes 'blazed off the page with an erotic charge' (Nicholls, 2020). It became the key to fashioning the 'real' Elizabeth from the primary documents in opposition to the 'bloodless, stiff little figures we see in photographs' (McCullagh, 2020), and the inspiration for first person point of view.

Through narrative point of view, readers cast their minds toward the focaliser and model his, or her, thoughts and feelings, a process capable of both stimulating the intellect and rousing empathy. Grenville, in an act of literary ventriloquism reminiscent of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001), challenges received historical knowledge, framing her narrative as a recently unearthed journal belonging to Elizabeth Macarthur – wife to John Macarthur, the founder of the Australian wool industry – and written in her old age. Grenville, in an artful nod to postmodern metafiction, claims to merely transcribe the recovered documents and, while Elizabeth possesses a greater alacrity with punctuation than Carey's police-murdering, bank-robbing counterpart, she too is revealed as a master storyteller, adept at spinning fictions. First person narration serves to undermine official records, such as the Macarthurs' letters extensively combed over by historians, to reveal an ingenious, resilient, sometimes duplicitous woman who makes the best of her lot while shackled to an egomaniacal husband. First person narration also renders the reader Elizabeth's confidante, privy to the 'true' story of Australia's early settlers. There is something rebellious in the voice Grenville constructs for Elizabeth: a willingness to question the esteemed reputation of John Macarthur, a desire to expose the myths of peaceful settlement in Australia and a longing to subvert cultural myths of masculine achievement in favour of feminine perseverance. Though readers will question the narrator's reliability – 'Do not believe too quickly!' (Grenville, 2020, p. 9), we are warned from the outset – Grenville's choice of narration forges a direct bond between the narrator and the reader. Implicit in the epistolary approach is an awareness of, and a reaching out towards, a future audience and, consequently, a desire to shape identity posthumously. In effect, the Elizabeth Macarthur of the novel mirrors what Grenville self-reflexively achieves as a writer of biofiction, highlighting the volatility of materials and the complexities of representation.

Fiction, Grenville demonstrates, shapes readers' experience of reality as much as the truth does. Elizabeth Macarthur of *A Room Made of Leaves* is not the Elizabeth Macarthur of 1790. So it must be, for, 'The individual maintains some

hold on an afterlife by the sacrifice of subject-hood' (Dillane, 2020, p. 3). She is but one possible iteration, and there may be as many versions as there are writers inclined to reinvent her. The fictional representation Grenville constructs will travel into the future so long as there are readers to indulge it. Imagination, after all, is the only place the dead can live.

Interestingly, metafictional interjections and past tense do not break the sense of immersion in Grenville's novel. It could be that Elizabeth Macarthur is so authentically drawn, that Grenville's choice of narration captures the aesthetic texture of emotional experience. If so, then Grenville achieves what Stockwell (2020, p. 183) terms 'impersonation': the point at which readers judge a character to have reached the threshold for personhood. Consequently, readers are willing to suspend their disbelief. The self-narration of the protagonist does create an analytic distance, separating her follies of youth from her present wisdom, but it does so with high pathos. The narrator, with her rhetorical flourishes and ironic commentary, becomes endearing and identifiable to modern readers. It is an attachment that ends with the close of the book, but it is an experience that cannot be 'undone', complicating the Macarthurs' legacy.

Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet: A Novel of the Plague*

In *Hamnet*, O'Farrell takes a different approach, employing omniscient narration with dual, alternating storylines, rather than a self-consciously subjective first-person narration. Focalisation shifts from Hamnet, the son of playwright William Shakespeare, to his mother, Agnes, and, in one chapter, even a flea which carries the Bubonic plague from Venice to London. Conspicuously, the bard is never mentioned by name. He is the Latin tutor, the husband, the playwright, but never William Shakespeare. For this is not his story, but that of his wife, Anne Hathaway.

O'Farrell employs present tense in *Hamnet*, telling dual stories in alternating chapters. As such, the 'now' of the text shifts between two timeframes. The first plot, following young Hamnet and his death from the plague, burns slowly, savouring the boy's short life and reflecting the agonising experience of grief. The second plot follows the courtship of William and Agnes, Hamnet's parents, galloping at pace with their passion. Structurally, these plots merge at the climax of the narrative – the boy's death – so that love and pain become one, the latter the price paid for the former, summoning a strong emotional response from the reader.

In its depiction of Hamnet, the narration highlights the boy's vitality. Attention to the minutia of his actions, delivered through a kaleidoscope of verbs, renders him authentic: the scraping of his knee on the flagstones, the curling of his fingers over his sister's hand, trotting along the street, dodging horses, or thudding, thundering and shouting for a physician. Agency, delivered through such prose, is an essential ingredient for both focusing reader attention and

enhancing resonance. Stockwell (2020, p. 178) suggests 'characters become more rounded when the reader is presented with a wealth of 'bottom up' textual detail' and O'Farell's sensory detail is certainly rich and evocative. There is the noise of 'barrows, horses, vendors, people calling to each other' alongside a mix of 'woodsmoke, polish, leather, wool' (O'Farrell, 2020, p. 4), such that Hamnet's lively character resides within an equally bustling text world. The overall effect of such narratorial description is experiential: readers empathise with the boy, participating in Hamnet's shock at being struck by his grandfather, his desperation to find an adult to attend his ill sister and, finally, the tenderness with which he assumes his twin's fatal fever. Such groundwork prepares readers for the grief Agnes, his mother, experiences upon Hamnet's death. 'Her unconscious mind casts, again and again, puzzled by the lack of bite, by the answer she keeps giving it: He is dead, he is gone' (O'Farrell, 2020, p. 260). It is textual but it feels real, embodied emotion. Such visceral grief moves readers who may themselves shed real tears. Emotion, Stockwell (2020, p. 183) reminds us, is a physical response and, whether evoked by a fictional world or the one in which we live, it is never artifice.

As a result, we may now think differently about the play, *Hamlet* – its origins, its influences – because Shakespeare's wife and children are so convincingly resurrected. Anne Hathaway can no longer remain the wispy, pale-faced widow pictured in encyclopaedic references. Having partaken in the affective experience of the novel, she has become for readers something more expansive: a social misfit, a healer, a passionate wife, a devoted mother, a woman attuned to nature and folklore. And though we know it to be a fiction, that representation satisfies the mind in ways that shall be remembered.

Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light*

In *The Mirror and the Light*, Hilary Mantel employs limited third person narration with frequent interior monologue. Readers hover, close to the action, with clairvoyant access to Thomas Cromwell's mind; our understanding of events and characters is filtered through his perception. It is a technique one scholar describes as creating 'an engulfing illusion of proximity to the focalizer' (Brosch, 2018, p. 63), and proximity, Stockwell (2020, p. 79) concedes, is one of the 'attention-resonance attractors' that render a literary experience powerful. Even Henry, Cromwell's master and monarch, anointed by God himself, does not have access to the mysteries enjoyed by the reader. 'The king has great power,' Princess Mary explains to Cromwell, 'but he has no power to know me, except through what I say and what I do' (Mantel, 2020, p. 472). The narration, of course, renders Cromwell's inner world visible to readers, demonstrating Cohn's assertion that 'the most real, the 'roundest' characters of fiction are those we know most intimately, precisely in ways we could never know people in real life' (Cohn, 1978, p. 5). As the novel reaches toward Cromwell's execution in the close, we travel further back into the recesses of his

memory to the burning of heretics he witnessed as a child, a scene so profound and insistent he can no longer repress it. 'He saw people's backs but he smelled human flesh. You had to breathe it in, till the wind changed' (Mantel, 2020, p. 557). It is transformative, a coming-of-age experience that renders him fearless. 'Nothing protects you, nothing. In the last ditch, not rank, nor kin. Nothing between you and the fire' (560). This strategy of psycho-narration enables Mantel to exhibit dimensions of Cromwell's character that the latter would be unwilling to reveal, granting readers access to subliminal zones of the mind. It is a narratological tool that Cohn (1978, p. 34) suggests has 'unlimited temporal flexibility', expanding and elaborating a mental instant. The result, for the reader, is an overwhelming sense of density (the texture of Cromwell's mind) and intensity (the political and religious dynamics that press upon him) that foster an affective connection.

Writing in present tense to narrate the past may sound counterintuitive. The past has gone, has happened, and readers, after all, have the benefit of posterity, possessing greater knowledge than those characters who people works of historical fiction. In her lecture for the BBC, 'Can these bones live?' Mantel (2017) suggests the reader is a 'small, conflicted god or a disbelieved prophet' occupying two time planes at once. Yet, far from diminishing narrative enjoyment, present tense offers the advantage of immediacy, of placing the reader in the historical moment to experience events unfolding as the protagonist does – vividly and for the first time, not as though the ending were pre-determined or inevitable. Dramatic irony functions here; educated readers are cognisant of Cromwell's future, but in the present he knows only his past. Present tense is a technique, Renate Brosch (2018, p. 65) suggests, that disturbs the experience of continuity by excluding 'a greater temporal reference'. With this tactic, the bond between reader and focaliser is strengthened; the feeling of possibility, the belief that paths other than those taken are within reach, is shared and affectively experienced.

In *The Mirror and the Light*, Mantel hurtles through the years 1536-1540, sketching Thomas Cromwell at the peak, and then fall, of his career. As in the preceding novels of the trilogy, readers trail behind Cromwell like his shadow, experiencing the machinations of the Tudor court in present tense. The novel opens, abruptly, with Anne Boleyn's severed head on the scaffold and Cromwell wondering whether he might have a second breakfast. His nonchalance, though fascinating, does not bode well, reminding readers that the close of the narrative will see Cromwell's decapitated form slumped in the late Queen's place. Despite this incontrovertible truth, readers willingly enter both the realm of Henry VIII and the consciousness of Thomas Cromwell. It is a rollercoaster ride, and not for the faint-hearted – it will be terrifying, but the bodily thrill of the experience is irresistible. Present tense is beguiling, amplifying the aura of danger at the centre of power and the sense of impending treachery. Moments of relief are delivered in dream sequences, or hallucinations borne of fever, where Cromwell's psyche processes the conversations, the manoeuvrings, and the theatrics of court life, sometimes replayed as they happened and other times in

grotesque symbolic form, haunted as he is by his part in Anne's execution. Reflections on his beginnings as a blacksmith's son also take readers backwards, highlighting his vulnerability in a society obsessed with class. Such digressions, Stockwell (2020, p. 184) argues, where we see protagonists in flashback or future speculation, involve multiple crossings of temporal boundaries, evoking a complex character of varying dimensions with which the reader can form a close emotional connection. These nested worlds aside, present tense affords readers no safe place to stand still and judge, further blurring the boundary between reality and text-world. Readers must come to know Cromwell in the very moments that shape him, making his representation so powerfully affective.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Macarthur, Anne Hathaway, and Thomas Cromwell lived lives verified by biographical evidence. But such knowledge does not make them feel real. Only fiction, with its capacity for emotional connection, can invest such individuals with dimensionality. Fictional representations offered by novelists are internalised by readers who, by extension, are complicit in shaping the afterlife of historical figures. As Fionnuala Dillane (2020, p. 2) sagely puts it, 'A person has no afterlife but their works have aftereffects, and different cultures shape the afterlives they need for their particular historical moment'. Stories of historical figures appeal to the imaginations of writers and readers, inviting continual redeployment in ever-changing contexts. The immersive quality of narrative means texts have influence, impact and reach, and historical biofiction, with its evocation of haunting revenants that press upon the present, is a particularly powerful medium.

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