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Singing from the shadows: historical fiction as fiction of ‘anti-progress’

Abstract:

On the eerie browned-out streets of wartime Melbourne, a young female journalist stands ready to tell the story of a serial killer who killed women to capture their voices. It is May 1942: Melbourne is torn between fearing Japanese invasion, and revelling in the carnivalesque atmosphere its American visitors have brought. This journalist is not someone we would recognise today, but she did exist. This paper discusses how historical fiction accesses the stories history has left behind. It challenges the view, set out by Georg Lukacs in his seminal book, *The Historical Novel*, that the historical novel, such as those written by Sir Walter Scott, is a novel of progress and of the ‘pre-history of the present’. It argues that historical novels written now, many of them postcolonial and/or feminist, are novels of ‘anti-progress’: while not opposing progress per se, they seek to recapture what progress has forgotten, to hark back to a lost world, or to remind us of how little things have actually changed. These novels seek to reclaim the tag of nostalgia that has been used to dismiss the genre, and to celebrate what it can do. To support this argument, I will use examples from recent Australian historical novels, *Skin* by Ilka Tampke and *Salt Creek* by Lucy Treloar. I will also use examples from my own work in progress, a novel that seeks to tell the story of the female journalist in wartime Melbourne. I will focus on novels by women, specifically Australian women, in order to connect back to the gothic historical fiction that women were writing well before Sir Walter Scott purportedly invented the historical novel.

Biographical note:

Gabrielle Ryan is undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at Deakin University. Her project considers progress and the role of nostalgia in historical fiction, and she will write an historical gothic crime novel set in Melbourne in 1942 as the creative component of her thesis. Gabrielle completed her Master of Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing at The University of Melbourne in 2014. She also has a Postgraduate Diploma and a Graduate Certificate in English Literature from The University of Melbourne and a Bachelor of Arts from Monash University.

Keywords:

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It is widely accepted that the western historical novel began with the first of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels in 1814 (de Matos), even though many critics over the past few decades have demonstrated that there was a large body of historical fiction before Scott (Wallace 2013: 7). In fact, Diana Wallace argues that this is a myth that has proven very hard to shift (2013: 8). Wallace's work focuses on women's historical fiction and its relationship with gothic fiction, mapping out an alternate, marginalised history of historical fiction. Wallace looks at the linear history of progress that is celebrated in the work of Scott and his (male) contemporaries and followers, and demonstrates that women's time is more cyclical than linear. In this paper I will explore Wallace's work and argue that while male authors of classical historical novels stride forward in a straight and certain line, and women wander around in circles where the past always repeats itself and haunts the present, that one important thing historical fiction can do is go into the past and stand still. That the historical novels I will discuss are novels of anti-progress – not opposed to progress per se, but lamenting what progress leaves behind or tramples over in its quest to surge forward. That perhaps historical fiction can reclaim the tag of nostalgia that has been used often to dismiss the genre, and to celebrate it as an important thing that historical fiction can do. To demonstrate this, I will consider two 2015 novels by Australian women writers, *Salt Creek* by Lucy Treloar and *Skin* by Ilka Tampke, as well as my own historical novel in progress.

Sir Walter Scott's novels focused on social conflict and the progress that followed (Wallace 2003: 78), something that became a defining characteristic of the historical novel (Price 2012: 262), or at least the historical novel that was recognised by critics. Marxist literary critic Georg Lukacs, in his seminal 1937 work *The Historical Novel* (translated into English 1962), argued that the timing of the first historical novels, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was important, because this was the 'point at which it became possible for writers to see history as the pre-history of the present' (in Wallace 2003: 78). Richard Maxwell argues that 'Scott's achievement as historical novelist is to demonstrate how men change the present into the past, manufacturing history itself (Price 2012: 260). *Waverley* became emblematic of the historical novel, and all other historical novels were judged by its standard (Wallace 2013: 7). Wallace argues that many of the novels that fell short of achieving the standard set by *Waverley* were by women (2013: 8), and that they fell short partly because their supernatural or fantastical elements did not measure up to the new standard of realism required. Jerome de Groot, while acknowledging that Scott's novels had predecessors, says that this Gothic fiction with its supernatural elements produces 'a nightmarish type of historical novel' (16). He goes on to say that 'the incipient historical novel, after the example of Scott, became a rational, realist form, shifting away from the excesses of the Gothic to emphasise process, progress and transcendent human values' (16). These novels of progress are often called 'classical historical novels' (Wallace 2003: 78), which differentiates them from the subversive modern European historical novels that this paper will discuss.

To accept that the historical novel was invented by, or began with, Sir Walter Scott, is to neglect an alternative history of the historical novel, dating back to before *Waverley* was published. Critics such as Georg Lukacs and George Saintsbury have

acknowledged that Scott had predecessors but did not consider them worthy of attention (Stevens 2010: 6). One reason for this lack of acknowledgement may be that many of these predecessors were women. In fact, Lukacs discusses no texts by women (Wallace 2003: 78), despite the fact that, as Ina Ferris claims, many of Scott's works drew upon 'generic innovations already established by women writers at least a decade before *Waverley* appeared' (Spongberg in Mitchell & Parsons: 58). The historical novel before Scott was considered a female form, but was 'remasculinised' by Scott, which, in turn, raised the status of the genre to one that became central to Victorian culture (Irvine 1999: 228). It is no coincidence that this 'remasculinising' of the novel was happening at the same time that history was being professionalised as a scholarly discipline by men who were usurping the ground from amateur women historians, whose work was cast as 'superficial and trivial' (Wallace 2013: 9). Leslie Fiedler called Scott's historical fiction 'the creation of a self-conscious attempt to redeem fiction at once for respectability and masculinity' (Wallace 2003: 78), a genre that rescued 'the novel from feminisation and sentimentality' by introducing 'real history' (Wallace 2003: 78).

This 'real history' refers to the social conflict and progress that Scott foregrounded in his novels, rather than the domestic, family history that was the domain of women. 'Real history' is 'what we normally think of as history – the 'public' and 'masculine' sphere of politics and war (Wallace 2005: 153). As Mary Spongberg argues, women during the eighteenth century were restricted to family history and used this domestic history to explore their own pasts (in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 53). The focus shifted from the public, masculine sphere to the private sphere where women had power (Wallace 2005: 153). One proponent of this was Jane Austen, whose novels *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* contained critiques of 'real history'. Spongberg discusses this:

Set during the period of 'false peace' between April 1814 and March 1815, with its focus on the impact of war on the home front, rather than the heroics of battle-scarred men, *Persuasion* presents a tone distinctly different from the euphoric patriotism of writers such as Walter Scott set during the same period. By domesticating history here, Austen clearly articulates a sense that women and men experience the past in very different ways (in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 66).

One way in which Austen, and other female writers in the 18th and 19th century, incorporated critiques into her novels was through the use of gothic tropes and symbolism. Smith and Wallace argue that the gothic is a vehicle through which accepted versions of reality can be challenged (6). The gothic novelists were, in this way, subversive in a way that the classical historical novelists were not. While Walter Scott did merge history with fiction, he did not, according to Ina Ferris, attempt to 'challenge, displace or otherwise distort history with his fiction' (Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 3). He posited the progression of history as inevitable (Price 2012: 262), not allowing his protagonists the opportunity to make choices that would change or challenge history. Women writers turned to the gothic because they felt themselves excluded from traditional historiographies (Wallace in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 137), and they used this to undermine the notion that the reality with which they were presented was inevitable, that this is the only story to tell and the only way it could

have unfolded. These women speaking from the margins of society tie history to the gothic by creating a spectral voice that was ignored by traditional accounts of history. Julian Wolfey has characterised these voices speaking from the outside as ‘a kind of ghost-writing’ (in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 155).

Critics have argued that these gothic novels were, in fact, predecessors of the historical novel (Stevens 2010; Wallace 2015). As Robert Irvine says, Walter Scott himself used the romance structure of historical fiction that was available because of earlier work by gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe (1999: 226). However, Scott transformed the genre and brought a new form of realism to it (Irvine 1999: 223; White 2005: 150). This new realism, characterised by an absence of supernatural elements, was what enabled critics such as Lukacs to dismiss the gothic writing dominated by women writers in favour of the realist historical novels (Wallace in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 137). When Walter Scott wandered too close to gothic tropes, as he did in his novel *The Black Dwarf*, the writing was considered a failure by critics ‘because none of the characters possess any historical reality... the result is a Gothic fairy-tale, of drastically limited seriousness’ (Irvine 1999: 230). Scott’s realist novels were praised by critics, and it was in this way that he took the place of the female authors who preceded him (229). Critics such as Lukacs, championing Scott, cast the historical novel as a realist genre (in Davis 2014: 3).

But whose reality did this genre reflect? Gerda Lerner sees that the classical historical realist novel reflected male history, which was the ‘systematic story of progress, the methodical building of thesis, antithesis and synthesis’ (Wallace 2005: 17); Lukacs’s ‘history as the bearer and realiser of human progress’ (Wallace 2005: 11). This paints the journey between the past and the present as a linear one. Lerner goes on to argue that she sees women’s history as ‘spasmodic, uneven and often repetitive’ (Wallace 2005: 17). The very fantastic or supernatural elements that were rejected by critics such as Lukacs were important to women writers, as they allowed women to undermine the ‘realism’ that was being presented to them by novels such as Scott’s (Wallace 2005: 33). Wallace uses Julia Kristeva’s notion of women’s time to demonstrate how men’s linear time is different from women’s cyclical time (2005: 135), and how for women this means that history is repetitive rather than progressive.

The cyclical historical novel undermines the idea that history is past and completed. It ‘calls upon readers to read the past through the present and the present through the past’ (Koolen 2010: 374). It creates temporal distances between the time of the readers and the time of the characters, in the hope that this will make social criticism more likely to be taken seriously (Koolen 2010: 372), yet at the same time it ‘presents the past not as a distanced object, but as a fluid process made by people conceptually proximate to ourselves’ (Dalley in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 47). It gives us enough distance to be able to look at ourselves more closely. Historical novels can be political tools, and can offer a critique of the present through looking at our treatment of the past (Wallace 2005: 2). Postcolonial historical novels as well as feminist and queer historical novels do this – they seek to recover lost voices and stories, and to highlight the stories of the defeated and the marginalised – to set the record straight (Robinson 2011: 49).

In filling silences and setting the record straight, historical fiction has, at its heart, a desire to resurrect ghosts of the past, where the past, a continuous, spectral presence, returns to make sense of the present (Davis 2013: 35). In reading the past and the present through each other, relations between them take the form of a ‘haunting’ where the distinctions between them are blurred (Mee in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 175). The new historicist Stephen Blatt declared ‘I began with the desire to speak with the dead’ (Robinson 2011: 7). This idea of speaking with the dead is an important one – it collapses the distinction between past and present, and it foregrounds the exchange of ideas between them, conceptualising this exchange as a dialogue. For Amy J Elias, we continue to return to the past to seek ‘creative openness’ rather than closure, to return with the ‘creative living utterance that we need for *self*-formation’ (2005: 169, italics in original). For Elias, it is a desire for an impossible dialogue:

History is not a person; it is not a place; it is not even a text except in its traces. There is nothing with which to have a dialogue if one wishes to have a dialogue with history. Yet we strive to have a dialogue with history, perhaps because we perceive it to be not a thing or a sterile collection of written texts but rather a cacophony of voices of living beings who preceded us in time (168).

Gothic fiction, with its ghosts, forgotten figures, and supernatural elements, is a way of making that dialogue possible.

Thus, there are a number of ways in which the modern European historical novel displays its inherent gothic undertones: through filling silences and resurrecting ghosts, in challenging notions of linear time, in blurring boundaries between the real and the not-real, and in emphasising the interpretive and incomplete nature of history. Diana Wallace draws the parallel between the gothic and the metafictional:

Early Gothic historical novels are the unacknowledged forerunners of the historiographic metafiction of the late twentieth century, in that they lay bare the textuality and the subjective nature of history ... in traditional historiography the past is represented as static, completed and knowable; in the Gothic it does not stay dead, it returns, it haunts the reader (in Mitchell & Parsons 2013: 137).

This aspect of repetitiveness, of haunting, of returning, may be one of the reasons the women’s historical novel has often been dismissed as ‘nostalgic’, and therefore as ‘escapist’ and unworthy (Wallace 2013: 227). And yet something like nostalgia is an important part of what historical fiction can do. We have seen how historical fiction can unearth stories and voices of the past to cast light on our present, or to undermine how history is perceived and destabilise the ‘reality’ with which we have been presented. And yet something like nostalgia is an important part of what historical fiction can do. It can be a lament for the important stories that were never told, the important perspectives that were ignored. It can try to recover these stories and voices. And yet there are things that can never be recovered – things that progress has trampled over and obliterated. Historical fiction can bear witness to, and grieve for, these things. I call these novels of anti-progress, but perhaps nostalgia is a better word, and what I am actually trying to do is reclaim the nostalgia in women’s historical fiction as a positive thing rather than a reason to dismiss. While these novels aren’t against progress, they do lament the aggressive, single-minded way progress

was brought about, with scant regard for what was there before. This anti-progress is nostalgic, but it is not escapist: it still has important lessons for modern day readers. And while Walter Scott rides forth on his horse of progress, the modern historical novelists hang back and say ‘what about this?’

My PhD will consider two novels published in Australia by women in 2015 that are particularly effective at asking that question. The first is Ilka Tampke’s *Skin*, a novel set in Southwest Britain in 43 AD. The female protagonist, Ailia, is born without skin, meaning that she does not know her family and therefore her totem animal. She is forbidden to participate in ceremonies, to marry, to learn. But she is defiant, and embarks on her own spiritual journey of knowledge. Through this, she comes to know the traditions and beliefs of her people and, despite skinlessness, to find a place of power within them. Tampke’s novel has been described as historical fantasy, relying as it does on ancient rituals, other worlds, shape shifting and visions. These supernatural elements threaten to undermine the realism but many of them are based on the extensive research Tampke did into the spirituality of the Druidic people. The power of the nostalgia in this novel is strong. The Roman invaders symbolise progress, and it is interesting here because we, as modern readers who are ‘beneficiaries’ of the kind of bloodthirsty progress wrought by the Romans, are barracking for Ailia. We, having been with Ailia through the entire novel, are firmly on her side. Before the invasion, she pleads with her lover, the warrior Ruther, to join with her to fight against the Romans, but he has betrayed the teachings of the Mothers, and now stands firmly with Rome. He says to her ‘if we fight, we are fighting to remain in the darkness’ (Tampke 2015: 314) and goes on to say ‘there is new freedom in what Rome will bring ... in the cities I see the vision of men set free ...’ and her response is ‘And what of the Mothers? Where are they to exist in these cities of men? Do you put your own creation above that of the Mothers?’ She stands firm against him. She believes so steadfastly in the ways of her people that she blesses the battle even though she has not foreseen its outcome as they believe she has. As readers, we know that the people of her village cannot win against the might of the Romans. As modern people with historical knowledge, we know that they *did* not win. And yet we can’t help but be caught up in what Ailia so fervently believes, and we want her to be right. We willingly jump to the losing side in support of her. She tells her people ‘our fighters are fewer in number than Rome’s but we hold one incontestable weapon... that weapon is truth’ (Tampke 2015: 320).

By the time Ailia does see the outcome of the battle, it is too late for her to save her people. She walks through the aftermath of the massacre and witnesses the last moments of the life of a respected journeyman. She cries ‘Do you know this man you have killed? Do you know his greatness? Do you know what you have destroyed?’ and she reflects on these Roman soldiers who have camped in the Mothers’ place and washed their knives in the sacred river. She holds tight onto the old ways, and we lament with her, because we have come to know and understand these people who are dead at her feet. We are sad to see them, their way of life and their beliefs gone. We stop and grieve with her as the marauding Romans ride on their way towards progress: these agents of progress are the ‘baddies’ rather than the heroes in this novel. Tampke uses inspiration from Australian Aboriginal totemic spirituality to

inform the ‘lessons’ that begin each chapter (Tampke 2015: 356), perhaps to link the lost Druid world of her novel to the lost world of the first people of Australia.

The second novel, Lucy Treloar’s *Salt Creek*, is set in South Australia in the 19th century, and is firmly focused on the lost world of Australian Aboriginal people. Treloar herself says ‘The traditional custodians of the land, the Ngarrindjeri, inhabited this once almost unimaginably rich region with great sensitivity for millennia... in some ways *Salt Creek* is a lament for that lost world’ (Treloar 2015: 403). *Salt Creek* is the story of Hester Finch and her family who move to the Coorong in South Australia and attempt to tame the land and its people. The family befriends a young Aboriginal boy named Tully. There are some profound moments of misunderstanding between Tully and the Finch family, which Hester reflects upon, sometimes with admiration, sometimes with confusion. These are moments that show the power and beauty of the culture that the well-meaning Finches, through their ignorance, crush underfoot. Hester reflects:

That winter I began to notice how differently he saw almost everything compared to us. Mama might say that the colours of winter reminded her of the highlands of Scotland, and I might say that the sky was sapphire or that the washing lines were like cobwebs on a cold morning. Hearing these things perplexed him, as did so much else – the encumbrances of our clothing, our impractical hair, our heavy boots, the fences we built – which he made apparent by his stillness or his incredulity and in other ways that I do not recall.

One day he asked why we had so few stories to tell and so few songs.

‘We have bible stories,’ I said. ‘And novels. Of course we have stories and songs.’

‘Books. You don’t speak them. Or sing them. Our stories are different.’

‘Tell me some of your stories then,’ I said, but he would not (Treloar 2015: 94).

Later, she reflects:

Seeing that I had some time he asked me again about heaven and hell, sin, the Fall, the vastness of the world and its shape. ‘Is it about the white people?’

‘All people – about the beginning of everything.’

‘We have stories too, about the beginning of this land.’

‘Like the one you told Fred? The man chasing his wives?’ I asked

Tull nodded. ‘Is your story true?’

‘Most people think it is, that it happened this way,’ I said. ‘But Papa believes it is a story that shows us how we all, people, became what we are, sinners who do wrong, that is, that they were tempted and chose their fate.’ Tull still appeared confused and I did not know how to make temptation and the Fall clearer to one who had never even heard of God. ‘Is your story true?’ I asked.

‘What is true?’ Tull gave me one of his steady looks and moved his face by infinitesimal degrees, and how could I know what that meant? (Treloar 2015: 95).

Salt Creek, though, is about bungled progress – what happens when the people acting in the name of progress get it wrong, and what they destroy along the way. The Finches not only destroy the land they are on, and the people who once tended it, but their own family is torn apart. *Salt Creek* shows a path towards an apparent progress that doesn't look much like progress at all.

Another way to look at a novel of anti-progress is to go back to a time in the past, a time considered less enlightened than we are now, and show how little progress we have actually made. For the creative component of my PhD I will write an historical gothic detective novel set in Melbourne in 1942. It has a female protagonist who is based loosely on a real person, a gothic (but real) setting, and it resonates strongly with the present-day conversation about violence against women. Through the eyes of a young female journalist, it tells the true story of American serial killer Eddie Leonski, who killed three women in Melbourne in May 1942. The journalist, whom I have named Alice Jenkins, is based on the real journalist Patricia (Pat) Jarrett who covered the trials of Leonski, an opportunity she was only given because there were no male journalists around. Ms Jarrett became a successful editor of the Herald and Weekly Times' women's pages, broadening the scope of what they covered (Tate). Having this character as my protagonist allows me to interrogate what life was like for women at this time – a time when many of them were experiencing unprecedented freedom, both economically through earning their own money, and sexually, often with the visiting American soldiers. The story of Leonski, dubbed the 'brownout strangler' or the 'singing strangler' is symbolic because he confessed that he killed the women 'to get their voices' – this immediately conjures up connections with the marginalised, the silenced, and the ghostly. Leonski killed these women to get their voices. I write to do the same.

Melbourne in 1942 was very much a gothic landscape. There was a brownout in force – a less strict version of a blackout – to reduce the likelihood of a Japanese invasion. Many of the young men had left the city to go to war, and in their place were these unfamiliar but alluring American soldiers. In the darkness of the city, things were not quite as they appeared. On the first night Alice is home from a diplomatic post in Washington, she finds the brownout ritual a strange one:

She noticed that the world beyond the windows was now cast in shadow, the streetlights turned off or hooded. It was eerie, so unlike the welcoming neighbourhood she knew. Sylvie rose and switched off the ceiling lights. She turned then and almost ceremoniously began drawing black curtains across the windows. Alice hadn't noticed these curtains before, and she wondered where the original white drapes had gone. The flames from the open fireplace in the corner flickered and danced, projecting restless light and shadow onto the surfaces of the room in ever-changing patterns. Sylvie's slow and deliberate actions looked to Alice like just one more way of shutting out the world outside. The room seemed to grow darker with each window she shrouded, even though there was no light coming from outside to keep it illuminated. Sylvie looked strange in the half light, transformed; her pregnant belly gave her an unfamiliar shape. She reached over their mother's head to switch on the pedestal lamp behind the couch. The lamplight painted the room with dull, understated light, stealing some of the fire's glory as it diminished the shadows. The

fire crackled in protest. Sylvie, her nightly brown-out ritual complete, lowered herself into the cushions on one side of the couch, leaving the other side for Alice.

The city is strange, and yet not so strange as to be unrecognisable. Alice describes the changes as ‘just tiny changes, changes that did not quite alter the fabric of society, but rather ever so slightly picked at its stitching’. As the novel continues, Alice’s vision and perspective becomes increasingly less stable, and she is haunted by ghosts, missed opportunities and the quest for justice.

The women who were killed by Leonski symbolised the modern woman of the 1940s. She was a woman considered to be exploiting declining moral standards. A woman who would flout the traditional family and societal structures and go into the night to drink and dance with foreign men. A woman... who got what was coming to her. When we look at today’s public portrayal of women who are killed by men, we are led to ask – has anything really changed?

The voices that Leonski was trying to capture need to sing again, to haunt us. To show us how little progress we have made.

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