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Hilary Mantel: Raising the Dead, Speaking the Truth

Lisa Fletcher

In 2012, Hilary Mantel became only the third author to win the Man Booker Prize twice, joining Peter Carey and J. M. Coetzee. Her winning novel, *Bring up the Bodies*, is a sequel to *Wolf Hall*, winner of the Man Booker in 2009. No sequel had ever won before and no author had gained the prestigious prize so soon after winning it for the first time. Mantel shot to fame in 2009, and at the time described her nine previous novels as something of a long apprenticeship for *Wolf Hall*, a 650-page work of historical fiction about the court of Henry VIII.¹

Her first novel, *Every Day Is Mother's Day*, was published in 1985 to positive reviews, but she is careful to point out in interviews that she wrote this short novel about contemporary England only because she failed to find a publisher for her first work of fiction, an extremely long historical novel about the French Revolution. This longer work, *A Place of Greater Safety*, was eventually released as Mantel's fifth novel in 1992. She explains, 'I only became a novelist because I thought I had missed my chance to become a historian.'² If *A Place of Greater Safety* had appeared first, Mantel's career would probably have played out very differently, and the Tudor novels would almost certainly have come as less of a surprise to readers. In a review of *Bring up the Bodies* for the *New York Times*, Charles McGrath writes that Mantel 'belongs to the same generation, roughly, as her compatriots Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, and is every bit their equal', but is not as well known.³ This is no longer the case: sales of her back catalogue reportedly rose by 900 per cent after the *Wolf Hall* Man Booker Prize 2009, and then rose further when the Chair of the judges for the Man Booker Prize 2012 proclaimed her the 'greatest modern English prose writer working today'; sales increased again when the Royal Shakespeare Company adapted *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* for sell-out stage productions in January 2014, then skyrocketed a year later with the BBC television adaptation of the two novels. *The Independent* speculates that Mantel's Tudor series 'has almost become an industry of its own',⁴ and, with the publication of the

third novel, *The Mirror and the Light*, on the near horizon, the ‘Mantel brand’ seems secure.⁵ Nevertheless, Mantel remains an ‘under-researched author’.⁶ Very few scholars have offered close analyses of her work, and there is as yet no book-length study.

This chapter examines Mantel’s three novels since 2000, *Beyond Black* (2005), *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring up the Bodies* (2012). In an interview with Eileen Pollard, Mantel described *Beyond Black* as ‘nothing but a vast preparatory exercise for writing the Tudor novels’.⁷ *Beyond Black* was Mantel’s second book to be published in the twenty-first century; the first was her 2003 memoir, *Giving up the Ghost*, and it is surprising that no one has considered *Beyond Black* and *Giving up the Ghost* together, since both are concerned with séances and messages from the dead. Mantel, who has said that if her life had turned out differently ‘she might well have become a medium’, frequently describes the work of writing a novel as a type of congress with ‘ghosts’: ‘You talk to the dead one way or another, and you make it pay.’⁸ As its title suggests, ghosts are at the heart of her memoir, both in the literal sense and as her preferred figure for glimpses of other lives she might have lived or created. To offer two examples: on the memoir’s first page she recalls that she was ‘not perturbed’ when her dead stepfather appeared on her staircase – ‘I am used to seeing things that “aren’t there”’; later, the daughter she never had will ‘always be a ghost of possibility, a paper baby, a person who slipped between the lines’.⁹ Mantel explains that she wrote the memoir ‘in order to locate myself, if not within a body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are’ (GG, 222). There are strong connections between the actual and metaphoric hauntings in *Giving up the Ghost* and her depiction of the encounters with the dead made by Alison Hart, the main character of *Beyond Black*. These invite a reading of the latter as another effort by Mantel to locate herself in relation to the meanings she unearths and those she produces as a writer of historical novels.

The multivalent figure of the ‘medium’ is central to *Beyond Black* and its vision of a world in which past and present are coexistent and inextricable. In this profoundly metafictional novel, ‘medium’ refers partly to Alison’s inescapable everyday life as an intermediary between the living and the dead, partly to her profession as a conjuror of spirits for paying clients, and partly to the means by which she expresses or stores information. As is apparent when this novel is read alongside the memoir, Alison, as the conduit for voices from the past to speak to audiences in the present, embodies the fraught work of authorship in the borderland between fact and fiction. She is an ‘arena of combat’ in which histories that seem to have closed are re-opened and re-energised.¹⁰ Like Mantel herself, who writes openly in her memoir and elsewhere about her rapid weight gain following treatment for long-term chronic pain, Alison is ‘of an unfeasible size’ (BB, 3). But if Alison is a fictional version of Mantel – and this seems indisputable – she is only half of the portrait. Alison’s manager/companion Colette is characterised throughout as an insubstantial, spectral presence; she is a ‘straight, flat creature’ with a ‘patchy, wispy’ aura that recalls the pale, thin young woman Mantel remembers when she looks in the mirror and sees a ‘steroid moon-face’ (BB, 81, 272).¹¹ Mirrors and other reflective surfaces are everywhere in *Beyond Black*, and, indeed, throughout her oeuvre.

Alison and Colette are linked as analogues for the writer's life Mantel portrays in *Giving up the Ghost* by the recurring phrase 'make a living'. Alison's deeply traumatic upbringing on the outskirts of Aldershot, Hampshire, is revealed in non-chronological fragments across the course of the novel. Her 'spirit guide' Morris is a foul-mouthed and foul-smelling remainder from her childhood, one of the 'fiends from Aldershot' who gathered around her prostitute mother and now linger in the 'place beyond black' (BB, 129, 194). In the argot of the novel's community of psychics and palm readers, the various spirits Alison encounters – from Morris and other characters from her childhood to Shakespeare ('Bill Wagstaffe') and Diana, Princess of Wales – have moved from 'earthside' to 'airside'. Alison insists that she is a 'professional psychic, not some sort of magic act', but also regrets her 'abnormality', a consequence of the horrific childhood that left her 'brain all cross-wired so [she's] forced to know the biographies of strangers' (BB, 9, 305, 297). Alison's mother responds to her daughter's resistance to prostitution by asking, 'How else are you going to make a living?' (BB, 120). This question echoes in subtle and darkly comic ways throughout the novel: Alison asks Colette how she would make a living if she were to give up touring as a psychic, and the question undergirds Colette's project to write a book about Alison's life to sell at the 'psychic fayres' (BB, 50). Colette's naïve effort to write a book by recording and transcribing interviews with Alison fails not just because the tape recordings are corrupted by the cacophony of voices and sounds from 'airside', but also because Colette is unable to translate the tangled complex of past voices into a coherent narrative.

Mantel's reflection on the question of 'ghosts' in her memoir and the self-conscious metaphors of mediumism in *Beyond Black* provide tools and concepts for analysing the complex, third-person, present-tense narration of the first two volumes of Mantel's Tudor trilogy. Stephen Greenblatt commends Mantel's 'ability to summon up ghosts'. The historical novel, he argues, 'is always an act of conjuring'.¹² Rosario Arias similarly contends that 'Mantel acts as a resurrectionist, or a medium, because she channels communication between the Tudor world and today'.¹³ In other words, the narrator of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* is both a 'medium' who recounts past events as they unfold and a charismatic persona who invites readers to participate in the challenge of recovering history. Mantel's own commentary on the Tudor novels and her writing process encourages the view that she is like a 'medium' who 'negotiates with the dead and lets them speak'.¹⁴ Her 'method', she explains, is grounded in the 'ideal of fidelity to history' and a sense of 'responsibility' to the historical figures she depicts.¹⁵

Mantel's account of her approach to writing historical fiction informs also the emerging critical consensus that her most recent work has shifted the goalposts for writers of historical fiction away from the self-consciousness and experimentation of 'postmodern' approaches to the genre associated with authors including John Fowles, A. S. Byatt, Sarah Waters, Peter Ackroyd and David Mitchell.¹⁶ Reviewers almost never compare *Wolf Hall* or *Bring up the Bodies* to other recent literary historical novels, despite the critical agreement that the genre is 'in robust health, critically, formally and economically'.¹⁷ Peter Childs, for instance, contends that Mantel's Booker win for *Wolf Hall* 'cement[ed] the historical novel's position as the

most prized literary genre in the twenty-first century'.¹⁸ Mantel, however, argues that the 'boundaries of the term "historical fiction" are now so wide that it's almost meaningless, so that use of the term is beginning to look like an accusation, a stick to beat writers with'.¹⁹ Her anxiety here may be linked to her choice of period: the novelist most often named alongside Mantel in journalism about appearances of the Tudors on page and screen is Philippa Gregory, best known for her 2002 *The Other Boleyn Girl*. The comparison invariably favours Mantel and casts Gregory not only as representative of the kind of commercial British historical fiction that would never be in the running for the Man Booker, but as a too-easy target for the view that, until Mantel, Henry VIII's reign was a 'worn-out story'.²⁰

Mantel is careful to distinguish her approach to the genre from that of authors who she agrees are ducking the 'tough issues' of the present 'in favour of writing about frocks', a distinction that recalls Georg Lukács's disinterest in novels in which the past is treated as 'mere costumery'.²¹ Lukács, in his seminal 1937 study of the genre, classified the true historical novel as one that achieves 'an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch'.²² It is now a critical commonplace to say that the value of the historical novel lies not in its potential to enhance our understanding of past people and events, but in its capacity to shed new light on the present: novels about the past are always also about the contemporary context in which they are written. Tamsin Spargo explains, 'The past is, in a sense, over but in another sense it is only available to us, knowable, as part of the present. The past may be real but it is, by definition, irrecoverable in its pastness'.²³ Mantel is only partially sympathetic to this view. The frequent traces of her engagement with the archives in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* are not there to suggest that history is irrecoverable. Rather, the picture of the past offered by these weighty novels is one of plenitude rather than absence or lack. The Tudor novels are much closer to 'classic' historical fiction than the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century trends critics have labelled as postmodern historical fiction, or, more recently, neo-historical fiction.

The Cromwell novels are emphatically not postmodern fiction; they are not, that is, examples of 'historiographic metafiction'. Linda Hutcheon coined this somewhat inelegant term in her highly influential book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, first published in 1988, to classify a body of novels that 'characterise postmodernism in fiction'.²⁴ In brief, 'historiographic metafiction' is fiction that reflects on its treatment of history and the fictionalisation of history in general, but paradoxically sustains a belief in the validity and value of historical narratives. For Alan Robinson, Hutcheon's claims are 'now outdated'.²⁵ The key to understanding Mantel's approach to, and passion for, writing historical novels is her commitment to the search for accuracy: 'I cannot describe to you what revulsion it inspires in me when people play around with the facts'.²⁶ She explains that every named character but one in the Tudor novels comes from the historical records; even the exception, the boy Christophe in *Bring up the Bodies*, is an extrapolation of a person mentioned but not named in the primary sources. When explaining her approach to *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, Mantel often recalls the experience of writing her first historical novel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992): 'I used to think when I set out that

doing the research was enough, but then the gaps would emerge that could only be filled by imagination.²⁷ Indeed, the professional values Mantel has espoused across numerous interviews – and which are implicit in the novels themselves – suggest a writer closer in spirit to historians than novelists, at least as they are characterised by critics of the historical novel.

Mantel's guiding principle is that the people of the past she portrays on the page existed in space and time:

I aim to make the fiction flexible so that it bends itself around the facts as we have them. Otherwise I don't see the point. Nobody seems to understand that. Nobody seems to share my approach to historical fiction. I suppose if I have a maxim, it is that there isn't any necessary conflict between good history and good drama. I know that history is not shapely, and I know the truth is often inconvenient and incoherent. It contains all sorts of superfluities. You could cut a much better shape if you were God, but as it is, I think the whole fascination and the skill is in working with those incoherencies.²⁸

For numerous reviewers, the most 'surprising' thing about *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* is Mantel's choice of an 'unlikely hero', Thomas Cromwell.²⁹ Before Mantel, Tudor fictions on page, stage and screen, most notably Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* and its 1966 film adaptation, had portrayed Cromwell as the villain in Henry VIII's court and Thomas More as the saintly hero. Mantel, whose admiration of Cromwell's 'brilliant mind' comes through on every page of the novels, professes little interest in the history or drama of 'people who start off possessing power'.³⁰ The clearest statement of the view of history undergirding these novels comes midway through *Wolf Hall* when Cromwell ponders how to tell Harry Percy, the Earl of Northumberland, that his claims to have been betrothed to Anne Boleyn are pointless because the 'world is not run from where he thinks': 'Not from castle walls, but from counting houses, not from the call of the bugle but by the click of the abacus.'³¹ The penultimate chapter of *Bring up the Bodies* – at over 150 pages nearly a novel in itself – is titled 'Master of Phantoms, April–May 1536' and presents Cromwell as a man at the height of his powers: Anne Boleyn and the five men executed with her are like characters in a narrative of Cromwell's construction. In Mantel's version of this famous episode, Cromwell is as much motivated by a desire to serve his king – whose impatience to be rid of Anne and marry Jane Seymour cannot be denied – as he is to avenge the treatment of his dead master and mentor, Thomas Wolsey; Cromwell's relationship with Wolsey is at the heart of *Wolf Hall*. Anne's five co-accused were each players in a vulgar play performed after Wolsey's death, but it takes time and patience for Cromwell to seal their fates. In the final pages of *Wolf Hall* Mantel, the narrator, and Cromwell – their voices are deliberately blurred – reflect on the relationship between the living and the dead. Cromwell recalls his boyhood fear of ghosts, but now knows differently: 'It's the living that turn and chase the dead. The long bones and skulls are tumbled from their shrouds, and words like stones thrust into their rattling mouths: we edit their writings, we rewrite their lives' (*WH*, 649). It is in moments like this that the

'intermingling' of author and character, which Mantel says she 'cannot stop', is most apparent.³² By the end of *Bring up the Bodies* this 'master of phantoms' is aware that he too will become a ghost to be chased through the archives. The novel's final page invites further reflection on Mantel's project: 'those who come after me . . . will sift through what remains and remark, here is an old deed, an old draft, an old letter from Thomas Cromwell's time: they will turn the page over, and write on me.'³³

After writing the first two paragraphs of *Wolf Hall*, Mantel says that she realised she would write Cromwell's story from 'behind his eyes' and that all decisions about 'how to tell the story' would flow from this perspective.³⁴ The novels are written almost entirely in the present tense and the third person, closely focalised on Cromwell. This 'grammatical intimacy' brings the author, narrator, protagonist and readers into a tight circuit of exchange, with the author/narrator holding the position of greatest authority in the making of meaning, but always from a perspective which privileges fidelity to the historical record.³⁵ The first chapter of *Wolf Hall*, like that of other Mantel novels, eschews exposition. Instead the novel opens in Putney in 1500 with an unattributed snippet of dialogue, 'So now get up' (WH, 3). The next paragraph launches readers into the close third-person viewpoint used for much – but, importantly, not all – of this novel and its sequel: 'Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen; knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard' (WH, 3). The person speaking is Walter Cromwell, who is in the middle of beating his son, Thomas; Walter's next kick 'knocks the last breath out of him; he thinks it may be his last' (WH, 3). The novel's first page thus introduces one of its most remarked upon stylistic devices: with rare exceptions, Cromwell is referred to throughout the novel, which concludes in July 1535, by the unqualified pronoun 'he'. Mantel amended this device for *Bring up the Bodies*, so that her protagonist becomes 'he, Cromwell'.

As indicated above, the second novel takes up where *Wolf Hall* left off and ends with an event that Cromwell orchestrates on behalf of his king: the execution of Anne Boleyn and her five co-accused. Reviewers tended to read 'he, Cromwell' and its variants as a gesture of generosity to readers who were disoriented by the idiosyncratic grammar of *Wolf Hall*, but Mantel is too clever and too confident a writer to adjust her prose for enhanced readability. Instead the foregrounding of Cromwell's name in *Bring up the Bodies* is an invitation to readers to share Cromwell's (and Mantel's) incredulity that the bloodied blacksmith's son we met at the beginning of *Wolf Hall* would rise to become the king's 'right hand' (BUB, 237). '[W]ho', the narrator asks early in *Bring up the Bodies*, 'would have thought that Thomas Cromwell would be anything at all?' (BUB, 34–5). The implied audience for this question consists of readers who conceive of historical fiction as a conversation between the past and the present by passages in the second person, and, crucially for Mantel, who recognise the value of looking anew at a history which many assumed to be over-examined.

There are numerous instances of second-person narration in both novels, designed to invite the reader closer still to Cromwell than the limited third-person perspective allows. The day on which his wife, Liz, dies from sweating sickness is mostly 'nothing to remember', but there is 'something wrong when you arrive home' (WH, 101). 'You' here is clearly Cromwell, but the effect of the second-person

pronoun is to ask readers to imagine themselves being part of this sixteenth-century scene. Twenty-first-century readers need not have experienced the illness to empathise with the shock and pain of Cromwell's loss: 'Then you see the dismayed faces; they turn away at the sight of you' (WH, 101). When his young daughters die of the same disease a year later, Cromwell's first-person thoughts are reported by the narrator, a technique that Mantel reserves for moments when Cromwell is most impassioned: 'I never knew her, he thinks; I never knew I had her' (WH, 152). Heightened emotion also accounts for the very rare moments when the narration slips more fully into the first person, as though the narrator has got too close to Cromwell. A key example follows a pivotal scene in which Cromwell cries for his lost family: 'Very well. I dry my tears, those tears from All Hallows Day' (WH, 162). Mantel offers her treatment of this episode as an example of the value novelists can add to the work of historians: before *Wolf Hall* historians had interpreted Cromwell's tears in relation to Wolsey's downfall and his fear for his own career, but Mantel notices that the event clearly took place on the day of the dead, and that Cromwell, who had lost his wife and two children over the course of the previous three years, may well have been crying tears of grief. 'This appears', she insists, 'to be the kind of thing that a novelist notices and that historians manage to ignore, generation after generation.' Recreating the private life of historical protagonists is 'part of the bargain. Otherwise you're just a pseudo-historian.'³⁶

The novelist Margaret Atwood sees Mantel's use of present-tense narration as a strategy to avoid one of the 'pitfalls' of historical fiction, the exaggeration of the strangeness of the past so that readers feel alienated; in the Tudor novels we are 'right there with Cromwell'.³⁷ The immediacy of the events portrayed in the novel and the implied propinquity of Cromwell to the reader is intensified by Mantel's adept use of deictic words. Deixis (meaning 'pointing') refers to those elements of language that anchor meaning to particular contexts: pronouns and temporal and spatial indicators such as here, there, now and then. In fact, a close reading of the Tudor novels shows that 'here' and 'now' are key words in both. Early in *Wolf Hall*, the narrator remarks, 'Nowhere else but here he is still a runaway, still a little, beaten boy' (WH, 42). In the opening chapter of *Bring up the Bodies*, 'Thomas Cromwell is now about fifty years old' (BUB, 6). Unusually for historical fiction, the narrator almost never intervenes to anticipate events in Cromwell's future of which he could not be aware in the narrative's present: in *Wolf Hall*, when his mother-in-law decides not to send the girls to the country during sweating sickness season, 'It's the wrong decision';³⁸ and in *Bring up the Bodies*, before Cromwell receives the (false) news that the king has died, the narrator forecasts, 'Later that day . . . he will be on his way to Greenwich, shocked, apprehensive.'³⁹ Mantel makes the past present by positioning readers at Cromwell's shoulder to watch events unfold without the benefit of hindsight so often granted us by historical novelists.

Mantel's approach to the genre of the historical novel is close to the view Robinson espouses in his recent book, *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel*: 'I approach historical fiction as a form of history in its own right, which confronts similar cognitive and imaginative challenges to those faced by historians.'⁴⁰ For Robinson, both historians and novelists 'project an

anachronistic narrative world'.⁴¹ The author's interpretation of historical sources creates what he terms the '*present past*': a virtual past reality from the point of view of the writer's present. The present past is 'only provisionally valid and open to constant revision', but Robinson stresses that this provisionality is a source of creative energy and possibility rather than a belief in the 'unknowability or sublime unrepresentability of the past'.⁴²

Arias regards *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* as examples of 'neo-historical fiction'.⁴³ Definitions of 'neo-historical fiction' emphasise the subgenre's 'self-analytic drive';⁴⁴ however, as Jerome de Groot argues, historical fiction is almost always self-analytical: 'The form is obsessed with pointing out its own partiality, with introducing other voices and undermining its authority'.⁴⁵ Mantel's 'authorial proximity' to both her protagonist and implied readers in the Tudor novels has the opposite effect.⁴⁶

Like Mantel, Cromwell communes with ghosts to reflect on the meaning of his life and create his plots: first his wife and daughters; then his beloved master, Thomas Wolsey; and later Thomas More, amongst others. The 'cast of characters' at the beginning of *Bring up the Bodies* includes a list of the dead. The closeness of Mantel to Cromwell is essential to one of the main messages about historical fiction that this book seeks to deliver: the past is no more defined by competing and contradictory versions of the truth than the present is. Cromwell's life was a tissue of fact and fiction even as it unfolded: 'why is it that his life as a child doesn't seem to fit one bit with the next?' (WH, 357). A short paragraph in *Bring up the Bodies* – a rare moment of narratorial intervention – does away with the notion that past truths are any more contingent and contradictory than those still in the making:

What is the nature of the border between truth and lies? It is permeable and blurred because it is planted thick with rumour, confabulation, misunderstandings and twisted tales. Truth can break the gates down, truth can howl in the street; unless truth is pleasing, personable and easy to like, she is condemned to stay whimpering at the back door. (BUB, 159)

Mantel offers Thomas Cromwell – organised and rational, but with a gift for imagining the dead – as her vehicle to the distant past. Like his twenty-first-century creator, Cromwell is a rare person in that he likes 'everything squared up and precise' and 'will allow some drift at the margins' (WH, 228).

At the time of writing, the date of publication for the third Tudor novel remains uncertain and, if internet chatter is anything to go by, readers are becoming impatient. In February 2015 Mantel said on Australian national radio, 'I hear on the one hand that it will be out next week, on the other hand that it will be at least ten years, [but] neither of these [is] true'.⁴⁷ It remains to be seen whether Geraldine Brooks is right that the Tudor novels are 'surely destined for the literary canon',⁴⁸ but there is no doubt that Mantel has shaken our assumptions about the definition and purpose of the contemporary historical novel.

NOTES

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10. Hilary Mantel, *Beyond Black* (2005; London: Fourth Estate, 2013), p. 2. All quotations are from this edition; hereafter, page numbers will be given in the text, preceded by BB.
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41. Ibid.
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FURTHER READING

For an up-to-date list of Hilary Mantel's novels, see the British Council website: <<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/hilary-mantel>> (last accessed 13 June 2016).

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