Wolf Hall

H.Mantel

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Six hundred and fifty pages. This is a lot. There is not much of a plot, because after all this is a historical novel, whose ambition is not to be a narrative, but to stick to the outward facts, as to be able to indulge in the recreation of the inner lives. We all know the story, or part of the story. Henry VIII becomes disenchanted with his queen, he maintains that they really never were married, that she was soiled goods, that the marriage with her brother was consummated after all (in other worlds the formal ceremony of marriage, however solemn, is not enough to ensure its legitimacy, should the nuptial bed also be part of the official ceremony?). This all smacks of desperate special pleading. There is the touching wooing of Anne Boleyn, playing indeed hard to get. We are speaking about haggling for the price, as Bernhard Shaw claimed, everything comes with a price. There is the downfall of Cardinal Wolsey the right hand of the capricious monarch, the eventual marriage, the conception and birth of a child, a possible heir, but alas a daughter, and then the machinations to preempt a plot, indicating Thomas More, the great scholar, writer of Utopia, friend of Erasmus of Rotterdam, and religious zealot, ending in a mass of executions. After that there is no longer any effective opposition for the King to seize control over the church in England, to shut out papal power. Not much for six hundred and fifty pages. So what is the book about?

It is a book about Thomas Cromwell, whom we meet as he is being almost pounded to death by his brutal father, the blacksmith. The beaten up boy is made of strong stuff, he escapes, goes abroad, serves as a soldier, gets into law and trade, learns Italian, French and Dutch, and makes himself indispensable. It is the miracle of a man of low birth making himself in effect the most powerful man in the kingdom, but his power, however solid, is brittle, and what ultimately makes him can also undo him. It is the ambition of the author to make this enigmatic figure come to life, by making him the center of the novel, the axis around which everything is seen to revolve. She chooses not to present him in the first person, that might have been too daunting an ambition, but he is always referred to as he. And when there is a 'he' it is almost always Cromwell, who is meant, a stylistic tick, which is fraught with the potential for endless and distracting misunderstandings.

We get to know him through his conversations, occasionally also through having the veil lifted from his interior monologues. Is he a sympathetic figure? He is hard, but that might mean not much more than to say that he is unsentimental. He has some weak spots. He loves his children, he is stricken when his two daughters are taken away from him by the sudden sweating sickness. A fate far too common for most of human history. He is truly attached to his wife and mourns her passing, yet not deeply enough to seal him from subsequent attractions and temptations, however not yielding to them. But above all he is a hard worker, with the ingenious and slightly crooked mind of a lawyer, and he does not spare himself, aided by an iron constitution and a boundless reserve of energy. He is struck down by disease, his mind ravished by feverish images, but only temporarily, soon

to bounce back. But maybe his most endearing quality is his loyalty. He is loyal to his employer Wolsey even when the fortunes of the latter are in deep, precipitous decline. This is what attracts the attention of the King, such loyalty is not so much to be rewarded as exploited. A successful monarch, like a successful commander, must have a lot of luck, but also an unerring instinct, and this the King has.

The King and the Queen Anne are the two other major characters. The King comes across as genial, generous, affectionate, shy, proud, unsure of himself, and of course capricious. Cromwell knows that loyal service is not to expected to be rewarded all the time, that he is at the mercy of the whims of the kings pleasure. But unlike Wolsey, he does not take this to heart, he does not allow that to ruffle him, the secret is to keep a cool head and weather it through, because in the end the king will always come around. And would he not do it, his head would roll. But this is life, at least life in the 16th century at the Tudor court.

While the King is above the court, Anne is very much part of it. She started out as a court lady, a lady in waiting to the Spanish Queen. She was brought up in France, she is educated, smart, and part of an ambitious family. But no one in her family is quite as ambitious as herself, and the others are more than content to ride on her coat tails. Mary her sister is a waif, readily giving in to the advances of the King. Anne is different, she knows how to play her cards close to her chest, whose flatness is a source of wonder. What does the king see in her? What is the nature of her beauty that so entices the King that he loses his head, all but literally? The King is in love. For the first and only time in his life. He, who does not like to write, writes her effusive letters (saved for posterity to read, ponder and if occasion arises, snigger at). The relationship between Cromwell and Anne is guarded, how could it be otherwise? They do not like each other, they do not trust each other, but they realize that they are very useful to each other, and such a common interest may prove stronger than mere sentimental dalliance. But only as long as it lasts.

Is it all true? What a naive question? A writer of fiction is free to make up characters, this is what fiction is all about. Making up characters who come to life more vividly than most of the people with whom we cross paths in our daily lives. There is not much emphasis on the material surroundings that would mark the life of the 16th century. True, details are given, but the details do not make up a whole. It is all about the dynamics of social interaction, the characters of which supposedly have not significantly changed during historical time. Still, vivid as the characters may appear, and of course writing a historical novel imposes constraints, which we have already touched and commented upon, that can powerfully provoke the imagination of writer and reader alike. But nevertheless, does not the author bring to her characters mindsets that are alien to the thinking people of almost five hundred years ago? Imaginative as her recreations may be, do they not miss the point? But there is no way we can tell, although the ambition of not missing the point is what gives her fictional project legitimacy, never mind the acknowledged license of the author of fiction.

In six hundred and fifty pages there is plenty of space for subsidiary characters, and of those there are many, more than any but the most devoted reader could expect to keep in mind. Thus the author helpfully draws a list of them, thematically grouped, at the very beginning of the work, as a form of glossary. It is hard to give one and each of them

a well-rounded and unique persona, most of them do appear as mere staffage. There is Wolsey of course, the Cardinal who amasses a fortune in the service of his king, something Cromwell is doing as well, be it on a more modest and less ostentatious scale. And then there is More, shown as a tortured man with principles that are inflexible and consequently makes him choke and break. He could save his neck with the smallest of concessions. He could swear an oath, his fingers crossed, but refuses. Cromwell, whose principles are more malleable, cannot understand him, and sees his obstruction as mere obstinacy, a stupidity that eventually will earn its just reward.

This is the first of a planned trilogy, hence it can afford to end almost in mid-sentence. The second part was read a year ago and reviewed, the third part is still to see the light of day. The styles of the two books are the same. Repellent at first, but sustained exposure weakens initial resistance, and lends to it a certain seductive, not to say mesmerizing power. The sentences are short and pound the reader, rather than sooth him. The interchanges are curt, often more in the character of innuendoes, which easily impress the unwary reader with the wit and intelligence the author seem to posses, than real ones. But even if the ultimate ambition is of realism, the way to convey it most effectively is not necessarily in the realist mode. A sympathetic reader may find it all poetic, or at least on the shore where prose morphs into poetry without ever letting go. Having read the second installment first, I come to the initial already prepared. This may be the reason I find it better than the second.

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