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The Responsibilities of Historical Fiction

Ned Beauman, *The Teleportation Accident*, Sceptre,
368pp, £16.99 (hardback)

Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, Fourth Estate, 411pp, £20 (hardback)

Last year was a good one for historical fiction – a genre often dismissed as fancy-dress escapism or low-tech science fiction. If critics do not deny the form outright, they have delicate and subjective systems by which they separate worthy historical fiction from its illegitimate sibling: historical romance. Historical *fiction*, a critic might argue, should not centre on real figures. For one, it must take place only in the very distant past while for another, it should be set no more than fifty years ago; speech and style must either always avoid the arcane or fustian, or it must be hyper-vigilant of the anachronistic modern, and so on. There are more (often contradictory) rules than there are rewards.

The story of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn is doomed to be retold forever, with varying artistic merit. But if Hilary Mantel's Booker win for *Bring Up the Bodies* – her second novel about Thomas Cromwell to win the prize – has not improved the integrity of the historical novel, it has at least got people writing about it seriously. *The New Yorker's* Larissa MacFarquhar began a long profile of Mantel with a disquisition on the art of historical fiction. Craig Raine's tri-quarterly *Areté* recently featured an essay on Mantel, which dutifully brought in Henry James's letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, the classic argument against historical fiction, and one that has been cited against Mantel in reviews of her past work:

. . . *the* real thing is almost impossible to do, and in its absence the whole effect is as naught: I mean the invention,

the representation of the old CONSCIOUSNESS, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose mind half the things that make ours, that make the modern world, were non-existent.

But another Booker nominee, Ned Beaman's *The Teleportation Accident*, came close to achieving what Henry James called the 'real thing.'

Beaman's 2010 debut *Boxer, Beetle* was a historical novel with both a complex moral seriousness and a sense of playfulness. Featuring a collector of Nazi memorabilia and a repressed homosexual eugenicist, it was a nuanced exercise in getting into consciousnesses separated from our own by the gulf of the Holocaust. *The Teleportation Accident* returns quite brilliantly to the same epoch with a more developed purpose. Ergon Loeser, a set designer in 1930s Berlin, wants to put on a play about the life of Adriano Lavicini, a legendary seventeenth-century set designer whose spectacular invention – 'the Teleportation Device' – killed him and half the inhabitants of a theatre. Loeser is terrified of artistic and romantic failure, and is continually bettered on both fronts. When Rupert Rackenham, an English writer, seduces the woman he is interested in and writes a historical novel about Lavicini, Loeser is inspired to fail on the international stage. We watch him humiliate himself from Paris to Los Angeles as he tracks down a girl who once stood him up. This girl is Adele Hitler, no relation to Adolf, who becomes a means for the book to pun on Loeser's political apathy and ignorance. A different Hitler causes his friends to repatriate, but Loeser cares more about sex – or rather complaining about his lack of it – than the rise of the Nazis. When he finds Adele she is working in California as a lab assistant to Dr. Bailey, a scientist building a real teleportation device. 'Where?' Bailey asks himself, 'did it come from, this compulsion to tumble always back into the past?'

And so the book's main concern, more than the rise of the Nazis, is the story of literary time travel – the ways in which we construct history afresh. Many of the aspects that critics have examined in Mantel's writing – the cooperation of historical fact and novelistic invention, for instance – barely concern Beaman. His quarry, along with the representation of historical consciousness and conscience, is the moral philosophy of historical

novels. *The Teleportation Accident* questions the fallacies propounded by its characters: Rackenham's theory that 'History is a sort of fantasy, and fantasy softens the blow;' and Loeser's theory of 'equivalence', that 'nothing ever changed.'

But history in this novel hardens the blow. Beaman proves himself to be consistently deadly with the moment when you smell irony on the turn. Living now in California and still refusing to believe that the historical Hitler will make any difference to his life, he fails to take seriously the accounts of public persecution sent him by Jewish friends remaining in Berlin. At one point, Loeser loses interest in a horrifying letter and crumples it when he is halfway through.

Beaman's playfulness is always hiding and then revealing his moral seriousness. His characters initially seem chosen for their garish exteriors, their heightened physical features, but they reveal themselves to have subtle, historically-conditioned minds. They are similar to people who live now, but there's something very slightly off – they lean and tilt morally. In *Boxer, Beetle*, the repressed homosexual eugenicist Philip Erskine expresses the distanced, condescending homophobia of his day, and, when infiltrating an underground gay club, 'mentally review[s] all that he knew about perverts in case he should be obliged to pass for one.' (Note especially the clinical decorum of 'obliged' and, more discreetly, 'review[s].') The mind of boxer and underdog Seth 'Sinner' Roach usually accommodates our modern sympathies but sometimes intelligently agitates:

In the world he knew, it wasn't unusual for brothers to end up fucking their sisters, or at least to come close, and he was proud that he'd never touched her like that.

Look at the defensiveness, the skewed normalcy and wholesomeness of this sentence! The way the tone unashamedly seeks the reader's congratulation for the most basic decency. It is as if, as Henry James puts it in the Jewett letter, something that constitutes the modern moral horizon is casually missing from these characters. Beaman's conception of the historical mind is the opposite of Mantel's conception. Where Beaman methodically works backwards from modernity, trimming tolerance and

resuscitating old prejudices, Mantel has her Early Modern man take his historical setting for granted – Thomas Cromwell exists in a paradoxically present tense – and fill his thoughts with a made-up set of values and social implications which attach themselves like familiar and universal ones.

Mantel imports a historical vernacular of thought into her similes, so we take them as familiar to us already; part of our own vernacular. In *Wolf Hall*, the first Cromwell novel, a cheese is ‘pitted and wobbling, like the face of a stable boy after a night out.’ When the Duke of Norfolk prods Cromwell belittlingly in the shoulder, he is ‘like a baker pressing the dimples into a batch of manchet loaves.’ The everyday to Cromwell is foreign to us. Manchet loaves aren’t made anymore and the stable boy’s face – or at least its connotations of class – are unfamiliar, but we trick ourselves into an easy understanding because of the ease, the readiness, with which these things slip into Cromwell’s thoughts. Yes, we think: that is exactly what these things seem like. In *Bring Up the Bodies*, when someone is described as ‘one of those men who had made a career of riding to tournaments all over Europe,’ we think, yes, one of *those*. We know the type, or think we do.

The historical success of the Cromwell novels is half due to authorial skill, half to the natural caste of Mantel’s mind. She is preoccupied with the uncanny; she has written fiction about mediums and spoken of her sensitivity to the paranormal, and in the light of this, her recent historical Booker winners, with their palpable five hundred year lag, seem not to have been much of a challenge for her. You can’t easily separate the foreign air of moral malevolence in the Cromwell novels from Mantel’s particular sensibility. In *Bring Up the Bodies*, when Anne Boleyn is upset about the death of her dog, her sister-in-law Lady Rochford says, ‘Do you know . . . when she miscarried her last child, she did not shed a tear.’ The domestic competition of this sentence, the economy of its spite, its preoccupation with children and childlessness, would allow it to fit seamlessly into one of her modern novels: *Every Day is Mother’s Day* or *Beyond Black*.

The historical exists in Beaman’s novels to make us feel uncomfortable, to provoke ambivalence or debate. *The Teleportation Accident* goes further than its predecessor; even *Boxer, Beetle* – with its sympathetic collector

of Nazi memorabilia and its eugenicist – declared its intentions. When we meet Philip Erskine, the Holocaust hasn't yet happened, so he retains his dramatic innocence. But as the reader has foreknowledge of the Holocaust and (fictional) knowledge that Erskine would eventually name a species of beetle after Hitler, his guilt is more than just potential. We are made to entertain his mind so as to eventually dislike him with more intelligence. But by giving jarring historical thoughts to Ergon Loeser, who reads more like a contemporary being than Erskine – an artist-intellectual, a liberal and a comedic failure – Beauman makes it unclear whether we should judge the man or the time. Does Loeser's theory of 'equivalence' – that nothing ever changes – apply to the reading of him and other historical characters? The result is a far more insidious and challenging historical novel.

When we first meet Loeser he is thoroughly unsympathetic but great company, like a cultured, neurotic cousin of Martin Amis's John Self. We follow him into the brothels of Weimar Berlin rather than eighties New York. Instead of the infamous cringe-worthy, mock-heroic attempted rape scenes in *Money*, we see Loeser debating whether or not to have sex with a fifteen-year-old prostitute after the madam construes that he wants a young girl. Both have inappropriately witty one-sentence paragraphs and punch lines designed to make us feel uncomfortable, then ashamed of ourselves for finding the choreography and farce amusing. We are partly meant to disassociate ourselves from, and therefore partly forgive Loeser's sexual ethics as normal for decadent Berlin, in the same way *Boxer, Beetle* asked us to suspend our judgement of a eugenicist long enough to read him, so that we can eventually give him a more thorough condemnation. This authorial request is complex and often misunderstood. For readers, nothing changes, and products of a different time are open to be judged by a timeless, universal aesthetic, which is imposed after the fact.

Beauman's historical fiction does all the things which one expects a novel set in the present to do and which people like Henry James thought the historical novel couldn't do. *Boxer, Beetle* suffered slightly from its youthful sprawl and tendency to sprout subplots, although Beauman neatly tied them all up. *The Teleportation Accident* is if anything more exuberant with its story-telling, but this is balanced by the (controlled) use of

postmodern techniques. Beaman has made room for all his subplots and ideas by giving the novel secret compartments – multiple false bottoms. It has a dextrous concertina of endings with a range of thousands of years. As a reader you don't get exhausted by all the invention and information, as can so easily happen with big books that have labyrinthine plots but only the one chamber. They are one-storied structures, only big in length. You can go forwards, turn corners and (most often) go backwards, but you never fall down a trapdoor, or see a view from the balcony.

The Booker panel as well as those writing essays on Hilary Mantel may have missed a trick in not affording more time to Beaman's book and its new look at the past. *Wolf Hall*, Mantel's first novel about Cromwell to win the Booker, had a similar fresh power. Primarily because it is a sequel, *Wolf Hall* having done all the work to establish the novels' own peculiar present, *Bring Up the Bodies* has a feeling of complacency. It is no longer in Mantel's best interest to emphasise unfamiliarity because she has achieved familiarity; she has made her reader live in the past. But this means we become immune to her finer touches. The book settles down to be a wonderfully observed political thriller, dressed in excellent prose and period clothing. And though it has been rightly praised for its chilling finale, we can easily put our finger on why it chills us. If we no longer feel a strange discomfort in reading the thoughts of a five hundred year old man, in the same way our ear does when it hears a five hundred year old piece of music, what is the point?

Thus the only artistic failing of Mantel's latest historical novel has less to do with its quality than our capacity as readers to respond to novelty. But admitting this isn't too unjust – as we know, *Bring Up the Bodies* hasn't suffered commercially or critically. Ned Beaman's *The Teleportation Accident* proves a wonderful, promising irony: that an exciting work of fiction about the true past relies on novelty and invention of thought.