

FEATURES OF HILARY MANTEL'S HISTORICAL NOVELS

Nazarova Raykhon Shavkatovna,
Applicant

Abstract

It can be said with all certainty that after the Modernists and the narrative forms they introduced, the historical novel has seriously changed. One of the innovative moments in the genre of historical novel was the role of the author, who no longer claimed the usual omniscience and omnipotence. Although, the author did not cease to have knowledge in which direction the story went (due to the time gap between the time of writing the novel and the time of the events narrated by the writer), he or she did not directly «impose» own vision of the events of the past, though the plot developed «along the rails of history» which was familiar to the reader. Instead of an all-knowing narrator, the narrator appears who is «one of us»; authors of historical novels either come up with the narrator who has a peculiar (individual) view of the past and narrates exclusively «from the perspective» of his «I» like Claudius from R. Graves's novel «I, Claudius» (1934), or, even using a third-person narrative, endows these «he/she» with such personal knowledge of the causes and consequences of events that formed the basis of the narrative that any omniscience is simply impossible to talk about.

Keywords: narrator, history, novel, genre, movement, H. Mantel, culture, narrative, interpretation.

Introduction

The historical novel is rapidly moving towards the narrative dominance of the character's point of view, when everything receives a fundamentally personal interpretation. This does not exclude the presence of an author's vision of a reproducible historical event; but it arises from the juxtaposition of different positions of the characters (and several), from the narrative-activated reader's assessment of the fidelity/infidelity of the reader, knowledge of history and/or understanding of the laws of history by which it moves, and how these laws are reflected in the character structure and imagery of character heroes.

This is obvious, for example, in «Orlando» (1928) by V. Woolf. Readers of the novel know that its main character, who was metamorphosed in the second half of the work and turned into a woman (a tribute to Woolfe's feminism and her idea of dominating the female principle in the world, however, is not new. Let us recall the ending of Goethe's Faust as well), travels through the history of England from the Tudor period until the beginning of the 1920s. This principle of the plot construction, based on the concept of beyond historicity, is used by Woolf in order to develop the ideas of eternity of human existence, dialectics of male and female principles, beauty, culture and others.

In general, despite its playful and comic nature, the novel demonstrates some new understanding of the story that J. DeGroot well formulated: «a space of constant movement and probabilities» «possibilities and potentials».¹ However, this space is not chaos, it is organized and structured by culture, in this case English, which acts as a means of self-discovery and self-esteem of the main character/heroine.

Here we approach another innovation that arose in the genre in the era of modernism and immediately after it, which is not completely revolutionary. This refers to the predominance in the process of Romanesque reconstruction of the past, not so much sociopolitical as sociocultural bonds of the past. Brilliant examples of a look at history through the movement of thought and cultural paradigms even before Woolfe's «Orlando» (and partly her novella «Flush») gave «Notre Dame Cathedral» (1831) by V. Hugo «Salamambo» (1862) by G. Flaubert novels by D. Merezhkovsky («Christ and the Antichrist» 1896-1905), V. Bryusov («The Fiery Angel» 1907).²

The novels of one of the brightest English writers of our time, Hilary Mantel, to a certain extent, combined both innovations that were discussed above. At the same time, they turn to the unusually acute socio-political confrontation of time, which determined further history of England, as well as «requires» the memory of the genre in its classical version.³ These novels develop the theme of the emergence of new England, a process that received a powerful impetus during the reign of Henry VIII, when the feudal Catholic paradigm was destroyed, and in its place grew a new Protestant-bourgeois structure of the country's life, which dominated England for many subsequent centuries. It's safe to say that novels turn to a period of dramatic socio-cultural breakthrough.

Thomas Cromwell, according to H. Mantel, is not only a character in the history of England, who largely determined this «drift» of the country towards a new world order, but also a person who, in fact, was an image of a new country, new thinking, attitude towards people, laws, rules and norms of being.⁴ When we reflect on the conflict underlying the ideological and artistic structure of the trilogy about the most important period of the formation of modern England, we notice that not only the political or religious contradictions of that time determine its essence: characters and events are «passed» through some general historical, essential oppositions. These primarily include the confrontation of the new and old, real and ideal, practical and visionary.⁵

The plot is built as a kind of psychological and analytical «self-report» by Thomas Cromwell about his progress up the socio-political ladder, as an explanation, an interpretation of his own life from childhood to maturity. Moreover, one can notice that the epochal event of English history seems to «pour» into the inner world of the hero, and the result of this

¹ De Groot G. The Historical Novel. — London and New York: Routledge, 2010. — 200 p.

² Leiderman N. L. Teoria zhanra. Issledovania i razbory. — Ekaterinburg: Uralskiy gos. ped. un-t, 2010. — 400c.

³ Boris Proskurnin. Hilary Mantel's Novels about Thomas Cromwell: Traditions and Innovations // Footpath: Contemporary British Fiction in Russian Universities. A Journal. 2016. № 9 (4). P. 57–70.

⁴ Hughes D. Tudor Tales: Hilary Mantel Reconsiders the Life of Thomas Cromwell. New Yorker.

⁵ Butterfield H. The Historical Novel: An Essay. — London, 1924. — 210 p

becomes the subject of storytelling: all important and less significant events, facts and personalities of time are «boiled» in Cromwell's mind.⁶

Acquaintance with the cultural component of novels convinces that it is important for the author to show how multi-layered, multilateral and multifaceted history is, and this multi-figure of history is covered by one generalizing concept - culture. In this regard, on the one hand, without departing from the tradition of the genre, going from Scott's novels with their obligatory historical and cultural conception, Mantel still goes further than simple ethnographic and historical and decorative culturems.

Summing up my reflections on the originality of H. Mantel's novels with the history of England and on the artistic structures of novels, the narrative dominant of which is the inner life of the hero, which absorbs all the features of the country's reality, rapidly moving towards a new socio-cultural device; we see that, on the one hand, the novels contain key genre «codes» of the historical novel, but on the other hand, Mantel's novels demonstrate how peculiarly they are used, especially in terms of plot and narrative construction.

It is clear that the features of the novels are directly related to the originality of the artistic thinking of H. Mantel as a whole, which was clearly manifested not only in her historical novels. But it is also obvious that Mantel's genre thinking reflected almost the entire experience of the historical novel genre in the 20th – 21st centuries, especially the postmodern time of its existence in the literary process. In Mantel's novels, the tendency to «plot» history is obvious, when the massive volume of English history, with its turning and deciding the fate of the country, becomes part of an individual story, moreover, reconstructed (or existing) in the mind of the protagonist; being meaningful and passed through his thought and assessment, the story appears before the reader. In this dilogy, we see the synthesis of past, present and future times as substances of the integrative inner life of the hero. In the novel, it is obvious that there is what could be called a «plusquamperfect» of history, when the past is actively involved in the formation and living of the present: the entire ideology of the image of Thomas Cromwell is built on this.

His figure, and how it was created, gives every reason to say that Mantel's novels demonstrate the unity of two structural dominants in modern English novel: reflective and psychological-analytical (self-knowledge and introspection) and historical, that it inscribes Mantel – a historical novelist, into the broad context of England's national novelism. Historical novels by H. Mantel once again prove that «the memory of the genre is not a museum exhibit, but a constantly operating mechanism of artistic creativity and reader's perception».

⁶ Mantel H. *Wolf Hall*. — London: 4th Estate, 2009. — 652 p

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