The Mirror and the Light. New Reflections on Old Stories
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In August last year my mother died, after a short illness. She was 91 and yet her family were surprised. We expected her to live to be 100 at least. I have always said, the women in my family live to be a great age. In fact, I don't have enough examples to be sure that is true. It is a sort of poetic truth: what I mean is that they trail a long past.
My mother was born in 1926, so when she was growing up the men around her were survivors of the Great War of 1914-18. She had no brothers or sisters, so she spent her time listening to adults, and she took the stories of these men into herself. She grew up in the north of England in a cotton spinning village and she went to work in the mill when she was fourteen. She did not have much education, and for her, history was the story of the people she knew. It was vivid and personal, and could be no other way.
Her family was Irish and lived as an Irish family transplanted to England, but she herself had never crossed the water, and so Ireland was unreal to her, less a physical place than a state of mind. She saw that she, Margaret, had few opportunities, that the world didn't treat her very well or value her very much, but she acquired no historic sense of grievance: she had no context for her disadvantage, no perspective on her place in the world. She did not see herself as a being *in* history: yet somehow she knew that the men whose war stories she listened to were part of a larger story: that they were individuals, but shared their fate with millions.
We have just commemorated the end of the Great War. I know that in this conflict Holland was a neutral country, but wars do not respect their own borders: they always bring prisoners and refugees, hunger and hardship, dislocation and disease, and they trail after them consequences that last for years. My family was lucky in the Great War – as these things go. All my mother's uncles returned alive, though damaged in various ways. That damage didn't stop with one generation: the results of those broken lives are still felt today. My grandfather, my mother's father, was a sergeant instructor in the Machine Gun Corps. After the war, with no one to instruct, he instructed his only child, so that all her life my mother was able to recite, like a parrot, the instructions for loading and firing a deadly weapon.
She found it impossible to outgrow or forget what she heard in her childhood. She carried a history that wasn't hers. It seemed to me that she was an unconscious reflector, a mirror, to the experience of others. Often I wanted to assert, on her behalf, the right to forget. About two weeks before her death, she dreamt that she was on a battlefield under fire, in the trenches, amid the shelling. It was a disturbing and profound dream that left her shaken, and when she told it to me, I knew, if I had not known before, that her own life was drawing to its close. She was entering the realm of the transpersonal: to put it another way, her father was coming back to guide her over the threshold.
In the next year, after she had gone, I found out a good deal about loss, its physiological impact. I did not know before that loss feels so much like hunger. It feels as if a space is opening inside you, and in that space, you put the dead, and their histories, and make them part of yourself.

I am not a historian by training but I have spent a lot of my life making spaces for the dead. I was lucky enough to have the education that was denied to my mother, so I can look beyond the people I know and my immediate physical world. I have a context within which I can exercise my imagination, to range over European history. As a child I never felt that I had a grip on Englishness itself. Growing up in the north, amid bleak moorland and an industrial landscape, I could not see my experience reflected in picture-postcard images of thatched cottages and green country lanes. I seemed to be excluded from this kind of nostalgic Englishness, and it had no appeal for me. When I began writing, at the age of 22, I began with a novel set in the French Revolution. It seemed to me that national boundaries were irrelevant here. The Revolution belonged to the whole world. It was not until I had written and published many novels that I moved on to the central ground of Englishness – the age of the Tudors. I planted my flag there. Now I am coming to the end of a project that has occupied me for about 15 years. It is a trilogy of novels about the 16th century politician Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to Henry VIII. The final novel is called *The Mirror and the Light*, and I hope it will be ready in time to be published next year.

It is true that life speeds up as you get older, and my scholarly friend Dr Draaisma has written a book to explain why. But even so, 15 years is a big slice of a working life. In that time you change. You change as a person and as an artist — if indeed the two can be separated. Writing seems to generate its own set of memories, as if the text had a personal past. Often if I look back at a passage, even in my very early books, I recall where I was, how I was, when I wrote it: even if it's thirty-five years ago. It remains rooted in physicality, in the senses. I don't remember every step of the thinking that led me to it, but I remember the light on the wall, or the smell of varnish from a library desk.

But like ordinary memory, writing memory has its defects. In my present work, novel three of the trilogy, I might write a phrase — it comes perhaps a little too easily — I look at it, suspicious — did I say that in novel one? Is my imagination caught in a loop – or is my text experiencing déjà vu?

My memory is challenged by a narrative that moves backwards and forwards chronologically, in which stories are never complete, or authoritative, and the dead are never quite dead, but return to advise and warn the living, or sometimes just to frighten them or plunge them back into mourning when they thought they had recovered.

Thomas Cromwell's life began in obscurity: which is not always a bad thing for a novelist, as it opens up opportunities for the imagination. When you undertake to re-imagine the life of a person who is on the public record, you are looking for what isn't there: for the erasures and absences that call for your creative attention. I would like to know when his birthday was, or the name of his mother, but I must be content with guessing at a birth year of around 1485, and with knowing that his father, Walter Cromwell, was a brewer and a blacksmith in the town of Putney, on the river Thames about 10 kilometres south-west of London. The family were not very poor, but there is no record of Thomas's education, and he seems to have left home at about the age of 15 to pursue his adventures in Europe.

I said that the Tudors are the center of the story the English tell about themselves. In our national mythology, which is doing so much damage today, this era is characterised as the time when England learned to stand proudly

alone — the era of the split from Europe – the break with Rome. But I try to suggest to my readers that this narrative is inadequate and inaccurate, and doesn't reflect they way people thought at the time. Breaking with the papacy was not the same as breaking with Europe. Culture, history, treaties and trade tied England into a shared future. A new, non-Catholic Europe was coming into being. No one was more cosmopolitan than Thomas Cromwell himself. It was his European contacts that earned him his career break-through. Cardinal Wolsey was the all-powerful minister of the early years of the reign of the young King Henry. As a churchman Wolsey needed to talk to the Vatican, and as a patron he wanted to talk to Italian artists he could commission. Cromwell had been in Rome, he had been in Florence, he had been in Venice. He spoke the languages. He also spoke the international language of money.

How he became so well-connected and knowledgeable is a mystery. As a boy, either in flight from his father or from the law, he had crossed the sea and joined the French army. His service had taken him to Italy. He had made himself useful, perhaps initially just as a household servant, and had been taken up by a prominent banking family. When he was finished with Italy, or Italy was finished with him, he had moved to Antwerp, the thriving commercial centre of northern Europe, and worked in the wool trade. From there he returned to England, married a merchant's daughter and set up as a lawyer; in that way he came to the notice of the cardinal. When Wolsey fell from power, he was taken up by the king, and within a very short time was his chief minister. It is said that at his first meeting with Henry he made him this offer: 'I can make you the richest king in Europe.'

I don't quite believe that. But there are a lot of things about the orthodox account I chose not to believe when I began work. Among specialist Tudor historians, Thomas Cromwell he had been for a long time a much-studied and controversial figure. But in popular history, he was a sinister plotter in a black cloak, who came after Henry VIII with a big axe and chopped down his enemies and his wives. (15 mins.)

It is delightful to the novelist to have a really strong villain to work with. It was in that spirit I went into the story. But then I came across his real strain of idealism, his acts of startling kindness, his moderating hand, his insight, his wit. So I had to modify my thinking very fast. That is not to say I have made him a hero. I have not gone to the other extreme. I have tried to replace the old picture with something more subtle and nuanced. I have been living with him for a long time now. And I am more fascinated by this life and its context than when I began. I follow the reams of official documentation his career generated, and he seems still in the process of becoming, of self-invention. My fiction is self-doubting, and what we learn in the first two books is challenged by what we learn in the third.

It is not that he has been telling us lies. It is that, over the years the story occupies — which is all the years of his life, from about the age of four to his death at about 55 — his memory reconstructs events: the past changes behind him. The phrase 'the mirror and the light' was a phrase he made himself. As his story unravels in the third book, the narrative holds up a series of mirrors to the past, and casts new light on it.

This happens to all of us, through the simple workings of time. Some parts of our story remain vivid and fresh, as if the paint were still wet. Some parts flake away,

as if worn away by wind and rain. If we need to, we can repaint the flaky parts, but only impressionistically. I am trying to write Cromwell's story to reflect the way his memory works. His career, as documented by the historical record, is astonishing by any measure. From his obscure and lowly background, he rose to be Earl of Essex, and for a very eventful period of about 8 years, he was at the king's side almost every day, writing laws and laying down decrees, reshaping the political *status quo* and revolutionising the economy. He was a man to whom job titles didn't matter — he just did everything. He worked across every department of government, and was the king's deputy in the new English church. No detail was too small for him, and no challenge too great.
It wasn't a life that left much time for introspection. And I think that he wasn't introspective. He wrote no books, left no diaries. The closest you come to him is his to-do lists. I have given myself the hard task, as a novelist, of writing the inner history of a man who repudiates the idea of an inner history, who reinvents himself with great speed and thoroughness, and who sheds his past every few years like a snake shedding its skin: the difference is, the snake will always be the snake, but you don't know what Cromwell will be.
Very early in the project I thought, this man's power comes not from what he shows and tells, but from what he holds back. Holbein's portrait of him is opaque. It is all flesh and no spirit. It is the picture of a man who is well-defended against interpretation. But a writer likes a challenge. As far as one can tell, Cromwell never apologises and never explains – he may explain policy, but he does not explain himself, so we do not, for example, know his own religious beliefs. He is a silence which others fill with noise. Seldom or never does he tell stories about himself. He does not speak of his youth, except in hints. And the hints frighten people. They do not know who he knows or where he has been. By concealing his personal history, by moving in an atmosphere of indeterminacy, he opens a space around himself into which others pour their hopes and fears.
In his lifetime, Cromwell's working memory was the subject of wonder and speculation. It was said that he had learned by heart the whole of the Latin New Testament, in the translation of Erasmus. Even if this is not true, he must have had a remarkable memory, to be in such command of the expanding business of government centuries before the database. My assumption has been that it is the other kind of memory, personal memory, that he suppresses. He has the power to recollect, but has he the will? Eventually, in the third book, we find out what happened the night before the first book, Wolf Hall, begins. We have gone back into the darkness together: to a cellar: to the riverbank: to a moonless night that tells no stories, but is where his own story starts.

So is remembering a good thing? I have written a memoir, so readers often ask me, what happens when memory is not just a natural force that overtakes you, like a wave, but a process you consciously set going? Is it dangerous, is it destabilising? Should I do it? they ask. Will I feel better afterwards, or worse?
It used to be general belief that the retelling of an event had therapeutic value, and that what the survivor of a disaster needed to do was to tell the story over and over, till it was somehow worked out of the system. We realise now that a shocked person who plunges into recall can remember more than he intended, and that the experience can be overwhelming. Memories of humiliation and fear are physically embedded , and even the most robust , unimaginative person can

experience total bodily recall, if some later emergency summons back those early events. Sometimes, memory is a luxury the body cannot afford. It makes us mad or makes us ill.
Timing is everything. The professional writer who sits down to write a memoir is protected. The conventions of the genre keep her safe — up to a point. As a novelist you operate at a certain distance from your work. It comes out of you, but you try to give it autonomy. When it comes to life-writing, you don't break that habit. You are always asking yourself not, 'How much is this my story?' but 'How much is this everyone's story?' You are not trying to trace the line of self within the text, but the line of art. And feeling better is not the point; creating a good book is the point. It is often said that writers are ruthless to the people around them, but they need first of all to be ruthless with themselves. They are the ground where the war is fought, the wish for self-revelation always fighting with the need to conceal weakness — the need to reveal, in conflict with the need to hide. (25 mins.)
I hadn't thought about writing a memoir till I found myself doing it. It began as a list of objects, in a house that was soon to be sold. I wanted to commemorate the objects by listing them, but they began to make themselves into a story. At first it felt like an attempt to come to terms with my stepfather's death. But in fact I was hardly able to write about my stepfather at all. I could write about my real father, who left home when I was ten. But I couldn't write about my teenage years. It wasn't that the material caused me pain, though it did. It was that I felt the story wasn't ready. I couldn't see around the edges of it. I was still *in* it – though I was in my fifties. It felt as if those years hadn't happened yet – as if they were still to be enacted – because they had yet to reveal themselves to me as a writer. I was not ready. When would I be ready? Perhaps never. There is a point you have to reach, to tell a story effectively, but you quickly go past that point. It may be the need to know about those years is no longer present, because there are other things I need to know.
There are two things I have learned. One is that memory resists efforts to manipulate it. You cannot forge it. You cannot save it like money in the bank, to sustain you in later years. My first two Thomas Cromwell books were adapted for the stage, and eventually the plays went to Broadway. On the last night, the producer said to be, in a very kindly way, tonight you should go on stage with the cast and take your bow: it will be a moment you will remember all your life.
He was trying to give me a gift — something better than a bouquet. I remember my immediate inner resistance, and my objection: 'It doesn't work like that.' It seems the more we focus on some big event, the more unsatisfying its traces are. I think it is because of self-consciousness: a shadow has fallen between ourselves and the event, and it is the shadow of an inauthentic self, one we have manufactured for the big occasion. We are looking through a distorting mirror: what should magnify us, actually makes us dwindle. I did go on stage. My only concern was not to stand next to the director, who is more than 12 inches taller than I am, because I would look absurd, like a court dwarf. So I held the hand of Henry VIII, who made sure I bowed at the right moment. It is the absurd mechanics of it I recall: the insignificance of the writer, in her street clothes, compared to her characters, blazing in damask and velvet.
The other thing I have learned by writing a memoir is paradoxical: do not do it if you wish to preserve your past in its virgin state. On the day when you work over

an incident, you examine all its dubious bits, and make decisions about what shape the story will be. Shaping means smoothing away, or cutting away. The choices you make that day alter the story of your past life. Once you have put an incident on the page and seen it into print, then that is the way it happened. One version is preserved. The others are erased. This is not to say you have dishonoured the past. You have done your best by it, but your best is never good enough. That does not matter. So much of writing, or any art, consists in failing gracefully, and coming back next day to fail again.

All of us, individuals and societies are caught in the same tension, trying to recall and failing, balancing our need to remember with our need to forget. As individuals we sometimes avoid exploration of our past, for fear we might understand it. If we understand ourselves, we may start to understand the people we have known: then, do we have to forgive them?

For a long time I was troubled by the idea of forgiveness. I didn't seem to find enough of that Christian impulse inside me. It was a relief when I read the psychologist Alice Miller, who suggests that forgiveness is a moral concept that means nothing to the body, in which our emotions are generated, and where they stick. As individuals and societies we do not have to forgive abuses of power. We have to survive them and learn from them, and morality resides not in forgiving, but in recognising the damage and vowing not to repeat the harm. There is a powerful impulse to improve our memories. If we do not have good parents we go on trying to create them, even after their deaths. As long as we do this, they are alive inside us: but as long as we do this, can we really grow up?

In the course of writing my Thomas Cromwell novels I have found that people like to stick fast to the first history they learn. When you suggest to them that there is more to know, or that they are misinformed, it generates huge anxiety, as if you were stealing from them bits of their own life – you are, in fact, taking away their belief in the early authority that shaped them. But bad history stops nations growing up. Anniversaries and official commemorations are tricky things. They are no use if they are designed only for comfort or for self-glorification, to sell us myths of victimhood and heroism and sacrifice. I think the business of commemoration must always be challenged, and sometimes taken back from the sentimental and the self-interested: when we review our histories, we must always look to disrupt the official version.

It is often said that in modern western societies we have forgotten how to mourn the dead. In Britain this certainly seems to be true. We are still marked by that volcanic explosion of collective grief that followed the death of Princess Diana. As the song says, you don't know what you've got till it's gone. In the absence of social ritual and tradition, it is hard to know when mourning is complete. The heart is not always a reliable guide. Only the rigorous practice of history can help us let the dead go; you can only forget them by remembering.

In my house I have a filing cabinet with a drawer marked with my mother's name. I was the executor of her will and I have not quite finished settling her affairs. But sometime in the next few months I will take her death certificate out of that drawer, and put it into the box marked 'ARCHIVE', with the papers that are all that is left of her mother, her father, and her uncles, the war-damaged heroes. Then she no longer be by herself, a displaced soul. She will have flitted from the present and joined them in history, and I will feel she has arrived home.