

Signifiers to Stand on: on the Anticipatory Function of the Other

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Abstract

In Lacanian theory the process of the coming into being of the subject is considered as a continuous and anticipatory process of interaction between the organizational levels of the biological and the social. The latter comprises what Lacan called the symbolic order (“l’Autre” or the Other) that anticipates the coming into being of the subject. It is argued that this anticipatory function of the Other is at stake in Alan Bennett’s play *The History Boys* (2004). More specifically, by a close reading of Bennett’s text, it is shown how anticipation is implied in the three main themes of the play: 1. in the headmaster’s and Irwin’s vision on education; 2. in Irwin’s view on history; 3. in Hector’s view on the function of poetry.

Keywords: Anticipation, Other, Subject, Bennett, *The History Boys*.

1 Introduction

The focus of my paper is on the anticipatory function of the Other, the Lacanian Other¹ that is, as implied in Alan Bennett’s play *The History Boys* (2004), as well as in its screen adaptation by the same title, released in 2006.²

The History Boys contains several interconnected topics: firstly, play and movie are about education and about different styles of teaching; secondly, they are about history, they try to answer the question of what is history all about and at the same time give us a critical view on Margaret Thatcher’s England of the nineteen eighties; thirdly and most fundamental, they are also about the confrontation of individuals with sexuality

¹ This Other is considered as the chain of signifiers with which the subject meets from the very start of its entrance in the world. It is from this Other that the subject receives its proper message – cf. André (1993).

² The play won several awards in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States: in the UK, amongst others, it won three Laurence Olivier Awards (for Best New Play, Best Actor and Best Director) as well as the Critics’ Circle Theatre Awards and the Evening Standard Awards for Best Actor and Best Play; on Broadway it won six Tony Awards, including Best Play, Best Performance by a leading actor, and Best Direction.

and with homosexuality, about how individuals wrestle with this confrontation, try to cope with it or fail to do so, and therefore play and movie reflect on what in our psychoanalytic frame of reference is called the process of the coming into being of the subject. By the latter I understand the dynamic, continuous and *anticipatory* process of interaction between the individual and the other, between the individual as a biological entity, as a living being that is continuously and actively directed towards what is outside of it, towards the other (the social) and more specific, towards the symbolic order that represents the other (the social).

It will be argued that in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, the idea of anticipation is at stake in his elaboration of the three topics mentioned above: education, history, and the never ending coming into being of the subject.

2 Education

With respect to the topic of education the notion of anticipation involved is most obvious. The setting of play and movie is a sixth-form class of some "boys' school in the nineteen eighties in the north of England" (Ibid.: 3). This year, and unusually so, the sixth-formers performed extremely well: "Felicitations to you all. Well done, Scripps! Bravo, Dakin! Crowther, congratulations. And Rudge, too. Remarkable. All, all deserve prizes. All, all have done that noble and necessary thing, you have satisfied the examiners of the Joint Matriculation Board (...)" (Ibid.: 4). As a matter of fact, no less than eight boys have obtained A Levels, "those longed-for emblems of conformity" (Ibid.) and now they will resume their education for an extra term. Felix Armstrong, the school's headmaster, is very ambitious and he wants this lot of bright pupils to prepare for, to anticipate that is, the entrance exams of one or other college at Oxford or Cambridge Universities. He is "thinking league tables. Open scholarships. Reports to the Governors" (Ibid.: 8) He cannot remember when they had anyone in history at Oxford or Cambridge and he knows that his school is "low in the league". He wants it "up there with Manchester Grammar School, Haberdashers's Aske's. Leighton Park" (Ibid.: 11) This eight boys are "clever, yes, remarkably so. Well taught, indubitably. But a little ... *ordinaire*?" (Ibid.: 9) While he is thinking "charm", he is thinking "Renaissance Man", and is convinced that he might achieve his goal if some work is done with respect to their "presentation" (Ibid.: 8), if they get a bit of "polish" (Ibid.: 9, 11).

For the latter, he is not willing to rely on his trusted staff, represented by Mrs. Dorothy, teacher in history, and by Hector, teacher in English and General Studies. Mrs. Dorothy is the one who saw to it that the boys "know their stuff". Her teaching style is straightforward and factual and in her opinion "plainly stated and properly organized facts need no presentation" (Ibid.: 9). Or as Lockwood and Rudge, two of her pupils, put it: "Mrs. Dorothy discourages the dramatic, (...). 'This is history not histrionics.'" (Ibid.: 18) She does the "firm foundations type thing. Point A. Point B. Point C" (Ibid.: 33).

Whereas Mrs. Dorothy "give(s) them an education," Hector from his side "give(s) them the wherewithal to resist it" (Ibid.: 23). Hector is the humanist, quoting abundantly

and sometimes randomly from poems and plays, which he wants his boys to know by heart. According to Felix, the headmaster, there is “passion” and “commitment” in Hector’s lessons but unfortunately the man is not at all “curriculum-directed” (Ibid.: 11-12). He “counts examinations, even for Oxford and Cambridge, as the enemy of education” and his “stuff is not meant for the exam, (...). It is to make the boys more rounded human beings” (Ibid.: 38) For Hector, “literature is medicine, wisdom, elastoplast. Everything.” (Ibid.: 44) But again, although Felix admits that Hector does get results with his stuff, these are “unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is of no use” (Ibid.: 67) Hector’s “old-fashioned faith in the redemptive power of words” surely will not help his boys to anticipate the Oxbridge entrance exams: “after all, it’s not how much literature that they know. What matters is how much they know *about* literature” (Ibid.: 49).

To work on the presentation of the boys and to polish them: that is Irwin’s job, a young supply teacher, hardly older than his pupils but who apparently was at Oxford himself. In his opinion, Mrs. Dorothy’s straightforward and factual knowledge as such can only result in dull essays while he reduces Hector’s stuff to the status of “gobbets”, that is to useful and “handy little quotes that can be trotted out *to make a point*” (Ibid.: 48).

For Irwin, “truth is no more at issue in an examination than thirst at a wine-tasting or fashion at a striptease” (Ibid.: 26). He wants the boys to “think bored examiners” (Ibid.: 19) who are asleep after having “read seventy papers all saying the same thing” (Ibid.: 24). He wants them to “flee the crowd”, to “follow Orwell”, to “be perverse: “(...) take Stalin. Generally agreed to be a monster, and rightly. So dissent. Find something, anything, to say in his defense.” After all, “history nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It’s a performance. It’s entertainment. And if it isn’t, make it so” (Ibid.: 35). The technique he recommends is “as formal in its way as the disciplines of the medieval schoolmen,” and comes down to this: “find a proposition, invert it, then look around for proofs” (Ibid.: 35).

In *The History Boys*, this technique of pretending of knowledge, of “manipulating of the truth” and of “impressing of examiners” (Bennett & Hytner, 2004) anticipates well enough. At the end of the play, Felix triumphs: “Splendid news! Posner a scholarship, Dakin an exhibition and places for everyone else. It’s more than one could ever have hoped for” (Bennett, 2004: 97). Even Rudge, the one oddity in the lot, got into Oxford’s Christ Church college, thanks to his “family connections” (Ibid.: 97) and his “prowess on the field” (Ibid.: 86).

And as for Alan Bennett himself, Irwin’s sack of tricks was the very way he got a scholarship to Oxford as well as his degree (Bennet & Hytner, 2004).

3 History

With respect to the second topic, the question of what history is all about, Alan Bennett must be considered as an insider. Born in 1934 in Leeds, Yorkshire, he applied for a scholarship at Oxford and was accepted by Exeter College from which he graduated with a first class degree in history.

According to drama critic Michael Billington "Bennett's most radical step [in *The History Boys*] is to use the intricacies of school life as a way of advancing his own view of history" (Billington, 2004). One aspect of this view is ventilated by Mrs. Dorothy who considers that "History is not such a frolic for women as it is for men," because "they never get around the conference table. (...) History is a commentary on the various and continuing incapacities of men. What is history? History is women following behind with the bucket" (Bennett, 2004: 84-85).

More important, Bennett's view is "one that emphasizes the randomness of events rather than grand designs and imperial forces" (Billington, 2004). It is Rudge, the rugby player, who summarizes this idea in saying that "history is just one fucking thing after another" (Bennett, 2004: 85), which in fact is only a paraphrase of the way Herbert Butterfield, a Professor of History at Cambridge in the '40s, put it: "History is one bloody thing after another" (Bennett & Hytner, 2004). Reflecting on the fate of Hector who had been caught by Felix's wife while fondling one of the boys on his motorbike, Mrs. Dorothy says: "[Hector] was also unlucky. For a start Mrs. Headmaster didn't normally do a stint at Age Concern [the local charity shop] on a Wednesday unless someone was off. And what if a customer had come in just as Hector had got to the lights and she'd been looking the other way? Or the lights had been green? This smallest of incidents, the junction of a dizzying range of alternatives any one of which could have had a different outcome. If I was a bold teacher (...) I could spend a lesson dissecting what the headmaster insists on calling 'this unfortunate incident' and it would teach the boys more about history and the utter randomness of things than (...) I've ever managed to do so far" (Bennett, 2004: 92-93).

Dakin in particular retained this very well from Irwin's lessons: "(...) when Chamberlain resigned as Prime Minister in 1940 Churchill wasn't the first thought; Halifax [was] more generally acceptable. But on the afternoon when the decision was taken Halifax chose to go to the dentist. If Halifax had had better teeth we might have lost the war" (Ibid.: 90). To Irwin, this sounds terrific, and he asks for more. "(...) Alamein, but not the battle. Montgomery took over the Eight Army before Alamein but he wasn't first choice. Churchill had appointed General Gott. Gott was flying home to London in an unescorted plane when, purely by chance, a lost German fighter spotted his plane and shot him down. So it was Montgomery who took over, seeing this afterwards, of course, as the hand of God" (Ibid.: 90).

For Irwin, history is all about taking distance: "Our perspective on the past alters. Looking back, immediately in front of us is dead ground. We don't see it and because we don't see it this means that there is no period so remote as the recent past and one of the historian's jobs is to *anticipate* what our perspective of that period will be ... even on the Holocaust" (Ibid.: 74, our italics).

Wittgenstein may well have been right in stating that "the world is everything that is the case," – a proposition which according to Mrs. Dorothy reflects a rather "feminine", "rueful" and "accepting" approach – for the historian the world is rather "everything that can be *made to seem* the case" – which reflects the more manly and "trickier" viewpoint (Ibid.: 84, our italics).

So far we have been talking about conscious anticipation of entrance exams, as well as about the more or less conscious anticipation at work in historiography. And as for the latter, Freud would surely have agreed with Irwin – with Bennett that is. In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci Freud states that when mankind came to an age of reflection, men “felt a need to learn where they had come from and how they had developed” (Freud, 1910c: 83). History was created and “inevitable was an expression of present beliefs and wishes rather than a true picture of the past” (Ibid.). Many memorabilia were “dropped from the nation’s memory, while others were distorted or (...) given a wrong interpretation in order to fit with contemporary ideas,” or also, in order to meet a present “desire to influence contemporaries” (Ibid.). For Freud history has always, in one way or another, the flavor of a screen-memory.

4 The coming into being of the subject

But in a more subtle way, *The History Boys* is also about the anticipatory function of the Other in the process of the coming into being of the subject. This process is continuous and especially at stake whenever an individual is confronted with what it cannot bear: mere *chance*, be it the utter randomness of the sexual drive (belonging to what Freud called “constitution”), be it death, or be it any other circumstance in life.

Let us take Posner for example, one of the characters I didn’t mention before. He is Jewish, very cleaver and the youngest of the lot. In the play as well as in the movie version, he is about seventeen or eighteen years old, but as Bennett admits in an interview, in his original idea Posner was only sixteen, with his voice still unbroken. All the boys in Bennett’s story are coming of age, they are ‘coming into being’, sexually and otherwise, but for Posner this is even more so.

He is the one who is living completely in the subjunctive, that is “the mood of what might or might not have happened” (Bennett, 2004: 90), the mood of unfulfilled desire. Not like Dakin, his more mature classmate who boasts about his moves towards Fiona, the headmaster’s secretary:

“She’s my Western Front. Last night, for instance, meeting only token resistance, I reconnoitred the ground (...) As far as ... the actual place. (...) I mean, not onto it and certainly not into it. But up to it. At which point the Hun, if I may so characterize the fair Fiona, suddenly dug in, no further deployments were sanctioned, and around 23.00 hours our forces withdrew. Like whereas I’d begun the evening thinking this might be the big push. (...) And the beauty of it is, the metaphor really fits. I mean, just as moving up to the frontline, troops presumably had to pass the sites of previous battles where every inch of territory has been hotly contested, so it is with me... like particularly her tits, which only fell after a prolonged campaign some three weeks ago and to which I now have immediate access and which were indeed the start line for last night’s abortive thrust southwards (Ibid.: 28).

Here Dakin demonstrates consciously and deliberately how his factual knowledge of history serves him as a metaphor for his moves on the battlefield of sexuality. But Posner “can’t bear to listen” to this and at the same time, “wants to hear every word” of it, and then questions himself: “What does [this conflict] mean?” (Ibid.: 29)

It means that he only gradually and reluctantly becomes conscious of the fact that he lives “in a state of frustrated possibility”, that he is “the boy with a yearning, who seems to be getting nowhere and so is the saddest” (Bennett & Hytner, 2004), that he is jealous about his classmate Dakin and fell in love with him.

So far Posner is not aware of this but fortunately he finds support in the Other, some signifiers to stand on. Attending Hector’s class on Useless Knowledge – private, behind locked doors, out of the school system –, and in his state of being “bewitched, bothered and bewildered,” Posner comes up with Thomas Hardy’s poem ‘Drummer Hodge’ and says it off by heart:

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined – just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around:
And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

Young Hodge the drummer never knew –
Fresh from his Wessex home –
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

Obviously, and more unconsciously than consciously, Posner has chosen this poem, or something in Posner has chosen it, and although he might not understand it, he is touched by the sad fate of this young soldier Hodge, because it gives him the wording of his own feelings.

Indeed, for Hector, his master in Useless Knowledge, learning poetry has not so much to do with its understanding. As the latter admits to his pupils: he himself “never understands it,” but they should “learn it now, know it now” and then they “will understand it whenever” ... they need it (Ibid.: 30). Hector knows that “most of the stuff poetry is about hasn’t happened” to them yet. But this stuff will happen to them, and then they will “have the antidote ready! (...) Poetry is the trailer! Forthcoming attractions!” (Ibid.: 30).

People reach out for words, but poetry sometimes reverses this direction, and then it is about words that reach out to the reader.

Almost like a psychoanalyst might do, Hector questions Posner about his choice for 'Drummer Hodge' and points out that the important thing is that the young soldier "(...) has a name. (...) Hardy is writing about the Zulu Wars or later the Boer War (...) and "these were the first campaigns when common soldiers were commemorated, the names of the dead recorded and inscribed on war memorials (...). Before this (...) they were all unknown soldiers (...)" (Ibid.: 55) Hardy's poem represents the birth of the common soldier as a subject. "Thrown into a common grave (...), he is still Hodge the drummer (...), he still has a name" (Ibid.: 55).

Hector also points out that the use of the compound adjective "uncoffined", "formed by putting 'un-' in front of the noun", or in front of the "verb," like in "un-kissed. Un-rejoicing. Un-embraced" is typical for Hardy and brings with it "a sense of not sharing, of being out of it (...), of a holding back. Not being in the swim" (Ibid.: 55-56). Posner can see that: "Yes, sir. I felt that a bit."

5 Conclusion

This anticipatory function of poetry is the reason why Hector, the one kind of teacher that never crossed Bennett's path, demands of his pupils that they learn poetry, and that they learn it by heart.

This eccentric character, for whom literature is "medicine, wisdom, elastoplast and everything" (Ibid.: 44), and his pupils, in their dialogues continuously quote from Auden, T.S. Eliot, Housman etc., as well as from Shakespeare's plays *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, not always apposite and sometimes the verses seem just to pop up, as with Hector: "Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail [a verse from John Milton]. I am an old man in a dry season [adapted from T.S. Eliot]" (Ibid.: 66) – "Sometimes it just flows out. Brims over" (Ibid.: 36).

However, at other instances poetry and literature – or art in general – are constituent and thus anticipate the coming into being of the subject. In Hector's words: "The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours" (Ibid.: 56)

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