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HISTORICAL NOVEL AND THE STUDY OF CONSCIOUSNESS:
BRING UP THE BODIES BY H. MANTEL

This paper is dedicated to the late Hilary Mantel, who passed away on 22 September 2022, one of the most brilliant authors of our time whose contribution to the revival of serious historical fiction cannot be overestimated.

Recent British fiction has taken a historical turn. The newly rediscovered and variously modified genre of historical novel has in the past two decades flourished, enjoying popular success. The landmark in the transition of conventional tendencies in historical fiction was Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). As a result, M. T. Rozett called many works that followed "the new historical fiction" [1, p. 14]. This sub-genre was very much in line with postmodern innovations that dwelt in uncertainties, experimental stylistic techniques, parallels between the stories of the past, the truths learned and embedded in culture and their subtle deconstructions, mixings of genres, as well as an irreverently playful attitude to history instead of the conscious striving towards absolute historical truth.

Historical fiction nowadays may include a wide range of works that deal not only with the pure past, but also elaborate biographical details and multiple settings which interact between the past and the present, different cultures and events. Some writers have gained their popular acclaim in historical fiction: Patrick O'Brian (1914–2000) has written at length about life in the early 19th century, especially during Napoleonic wars; J.G. Farrell (1935–1979) became famous for his *Empire Trilogy* (1970–1978) that treats of the consequences of British colonial rule. Many other novelists have written several historical novels experimenting with the sub-genre conventions: Iris Murdoch's *The Red and the Green* (1966); Rebecca West's *The Birds Fall Down* (1966); Peter Ackroyd's *Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *Chatterton* (1987); Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983); J. Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989); Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Beginning of Spring* (1988) and *The Blue Flower* (1995); Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989); Julian Barnes's *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989); Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989); Beryl Bainbridge's *The Birthday Boys* (1991), *Every Man for Himself* (1996) and *Master Georgie* (1998); Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991); Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995); Jill Paton Walsh's *Knowledge of Angels* (1994); Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson* (1999); A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2000); Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001); and Helen Dunmore's *The Siege* (2001) (interviews with survivors and historical research used to represent the tragic siege of Leningrad). Some of these works are also fictional biographies. Ackroyd's *Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, for example, recreates the flavor of the end of the 19th century while focusing on the life of one

of the most ingenious and controversial minds in the history of literature. This list is remarkably supplemented by the outstanding new historical novels of Hilary Mantel, namely, *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), *The Giant*, *O'Brien* (1998), *Wolf Hall* (2009) *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) and *The Mirror and Light* (2020).

The presence of women writers among the authors of historical fiction is quite remarkable. Critic L. Duguid notes that B. Bainbridge, P. Fitzgerald, P. Barker, H. Mantel, R. Tremain and J. Winterson turned to historical fiction in the 1980s “as a way of escaping the feminist straitjacket, or just getting out of the kitchen” [2, p. 296]. These and other women writers still borrow from the rich tradition of George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Renault, Daphne DuMaurier and Margaret Mitchell.

The generic boundaries between historical and non-historical novels are by no means polarized, as historical fiction includes elements of other subgenres. S. Keen writes that “saturation of the contemporary with versions of the past” [3, p. 168] becomes very striking. Historical fiction is definitely the “serious” type of literature which goes back to Walter Scott, and which was later practiced and shaped by some Victorian authors, including Ch. Dickens. On the other hand, historical fiction shares the same ground with popular literature, because it widely employs adventure and romance. The distinguishing mark, however, is that contemporary historical fiction is bent on representing traumatic events while aspiring to historical accuracy and invoking an empathetic response from readers situated far from the events and perhaps learning about them for the first time [4, p. 57].

Hilary Mantel’s place in this sub-genre is unique. A twice Booker Prize winner, she seemed to concentrate her invaluable research results and psychological insight on bringing back to the public eye some figures from British history looming over the centuries. H. Mantel was born in Hadfield, Derbyshire, in a working-class Irish Catholic family, which is chronicled in her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003). A graduate from the University of Sheffield, she spent five years in Botswana and later suffered from a painful, debilitating illness which incited her to explore the body as object of consciousness in fiction. Mantel died recently.

A sequel to *Wolf Hall* (2009) – a long explorative narrative of coming from rags to power circles of Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540), an English lawyer, statesman and chief minister to King Henry VIII – *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) continues to delve deeper, in much the same manner as employed in the previous book, into the minds of Thomas Cromwell, King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, while *The Mirror and the Light* exacerbates Henry’s skullduggery, the intrigues, blind loyalties and despaired betrayals of his henchmen – all the gruesome events are presented through the prism of Cromwell’s consciousness.

Bring Up the Bodies follows Henry’s weakening passion for Anne Boleyn, the woman who played, inadvertently, the crucial role in the transformation of political structure of Britain, the Reformation and breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church. In the novel, she appears as the reflection of Thomas Cromwell’s inner image of her person. Not only is she the object of Henry’s manipulations, but

also a worthy opponent of Cromwell's: he believes he must destroy Anne before she destroys him. A highly attractive woman, her sexuality blooming, the Queen of England – Anne Boleyn falls into nature's trap by being unable to produce a male heir to the king, the son that would succeed him to secure England's future and make it safe from civil war. Anne's first pregnancy results in a daughter (the would-be Queen Elizabeth), and the following two – in miscarriages. Henry interprets it as Anne's breaking her promise to him, and so he starts looking at other women, which infuriates her, makes her jealous and seeking to restore her confidence in herself through relationships with other men. The novel never reveals how far these relationships go – neither does the author or any historian. Henry, before the queen dies, says she has committed adultery with a hundred men, and five of these alleged traitors are accused together with her, hers being the accusation of witchery as well. Anne Boleyn remains unexplained – in the novel as well as in history. Instead, H. Mantel embarks on a colossal project of exploring the mind – namely, the mind whose holder left an ineradicable imprint on history and politics. Thus, instead of following the beaten track, Mantel follows Thomas Cromwell and his thought process hour by hour, as well as other people's movements, makes us overhear their conversations and, sometimes, even secret broodings.

S. Wells writing the book review for "The New York Review of Books" explains the profound implications of the novel's title: "Bring Up the Bodies". It is "a legal phrase, the command to court officials instructing them to deliver to their trial men who, because they are accused of treason, are regarded as already dead: 'The order goes to the Tower, 'Bring up the bodies.'" But the phrase is suggestive too of the march to death, specifically to the scaffold, that is undertaken by many of the book's characters" [5]. The main plot line entwines around Henry's horrendous plan: to disavow his wife, the Queen of England, Anne Boleyn, to make him free to pursue yet another candidate for his heir's production. Cromwell becomes vulnerable for the first time in his life – the life of tailoring the King's whims to the country's policies. Now he faces the fruit of his own devious dealings to bring in Anne by estranging Katherine of Aragon. The time has come to repeat the procedure all over again: to get rid of Anne and vacate a place for the new would-be wife, Jane Seymour.

The narrative strategies that the writer employs are no less devious than those devised by Thomas Cromwell himself. First, the narration is produced in a misleadingly dramatic Present Indefinite. The characters act and speak as if they were the figures moved on stage by an adroit stage manager with the help of free indirect discourse. This technique creates a sensation of being simultaneously in the time of the one who speaks or acts and in our own epoch. Is it set up right at the outset: "How the son of such a man has achieved his present eminence is a question all Europe asks. Some say he came up with the Boleyns, the queen's family. Some say it was wholly through the late Cardinal Wolsey, his patron; Cromwell was in his confidence and made money for him and knew his secrets. Others say he haunts the company of sorcerers. He was out of the realm from

boyhood, a hired soldier, a wool trader, a banker. No one knows where he has been and who he has met, and he is in no hurry to tell them. He never spares himself in the king's service, he knows his worth and merits and makes sure of his reward: offices, perquisites and title deeds, manor houses and farms. He has a way of getting his way, he has a method; he will charm a man or bribe him, coax him or threaten him, he will explain to a man where his true interests lie, and he will introduce that same man to aspects of himself he didn't know existed" [6, p. 7].

Following this strategy of zooming in the picture of the inner self, the writer permeates the description of action with the technique of free indirect discourse, so that it becomes problematic to separate the picture presented by the distanced author and that of Cromwell's own inner vision. Among multiple examples, there is a scene which arouses Cromwell's – and the reader's – premonition about something to happen, to turn wayward. It is the scene where King Henry walks in the garden with Jane Seymour, with Cromwell secretly watching them:

"Now Jane is behind a bush. Henry is nodding at her; he is speaking at her; he is impressing something on her, and he, Cromwell, watches, scratching his chin: is the king's head becoming bigger? Is that possible, in mid-life?

Hans will have noticed, he thinks, I'll ask him when I get back to London. Most likely I am under mistake; probably it's just the glass" [6, p. 31].

As the prominent Russian scholar Boris M. Proskurnin observes, "the characterological and psychoanalytical paradigms" played a great role in the reconstruction of the historical perspective in the genre of the historical novel [7, p. 78]. Building up on this important remark, it is useful to demonstrate how different variations of psychological analysis enhance the picture of the mind in *Bring Up the Bodies*. As one critic summarises Cromwell, "He was famously persuasive. He could make your creditors weep, people said; he could convince your tenants that their rents were fair. His cunning was legend" [8]. A bypassing remark, an impulsive and therefore senseless exchange overheard by maids and servants produces a chain of reasoning in Cromwell's mind, which is definitely a way to relate a psychoanalytic mind process from contemporary perspectives: "It is treason. Possibly. To envisage the death of the king. The law recognizes it: the short the step, from dreaming to desiring to encompassing. We call it 'imagining' the death: the thought is father to the deed, and the deed is born raw, ugly, premature" [6, p. 309].

Thomas Cromwell as the "narrating mind" of the novel is a great symbol of England's transformation: he represents a new country yet to be born, new consciousness, new thinking and attitude to social realities. Besides many comments on the life in early 16th century, one particular speculation strikes as especially contemporary. Even though the reader realizes that it is the voice of the 21st-century writer, it strikes home. Cromwell's friend and admired sonneteer, Thomas Wyatt, transpires as a figure whose talent only Cromwell can appreciate at the moment: "When Wyatt writes, his lines fledge feathers, and unfolding this plumage they dive below their meaning and skim above it. They tell us that the rules of power and the rules of war are the same, the art is to deceive; and you will

deceive, and be deceived in your turn, whether you are an ambassador or a suitor... A statute is written to entrap meaning, a poem to escape it. A quill, sharpened, can stir and rustle like the pinions of angels. Angels are messengers. They are creatures with a mind and a will" [6, p. 414]. Thus, we can fully agree with B. Proskurnin's statement, that "...Mantel arms her hero with a new and much more adequate understanding" of how history is actually created [9, p. 65].

Hilary Mantel, it seems, has turned the flow of historical fiction into yet another estuary: "Her interest is in the question of good and evil as it applies to people who wield great power. That means anguish, exultation, deals, spies, decapitations, and fabulous clothes" [8]. To get her discoveries across, the author takes upon herself the mission of a reader and interpreter of a historical figure's mind, she leads us through the mazes of human consciousness, its superior manifestations at the times of crisis and fall of old systems, turning points in cultural life and wrecking of political paradigms. Immersion into the processes of thinking and perception of the main hero allows obtaining a picture of consciousness of one of the most cryptic historical figures while simultaneously coming closer to the realization of the role of human consciousness in history.

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