

*Of tides and men: history and agency in Hilary Mantel's A Place of Greater Safety**

Pilar HIDALGO
University of Málaga

“To impute the revolution to men is to impute the tide to the waves”
(VICTOR HUGO, *Quatrevingt-treize*).

ABSTRACT

Carlyle's *The French Revolution* and Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* have been influential on the British construction of the French Revolution, and both historian and novelist share their perception of the Revolution as revenge exacted by the French people against their aristocratic oppressors. In making the leaders of the Revolution the protagonists of *A Place of Greater Safety* and in foregrounding their private lives, Mantel writes a new kind of historical novel in which the issue of agency is left unresolved.

Key words: Hilary Mantel, history and fiction, the French Revolution and British fiction.

RESUMEN

DE ÉPOCAS Y HOMBRES: HISTORIA Y AGENCIA EN A PLACE OF GREATER SAFETY, DE HILARY MANTEL

En *A Place of Greater Safety* Hilary Mantel ficcionaliza la revolución francesa y rompe, tanto con la novela histórica tradicional que situaba a personajes de la vida

* The research for this paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education, DGICYT PB98-1406.

corriente en los márgenes de grandes acontecimientos históricos, como con la influyente construcción de Carlyle y Dickens que habían presentado la revolución como la venganza del pueblo francés contra una aristocracia opresora. Al hacer a tres de los líderes revolucionarios sus protagonistas, Mantel sitúa en primer plano la conexión entre vidas privadas y esfera pública, evita un punto de vista unitario, y plantea la cuestión de la agencia revolucionaria.

Palabras clave: Hilary Mantel, historia y novela, la revolución francesa y la novela británica.

1. LIVING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

When Oscar Wilde's *Lady Bracknell* interviews her prospective son-in-law in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the discovery that Jack Worthing had been found as a baby in a handbag in the cloak-room at Victoria Station provokes the following comment:

To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? (Wilde 1895/1980: 31-32).

The comment, which incidentally shows Lady Bracknell's ignorance of Jacobin attitudes to women and family life, highlights some aspects of one British dominant construction of the Revolution which, on a more exalted level than that of Lady Bracknell, had Edmund Burke as its early brilliant spokesman. Unlike Burke who, writing in 1790, could only cover the early phase of the Revolution, Carlyle's *The French Revolution* and Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* tell the whole story of the Revolution (in Dickens's case, of course, very selectively) and focus on people and events rather than in the political philosophy underlying Burke's *Reflections*. The difference (among others) between Carlyle and Dickens is that Carlyle deals with historical characters, and in *A Tale of Two Cities*, as in other Victorian historical novels (*Esmond*, *Romola*), the plot focuses on ordinary people placed on the margins of momentous events.

Mantel's originality in *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992) lies in her making the protagonists of the French Revolution the centre of narrative interest, and in fictionalising the way they lived their private, and then all-too-public lives, from their childhood to the execution of Danton and Desmoulin in 1794. Against the influential British tradition, represented by Carlyle and Dickens, of the Revolution as revenge exacted by the French people on their aristocratic oppressors, Mantel gives a startlingly vivid picture of the Revolution as a

profit-making and life-enhancing venture, and of history as fiction attributed to the wrong author.

The crucial events in the development of the Revolution (the storming of the Bastille, the flight to Varennes, the fall of the monarchy, the trial of the King, the war against the European powers) are not presented as part of a historical narrative, but rather as episodes in the lives of the protagonists which impinge on their marriages, friendships and way of living. This is a novel in which it is difficult to tell what is historical from what is fictional, in which the author embeds Robespierre's famous quote, "History is fiction", in a conversation with Camille Desmoulins (Mantel 1992/93: 566), and which meditates not so much on history, as on the strangeness of existence.

In making a novel out of some of the best-known episodes and characters in modern European history, the first issue to be addressed is one of selection: when to begin and when to end, what events to highlight, whether the protagonists will be fictional or historical, and the perspective from which the story will be told. I think the choices Mantel has made are significant in themselves, quite apart from the way she handles her material. She places the beginning of her story some twenty years before the Revolution, when the protagonists are children in the French provinces. By giving the reader privileged access to the protagonists' childhoods, she makes Desmoulins, Danton and Robespierre look more like fictional characters. She also roots some if not all of their future political careers in their early experience: Camille's rebelliousness is partly a consequence of his difficult relationship with his father, Robespierre's concern for the underdog derives from his mistaken suspicions about his legitimacy. Danton's early family life is less complicated; his ugly face, scarred in a childhood accident, and powerful physique foretell aspects of his subsequent revolutionary persona.

The links between the first chapters and the rest of the novel are mainly biographical, but on occasion also thematic and figurative. The day when Robespierre's mother dies giving birth to her fifth child, the small boy plays with the lace at his aunt's cuff and thinks: "His mother could make lace" (14). At the end of the novel, when Camille and Danton have just been judicially murdered, Robespierre remembers his mother making lace:

He sees the girl on the window-seat, her body swollen, pregnant with death: he sees the light on her bent head; beneath her fingers the airy pattern, going nowhere, flying away (871).

I think the decision to stop immediately after the executions of Danton and Desmoulins, and to leave out the events leading up to Thermidor, is coherent with the focusing of the narrative on the personal and political relationships between Camille, Danton and Robespierre. The final Note

informs the reader of the fate of the characters who remained alive at the end of the narrative proper; most evocative of all is the information that Adèle Duplessis, Lucile Desmoulins' sister and a very minor character in the novel, did not die until 1854, that is, sixty years after the executions of her sister, her brother-in-law, and her former suitor Robespierre.

2. WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN

In an interview with Rosario Arias, Mantel touches on her life-long interest in the French Revolution, which she sees as not only having to do with a specific set of events, but with “the question of what it is to be human, which I think is the defining question of revolutions. What it is to be human, what rights does it give, what responsibilities does it compel, and who decides ...” (Arias 1998: 288).

The huge scope of *A Place of Greater Safety* offers its author ample opportunity to answer the question about what it is to be human and its accompanying rights and responsibilities. Who decides, or to put it another way, who set the revolution in motion and for what ends, remains a moot point when the narrative is over. The dilemma is not new. In his novel about the events of 1793, *Quatrevingt-treize* (1874), Victor Hugo dispenses with notions of guilt and innocence, and incidentally of agency, and offers instead a cosmic view of the revolution as storm in which “Desmoulins, Danton, Marat, Grégoire and Robespierre are only scribes. The true author is God” (Quoted in Ferguson 1994/97: 168).

The identity of the author of the Revolution is precisely what remains hidden in *A Place of Greater Safety*. The myth-making nature of the events and characters it chronicles obscures the fact, although the text is sometimes made to voice its lack, as we shall see further on. Any writer purporting to tell the story of the French Revolution has his/her script to a certain extent written beforehand. S/he must include a portrait of the situation of France on the eve of the Revolution, the calling of the Estates-General, the fall of the Bastille, the women's march to Versailles, the flight to Varennes, the fall of the monarchy on August 10 1792, the September massacres, the execution of the King, perhaps also of the Queen, the creation of the Committee for Public Safety, the Terror, and Thermidor.

Mantel's choices are revelatory. Like Carlyle, she begins with Louis XV, but whereas he had devoted the first and shortest book of his massive history to the death of the Well-beloved, she uses as epigraph to the first part of the novel an anecdote about the king taken from Michelet, the great historian of the Revolution, and proceeds to plunge into the early married life of Camille Desmoulins's parents. It would be tempting to see in Mantel's imaginary

reconstruction of the childhood and youth of the three protagonists of her novel a privatization of what were highly public and politicized lives. Tempting but wrong since, to my mind, one of the most original traits of this original work is the blurring of the boundaries between the political and the domestic, to such an extent that, as we shall see further on, the most momentous political decision in the novel, and arguably in the history of the Revolution, is taken in a domestic setting and under the impulse of very personal emotions.

The problematic nature of revolutionary agency in the novel is made evident precisely at the moments when we would expect the characters to take decisive action and influence the course of history. A good example is the account of Desmoulins's famous harangue in the Palais Royal calling the people to arms and to the barricades. What the narrator calls "Camille's precipitate entry into history" (220) proceeds as if the protagonist were an automaton. Somebody behind him suggests that he address the crowd, three unknown young men start the cry for arms, and somebody puts a pistol in Camille's hand.

The contrast with Carlyle is illuminating. He describes the storming of the Bastille in Book V (*The Third State*), chapter 6 («Storm and Victory») of *The French Revolution*. The purely narrative sequence is brief and comprises the people's need for arms (which will be taken from the Invalides), the role of De Launay as governor of the fortress and the visit of Elector Thuriot. The assault itself is presented in typically Carlylean fashion in the form of second-person address ("Roar with all your throats, of cartilage and metal, ye Sons of Liberty; stir spasmodically whatsoever of utmost faculty is in you, soul, body, or spirit; for it is the hour!" (Carlyle 1837/1989: 199).

Carlyle takes pains to give the names and trades of the known assailants: Louis Tournay, cartwright, Aubin Bonnemère, old soldier, half-pay Elie, Cholat, wine-maker, Santerre, brewer, and so on. Immersed in the present, the narrative looks for a moment to the future when it describes Marat's brief intervention: "Great truly, O thou remarkable Dogleech, is this thy day of emergence and new-birth: and yet this same day come four years - ! But let the curtains of the Future hang" (203). As Dickens would do later, Carlyle thus highlights the protagonism of the suburb Saint Antoine and stresses the class-war aspect of the revolt.

It can be argued that Carlyle was writing history, not fiction. But no one writing in English about the French Revolution can escape the Carlylean example, as both Dickens and Mantel show in their very different ways. A case in point is the presentation of the September massacres in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Place of Greater Safety*. Dickens, who sees the Revolution wholly from the outside, ignores the political infighting that Mantel explores at length, and concentrates on the theme of revolution-as-revenge that he

took from Carlyle. He does not present the actual butchery but mythologizes it with such details as the sharpening of knives and hatches on the grindstone:

As these ruffians turned and turned, their matted locks now flung forward over their eyes, now flung backward over their necks, some women held wine to their mouths that they might drink; and what with dropping blood, and what with dropping wine, and what with the stream of sparks struck out of the stone, all their wicked atmosphere seemed gore and fire. The eye could not detect one creature in the group free from the smear of blood ... Hatches, knives, bayonets, swords, all brought to be sharpened, were all red with it. (Dickens 1859/1970: 291)

This is a far cry from the quasi-bureaucratic quality of the scene in Mantel when the revolutionary leaders prepare the lists of people to be murdered or saved. We can guess that Mantel has in mind the twentieth-century experience of mass murder, although, if numbers alone were concerned, the September massacres would not rate very high in the annals of atrocities. The different manner in which the two novelists and the historian present the September events is instructive. Dickens avoids the actual murders, and suggests what is going on through the description of the ferocious and animal-like aspect of the murderers, as we saw above. Carlyle begins by giving a historical (and exculpatory) perspective on the massacres:

From Sunday afternoon ... till Thursday evening, there follows consecutely a Hundred Hours. Which hundred hours are to be reckoned with the hours of the Bartholomew Butchery, of the Armagnac Massacres, Sicilian Vespers, or whatsoever is savagest in the annals of this world. Horrible the hour when man's soul, in its paroxysm, spurns asunder the barriers and rules; and shows what dens and depths are in it! (Volume II, 149-50).

Carlyle then offers a full account of the massacres with an abundance of revolting details. Mantel avoids these, and focuses instead on the involvement of her leading characters in the planning, though she cannot resist giving a brief account of the fate of the *Princesse de Lamballe* (520). She makes Camille attend the all-night session when a group of revolutionaries strike names from the lists of people held in the Paris prisons. Camille saves a refractory priest and a lawyer, both of whom he had known in his youth. The arbitrary nature of the proceeding is emphasized, and there is an allusion to the fact that some people saved their lives for a fee. Once the killings start, the situation quickly gets out of control:

Exasperation at midday. 'We might as well not have bothered sitting up all night over those lists', Fabre says. 'I'm sure the wrong people are being killed' (518).

Mantel keeps Danton and Robespierre away from the scene; however, as Minister of Justice at the time, the former cannot escape responsibility. She dilutes the question of culpability by embedding (immediately after the account of the Princesse de Lamballe's torture and death) a quotation from Voltaire on "the nine ways in which one may share in the guilt of another's sin" (520). In any case, the September massacres are not a good testing ground for the question of revolutionary agency, since so many anonymous people were involved and chance played so decisive a role. It is also one of the few episodes in Mantel in which there are no hidden agents.

3. DANTON AND REVOLUTIONARY AGENCY

Danton's role in bringing about the fall of the monarchy on August 10 1792 is tinged with ambiguity. Mantel takes pains throughout the novel to highlight the fact that Danton enriched himself in the Revolution through his dealings with powerful groups, including the Court and the British Foreign Office. Shortly before the day set for the uprising, Camille and Danton are surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd singing the "Ça Ira" and the "Marsellaise". Danton's comment is revelatory in its suggestion of the great revolutionary leader as animal tamer:

'Strange beasts,' said Danton mildly. 'Let's hope they perform in a week or two' (454).

We do see Danton perform a couple of decisive actions in the course of the August revolt: he has the Marquis of Mandat shot, and he forces Roederer to take the royal family out of the threatened palace. But even this important role is undercut by Danton's going to his native Arcis to settle his affairs three days before the planned coup. Later in the novel, once the revolt has succeeded and Danton rules the Ministry of Justice, Camille thinks of the reflection his friend's financial dealings cast on the Revolution:

If Danton is not a patriot, then we have been criminally negligent in the nation's affairs ... If Danton is not a patriot, then the whole thing – from May '89 – must be done again (548).

Camille's doubts about the nature of the Revolution are not an isolated incident in the novel. Again, the comparison with Dickens is instructive. By eliminating politics and leaders from his narrative, by erasing the stages in the Revolution and focusing, first on the storming of the Bastille, then on the Terror, Dickens magnifies the role of the French people and privileges the view

of the Revolution as revenge. Mantel's presentation is far more nuanced and detailed, and inevitably coloured by late twentieth-century knowledge and experience. Precisely because her narrative encompasses the whole history of the Revolution (in Paris, if not in the provinces) up to the execution of Danton and Desmoulins in April 1794, and scores of historical characters have some role in her narrative, Mantel dilutes the issue of agency that appeared so misleadingly clear-cut in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

We might think that politics is to Mantel's novel what revenge (both private and social) was to Dickens's. Her three major characters are politicians, and the narrative incorporates a good deal of Camille's and Robespierre's political opinions and writings. But the first chapters of the novel offer the possibility of a psychological reading of the characters' behaviour in the Revolution, especially as regards Camille and Robespierre. The former has to cope with a forbidding father, an unresponsive mother, and a stutter, and the latter with the early death of his mother and the disappearance of his father. Danton poses different problems, both from a political and a narrative point of view. The narratorial voice makes the difficulty explicit when it accounts for the need to give Danton a chapter ("Danton: His Portrait Made") in which he tells his own story:

Now we have a problem. It wasn't envisaged that he should have part of the narrative. But time is pressing; the issues are multiplying, and in a little over two years he will be dead (389).

Just as Mantel goes out of her way to emphasize Robespierre's idealistic opinions on men and society and his indifference to personal wealth and bodily comforts, she does not spare details about Danton's steady financial rise in the Revolution from an indebted lawyer to a man of considerable property. It is a mark of the complexity of the novel that Danton, and not Robespierre, should make what is perhaps the most idealistic gesture in *A Place of Greater Safety*. When General Dumouriez tries to enlist his help for the restoration of the monarchy, Danton unhesitatingly turns him down:

'I shall maintain the Republic,' Danton said.

'Why?'

'Because it is the only honest thing there is.'

'Honest? With your people in it?'

'It may be that all its parts are corrupted, vicious, but take it altogether, yes, the Republic is an honest endeavour. Yes, it has me, it has Fabre, it has Hébert – but it also has Camille. Camille would have died for it in '89' (623).

We may notice that Danton defends the Republic on moral, rather than strictly political grounds: no matter how unsavoury many of the revo-

lutionaries that help bring it about, the Republic is an honest endeavour explicitly because it has people like Camille, and implicitly throughout the novel, because of the sheer stupidity and blindness of the old regime, exemplified by Marie Antoinette. Mantel is aware of the lurid tales about the Queen's supposed sexual profligacy put into circulation by pre-revolutionary pamphleteers (she reviewed the work of a French historian on the origins of the myth of Marie Antoinette, see Mantel, 1999), and she is also familiar with Burke's famous presentation of the French Queen in the passage beginning "It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France" in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. She takes pains to present a rather dry portrait of the Queen that stresses her political role in the events following the storming of the Bastille. Mantel's Marie Antoinette is as distant from Burke's idealization of endangered femininity as from the pamphleteers' lewd imaginings. The French Queen is a political creature who makes all the wrong moves, usually out of personal spite against Lafayette. As Danton observes:

In October our fulsome patriot Jérôme Pétion was elected Mayor of Paris. The other candidate was Lafayette. So deeply does the King's wife detest the general, that she moved heaven and earth to secure Pétion's election – Pétion, mark you, a republican. I hold it the best example yet of the political ineptitude of women (390).

4. THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE POLITICAL

It is a curious aspect of *A Place of Greater Safety* that women who because of their position (Marie Antoinette), or out of their own choice and interests (Mme Rolland, Théroigne de Méricourt) play a role in the public sphere are more feeble as fictional characters (and incidentally far less sympathetic) than women who are confined to the private sphere (Gabrielle, Danton's first wife, Lucile Desmoulins). Nonetheless Mantel conspicuously avoids the position that sees Revolution as men's affair while women carry on with everyday living, a position that Arnold Bennett endorses when he chronicles the days of the Commune in *The Old Wives' Tale* and that John Carey finds feminist:

For Sophia the siege and commune were, Bennett shows, far removed from Zola's crowd scenes and bloodshed and novelistic coincidences ... What the siege meant most vividly to her was the notice across the shuttered windows of her local creamery: 'Closed for want of milk'. The commune which followed was an inconvenience, since the streets were not always safe and she had to give orders to the butcher over the courtyard wall. But she never witnessed any violence, being too busy keeping alive and feeding her lodgers amid the havoc caused by men and politics.

It is a feminist view of a historical event that Sophia validates, and also a populist one (Carey 1992: 177-78).

Of course the boundary between private and public life became blurred as the Revolution progressed, and at the height of the Terror whole families were sent to the guillotine. Lucile Desmoulins herself was executed shortly after her husband, even though she had taken no active part in revolutionary politics.

If one of the consequences of the Revolution was the politization of the everyday, *A Place of Greater Safety* enacts the privatization of the political. I have already mentioned how the fictional reconstruction of the childhood and youth of Desmoulins, Robespierre and Danton gives the reader an insight that would have been absent from an account that stuck to the bare facts of the historical record. At the same time, the emphasis throughout the novel on what it must have felt like *living* the Revolution produces some memorable moments that, although connected with developments in the Revolution, record a very private experience. I have selected two of these moments. After the storming of the Bastille and the rioting on the streets of Paris, Camille Desmoulins meets Hérault de Séchelles at dawn. The refined and handsome aristocrat is dishevelled, his clothes are torn, and he carries a pistol in one hand and a meat cleaver in the other:

'But the waste, the irresponsibility,' Hérault said. 'They've plundered the Saint-Lazare monastery. All that fine furniture, my God, and the silver. Yes, they've raided the cellars, they're lying in the streets, vomiting now. What's that you say? Versailles? Did you say "finish it off" or "finish them off"? If so I'd better get a change of clothes, I'd hate to turn up at the palace looking like this. Oh yes', he said, and he gripped the cleaver and charged back into the crowds, 'it beats filing writs, doesn't it?'. *He had never been so happy: never, never before* (228. Emphasis added).

Incidentally, Mantel is making here the important point that revolutions can be exciting and life-enhancing, at least at the beginning, and will attract privileged people who desire to escape from routine. The second moment (there are of course others) occurs near the end of the novel, when the Committee of Public Safety is about to move against Danton and his associates. Camille arrives at Danton's parents-in-law's country retreat and is met by Angélique, Danton's mother-in-law, who had known the revolutionaries when they were struggling young lawyers who came to the café she ran with her husband:

She slid her arms around his shoulders and saw suddenly, with complete vividness, the sunlight slipping obliquely across the little marble tables, heard

the chatter and the chink of cups, smells the aroma of fresh coffee, and the river, and the faint perfume of powdered hair. Clinging to each other, swaying slightly, they stood with their eyes fixed on each other's faces, stabbed and transfixed with dread, while the laden clouds scudded and the foggy dismal torrent wrapped them like a shroud (817).

I think that this very intensity of feeling militates against a purely political and historical reading of the novel. Many of the images that stick to the mind have to do with private moments in the midst of political turmoil: Gabrielle's belongings in the house after her death, her place marked in the novel she could not finish (611), or the unknown revolutionary who comes to Danton's apartment where the women are waiting on the day of the assault against the Tuileries, kisses Lucile and tosses to Gabrielle a silver-backed hairbrush taken from the Queen's dressing-table (484). At moments like these, one might think that *A Place of Greater Safety* is not so much an historical novel, as a novel involved with the leading figures of the French Revolution and their wives, mistresses, parents, and friends. To counterbalance this privatization of public life we have an array of ceremonies, plottings, and street fightings, plus a number of extracts from pamphlets, newspapers accounts, trials, letters and debates at the National Assembly, the Convention and the Jacobin Club. Underneath the welter of ideals, hatred, ambition, resentment and chance, politics can provide the grounds for motivation and agency. And even those who believe that the French Revolution had ultimately not an excessive social and economic impact on French society, acknowledge its role in the creation of a new political culture, not only in the realm of ideas but also in the symbolic through the dissemination of songs, pictures, festivals and fashions.

Camille Desmoulins and Robespierre are the two characters in the novel who consistently act out of political conviction. Despite his entanglements with Mirabeau and the Duke of Orléans, Camille is one of the first to voice republican ideals and he abides by them until the end. The reproduction of some of his journalistic writings gives the reader access to his political thinking, and Mantel emphasizes his role, as the brilliant author of the *Old Cordelier* numbers, in the campaign to stop the Terror in the winter of 1793. What makes Camille, if not the protagonist, at least one of the most compelling characters in the novel, is the rare combination of passionate commitment and ironic detachment which saves him from priggishness, and allows him to face both the need for the Revolution and the messy and unpalatable ways to achieve it.

Mantel must have been aware that Robespierre would not likely prove to be a sympathetic fictional character, and she has taken considerable pains to foreground his more admirable qualities. While most of the revolutionaries do quite well out of the Revolution, Robespierre lives frugally in the Duplay

house, works tirelessly and is right on all the major issues: he distrusts Mirabeau from the start, is in favour of the abolition of the death penalty, against the war with the European powers when France is unprepared, later against the grotesque excesses of the dechristianising campaign, and so on. She even gives him a brief self-deprecating comment when Danton reports the activities in the salon of Madame Roland in the year before the fall of the monarchy:

Robespierre used to go to supper there, so I gather they're a high-minded lot. I asked him did he contribute much to the conversation: he said, 'Not a word do I speak, I sit in a corner and bite my nails.' He has his moments, does Maximilien (395).

5. THE MEANING OF REVOLUTION

As a novelist, Mantel does not take part in the controversy among historians about the overall meaning and consequences of the French Revolution, whether it was, in the orthodox Marxist interpretation, a bourgeois revolt against feudalism, or, in the view which had in Alfred Cobban one of its leading exponents:

It was not wholly a revolution for, but largely one against, the penetration of an embryo capitalism into French society. Considered as such, it largely achieved its ends. The peasant proprietors in the country, and the lawyers, *rentiers* and men of property in the towns, successfully resisted the new economic trends (Cobban 1964/1999: 172).

It is characteristic of the far less analytical and more mythologizing nature of *A Tale of Two Cities* that the sort of question asked regarding the historical aspect of the novel is whether Dickens's presentation of the French Revolution, a presentation which has been so influential on the British imaginary, was ultimately positive or negative. Orwell observed that, despite the depiction of the *ancien régime* as oppressive and cruel in the novel, Dickens gives the impression that it would have been better if the aristocracy had treated the people humanely, thus avoiding revolution, a viewpoint that, as Orwell rightly comments, is not that of the true revolutionary, for whom the brutality of the ruling class plays a necessary role (Orwell 1940/1972: 98).

From a different perspective, David Craig finds that Dickens tends to present the people as a brutalized mass, that his leading revolutionaries, the Defarge, are not poor, and that he further erases the real suffering and starvation (this I think is misleading, since the scenes set in the Marquis's

domains give a vivid picture of the destitution of the pesasants) (Craig 1983: 79, 80).

If this sort of questions do not easily arise from the reading a *A Place of Greater Safety*, it does not follow that Mantel's novel is not deeply involved in political issues. As a matter of fact, Edwin Frank deploys the novel in his attack on Simon Schama's *Citizens*, the highly successful chronicle of the French Revolution, published in 1989 to coincide with the two hundredth anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. Frank oversimplifies when he says that, in writing *Citizens*, Schama was determined "to prove that the Revolution was nothing more than an outbreak of mass hysteria" (Frank 1995: 30). Schama certainly does not overlook the violence that had driven the Revolution from its beginnings, or justify it because of the supposedly idealistic intentions of the perpetrators:

While it would be grotesque to implicate the generation of 1789 in the kind of hideous atrocities perpetrated under the Terror, it would be equally naive not to recognize that the former made the latter possible. All the newspapers, the revolutionary festivals, the painted plates; the songs and street theatre ... were the product of the same morbid preoccupation with the just massacre and the heroic death (Schama 1989: 859).

Frank is quite perceptive when he relates Mantel's imaginative presentation of private experience in the midst of the Revolution, to her grasp of the personal and political opportunities that the Revolution opened up, and that would have probably remained closed in the course of the ordinary evolution of social and political life that Schama advocates:

The domestic and personal emphases of Mantel's tale reflect her understanding of the Revolution as, essentially, the public and political emergence of a few seemingly simple demands: to be free, to be as happy as one can, to be at home in the world. In Mantel's telling, it is these apparently ordinary ambitions ... that unleashed the transformative yet treacherous energies of the Revolution (32).

A Place of Greater Safety neither asks nor answers questions of the type "Was the revolution necessary?", or "was the violence used inevitable or justified?", not even, some appearances to the contrary, "who profited by the Revolution?". Although the story is mostly told in the third person, the novel lacks a central point of view and could be an example of the kind of Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse which Sue Vice finds in Holocaust fiction, as a result of the juxtaposition of literary with historical discourse, or that of different and opposed historical sources (Vice 2000: 9). One is irresistibly reminded of Mantel's work when Vice finds polyphonic and dialogic features in Holocaust fiction inasmuch as "the narrator is constructed

in just the same way as the characters, and has no superior factual or moral knowledge" (9).

That the narrator in *A Place of Greater Safety* does not provide a totalising moral viewpoint does not mean that the narrative is neutral. The mere fact that it focuses on Camille, Danton and Robespierre inevitably privileges their perspective. The views and actions of other factions within the Revolution (especially those of the Girondins) are filtered through Camille, Robespierre and Marat; *enragés* and sansculottes are kept on the margins. I think that it is when dealing with questions of money and agency that the novel becomes truly dialogic and calls on the reader to negotiate his or her own opinions.

In her presentation of the most spectacular mass actions of the Revolution, Mantel does not elude the fact that they were all orchestrated and financed in shady deals involving the Duke of Orleans and sometimes foreign powers. The ideological battlelines become blurred when Robespierre's musings on the need for the common people to believe in an Eternal Being ("If there is no Supreme Being, what are the people to think who live all their lives in hardship and want?", 729) sound remarkably similar to Burke's opinions on the subject:

The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect that property of which they cannot partake. They must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportionated to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice. Of this consolation, whoever deprives them, deadens their industry, and strikes at the root of all acquisition as of all conservation (Burke 1790/1986: 372).

As both Carlyle and Mantel make abundantly clear, the situation of the poor did not improve with the Revolution. In the final pages of *The French Revolution*, Carlyle quotes Mercier's description of the dinner of grilled herrings, scant bread and onions he saw working men consume on the Place de Grève (Carlyle entitles this chapter "Grilled Herrings") and goes on to apostrophize the workers: "O Man of Toil, thy struggling and thy daring, these six long years of insurrection and tribulation, thou has profited nothing by it then?" (444). In Mantel's novel, even the most radical leaders seem to aim for liberty and an ideal republic (in the case of Robespierre, *vertu*) in which the social structure would remain pretty much the same (minus the monarchy and the hereditary aristocracy of course). When Camille and Marat discuss how to get rid of the leaders of the sansculottes who, from their point of view, are endangering the Revolution, Marat adduces that they are not

revolutionaries but atavists who delude the people; according to Camille, “the situation of the poor does not change. It is just that the people who think it can change are admired by posterity” (579).

Mantel makes explicit something that I think is implicit in the novel in her review of a study of the women of Paris during the French Revolution. After describing the hunger and cold of the winter of 1794-95 and the desperate situation of the people, she concludes:

But the Revolution has changed something: even if it is only the quality of the people's despair. From now on, the demand to live is not isolated from the demand to live free. In the repression and frozen privation of 1795, the cry is not for 'Bread', but for 'Bread and the Constitution of 1793' (Mantel 1998: 6).

By erasing the liberal aristocrats who were crucial in the early phase, and the lawyers, journalists and businessmen of the second, and by concentrating on street action and events such as the storming of the Bastille and the September massacres, Dickens had given the impression that the people had had a decisive role in the Revolution. Mantel on the other hand eschews the myth-making aspects of Dickens's *Tale* and stresses the day-to-day business of men and women being driven by forces they do not always know or control.

Perhaps the greatest attack the novel makes against the notion of revolutionary agency is the presentation of Robespierre's motives for moving against Danton and his comrades and thus arguably ensuring the demise of the Revolution three months later. In a startling and rare departure from 'real' history, Mantel makes Robespierre's long-delayed decision to break with Danton and Camille turn on an imaginary private matter of honour and on the Incorruptible's feelings of sexual inferiority. Both early historical and literary accounts of the Revolution (witness Büchner's *Danton's Death* and Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, Book VI, chapter II, where he says of Robespierre: “with what terror of *feminine* hatred the poor seagreen Formula looked at the monstrous colossal Reality, and grew greener to behold him” (Carlyle 1837/1989: 383. *Emphasis added.*) privilege the element of personal animosity in the political rivalry between the two men. Mantel, who takes great pains to delineate the psychological and ideological make-up of Robespierre, follows in Carlyle's footsteps and, with the novelist's greater freedom, invents a sexual misdemeanour by Danton that offers Robespierre the high-minded pretext he needed to get rid of him.

The cumulative effect of the leading figures' lack of agency at crucial moments in the story, together with Danton's dubious financial dealings and Robespierre's obvious feelings of sexual inadequacy, makes the alert reader aware of the existence of a hidden agenda behind the revolutionary façade. Near the end of the novel, Camille himself becomes suspicious about his role

in the revolutionary grand narrative: “what if some con-trick I thought was cooked up in a Palais-Royal café is really a gigantic conspiracy woven in Whitehall?” (752). If, as I take it, *A Place of Greater Safety* is not so much a novel about the French Revolution but rather about *living* the Revolution, the inescapable conclusion seems to be that the author of the revolutionary script remains hidden to the end.

Pilar Hidalgo Andreu

Dpto. de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana
 Universidad de Málaga, Campus de Teatinos, 29071
 Málaga, España
 phandreu@teleline.es

REFERENCES

- Arias, R. (1998). An interview with Hilary Mantel. *Atlantis*, 20: 2, 277-89.
- Beckwith, Charles E., ed., (1972). *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of A Tale of Two Cities*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Büchner, George (1993, 1835). *Danton's Death*, in *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Burke, Edmund (1986, 1790). *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Carey, John (1992). *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Carlyle, Thomas (1989, 1837). *The French Revolution*. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cobban, Alfred (1999, 1964). *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Craig, David (1983). The crowd in Dickens. In R. Giddings, ed.: 75-90.
- Ferguson, Priscilla P. (1997, 1994). *Paris as Revolution : Writing the 19th-Century City*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Frank, Edwin (1995). Writing About Revolution. *Boston Review* (Summer): 30-33.
- Giddings, Robert, ed. (1983). *The Changing World of Dickens*. London: Vision Press.
- Mantel, Hilary (1993, 1992). *A Place of Greater Safety*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- (1998). The National Razor. *London Review of Books* (16 July), 1-6.
- (1999). Fatal Non-Readers. *London Review of Books* (30 September): 28-30.
- Orwell, George (1940 1972). Viewpoints. In C. E. Beckwith, ed., 96-100.
- Schama, Simon (1989). *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Vice, Sue (2000). *Holocaust Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wilde, Oscar (1980,1895). *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Edited by Russell Jackson. London: Ernest Benn Limited.