

## When History Becomes Fiction

Historical fiction is a high stakes game, risking falsification of event and character--neither history nor literature, but a slight of hand diversion, which may dabble in inanimate portraiture, costume drama, or mere atmospherics. Yet, in the hands of the great dealers it becomes a discipline of the highest art, in which the heft and consequence of both elements intermingle and move beyond the apparently limiting confines of mere fact or personage. It requires--simultaneously--a seriousness of scrutiny and a generosity of imagination that offer deep pleasures of mind and heart. Crucial to this hybrid experience is a fundamental doubt regarding the possibility of categorizing the chaotic nature of collective human events, and an implicit questioning of the role of interpretation in history as well as fiction—all of which are inherent to the form itself. But, for me, more striking than any of these abstract considerations is the very particular art of creating from the lineaments of a historical personage--whose lifespan and “significance” has already been judged--the weight, depth, and irreplaceability that is the indelible sign of a great fictional character.

In 1812 in Russia, in the French Revolution, or in the turbulent reign of Henry the VIII, character is, whether willingly or not, forged and proven through moments of heightened intensity, ferocious violence, and massive consequences. The major figures of these periods are giants by anyone’s account, exerting heat across the ages—the eternally restless and still prophetic undead. Few historical figures have been more brooded over by professional scholars as well as popular historians than Robespierre and Danton, with the poly-erotic Camille Desmoulins and his wife, Lucille, providing important if secondary fuel for analysis. Into this cauldron of words, ideological controversies, and analogies of evil, Hilary Mantel, still a young writer at the time, intrepidly dove to create her 1992 novel *A Place of Greater Safety*.

For someone, like Mantel, who seems to believe in ever-speaking ghosts, the special attraction to the time, place and treasure trove of personality provided by “the Terror” seems unwilled, even fated. She reports that in the beginning she regarded her obsessive reading about and recording of the French Revolution to be in the nature of a kind of “research project”. But at some point she discovered that her instinct for orderly

note-taking had started to break down under the yawning weight and breadth of these particular events and their protagonists. It would be fascinating to know exactly, when the note-taking started its sea-change into fiction, but it was probably a see-sawing motion, never fully anchored. What seems absolutely certain to me is that it was the young revolutionaries--Camille Desmoulins, ardent and ambiguous; Danton, ferociously ugly and ever-so brutally appealing; and, more than all the others, Robespierre, shy, slight, fixated--who pulled her across the line. At a certain point, the trio erupted into conversation with her, and she listened with an ear so finely tuned to each of their particular rhythms that the attempt to accurately render the sequence and meaning of events began to yield to a larger pool of feeling that overflowed the borders of history, becoming fiction.

The miracle effected here involves imagining life for a set of characters whose fates are apparently foreclosed. We know the time and conditions of their death, and drag along with us some mixture of ideas regarding the forces of event and personality that brought them to the grave. But for us to care about them, Mantel must breathe into them the kind of radical freedom of choice and being that makes us believe that their destinies are still open in every moment—until the end. In my case, when the four characters of Mantel’s imagination died inside the frame of the novel I was bereft in the way of an abandoned lover: viscerally, imaginatively, obsessively. The overwhelming sense of personal bereavement is, I am sure, directly connected, in this book and others I adore, to the author’s compulsion to love these characters rather than judge them.

The word love is used here in its archaic, decorous senses of sympathy (the ability to suffer with), of intense intellectual affinity (as with Dante and Beatrice), as well as in a rawer, nearly erotic sense of physical attraction to another fleshly being, where such attraction is itself made up of an inter-tangling rush of blood, un-willed compassion, and deep thought. It is this latter aspect that is the glue that attaches us to great fictional characters (and, to lovers) for good and ill.

Mantel has confessed to being an ardent Robespierriest, even if for many he has been found hard to love. In an LRB article, she quotes Danton: “He (Robespierre) can’t fuck, and he’s afraid of money.” But Mantel seems not to have been even a little put off

by this or later versions of the Incorruptible's aridity. Her imaginative and intellectual engagement with the leading protagonist of "The Terror" is the stuff of which her love for him is made, a feeling as sympathetic as it is wide-ranging, and rationalist:

*You couldn't buy him. You couldn't impress him. You couldn't frighten him.... Whenever Robespierre was interrupted, something is missing still. Whenever he was silenced, we are listening to the silences. Whatever else he was, he was a man of conviction and a man of principle.*

The sense of longing in these sentences is palpable, and bespeaks a very rare language of love.

Mantel points out that she was not alone in her attraction to Robespierre:

*You can believe that, as Desmoulins reported, he could bring 800 men to their feet in a single moment. You could quibble over the head-count, but the power seemed to be real. It extended to the women of Paris, who attended the public galleries of the Jacobin Club.*

Elsewhere she lingers over descriptions of his "green eyes." Whatever Danton thought, Robespierre apparently had his own ways of finding a path to erotic apotheosis. Mantel's ardor, is instinctual and intellectual, and of the kind that doesn't admit of any distinction between the two.

So if Robespierre is the compelling object of her affection, why does Mantel give her fraudulent, free-wheeling, infinitely corruptible Danton the most moving and last major scene in the book? Powerfully, here, she shows her capacity to live inside the skin of a character and to love him intensely--the embezzler, the Tammany Hall-style party boss, the conscienceless womanizer. Mantel risks our bereavement and her own as she takes Danton, Camille Desmoulins, and Herault, after their three-day mock trial, to the foot of the guillotine. But in this fatal place she begins to distrust herself. Though we feel sure that she has already made the decision long ago, and made it correctly, she poses an ever-looming question of historical fiction: how much can be made up without distorting truth? How must the imaginative life of facts be rendered?

*There is a point beyond which—convention and imagination dictate—we cannot go; perhaps it's here, when the carts decant on to the scaffold their freight, now living and breathing flesh, soon to be dead meat.*

But she can't let it go, can't not imagine--fully, intricately, intimately—what all of us have in our own poor capacity tried to do, to imagine ourselves mounting the scaffold.

Too deep in to turn back (for herself or Danton), she immediately re-enters Danton's imagination and body, watching first Heraut, then Desmoulins, undergo the fatal transformation. She imagines Danton looking away briefly, just "for ten seconds", as Camille kneels before the executioner. *"After that he watches everything, each bright efflorescence of life's blood. He watches each death, until he is tutored in his own"*. When his moment is ripe, the compellingly ugly Danton utters the words for which he is most famous. He calls to the executioner:

*"Hey, Sanson?"*

*"Citizen Danton?"*

*"Show my head to the people. It's worth the trouble."*

Mantel loves him with all her heart, as the crowd must have, and, as I do. Her "efflorescence of life's blood" has already fixed him imaginatively, forever.

Strangely, Mantel's Robespierre dies off-stage in a historic note at the end of the book, along with Lucille. Perhaps, she couldn't bear the horror of his death.

