



## Creative Writing

*Hilary Mantel on Film and Drama*

### Bill Greenwell

The influence of film and drama on Hilary Mantel's writing is crucial. She spoke to me about her use of analogy and the way she uses a paragraph as the main unit of structure.

In both, *Every Day is Mother's Day* and *Vacant Possession*, there are very rapid cuts from one section to another and these are your first two published novels. Do you see the way in which you were working then as being still partly the way that you're working now?

### Hilary Mantel

Yes. Absolutely. I'm still a fan of leaving a line and on to the next thing so that I am, as I say, cutting like a film narrative. That's the kind of writing I like to read so that's what I try to give the reader, and I think now, you see, we're all so slick about narrative. People are so quick on the uptake, thanks to a century of watching films, you don't need the kind of exposition that the Victorian novel goes in for. It now becomes like padding and that I think is something I aim to avoid; I don't ever want scenes to drift. I want to snap them together quite sharply. I think film narrative is so important nowadays in considering how you build a novel.

I've started to work for radio in the last few years. It is just wonderfully satisfying to be able to write a play. And, I think it's the condition my novels are moving towards, being vast overgrown plays or somebody described *A Place of Greater Safety* as a huge shooting script, which I think is quite accurate really. And, writing for radio, I think, has made me a better novelist. It's made me think more about how to condense a character's psychology and indicate it by a line, that is to say the character's psychological workings indicate it by a line, indicate it by a metaphor. So I think moving in to other media like that or thinking about bringing their techniques to the novel, can really strengthen your hand as a narrator.

### Bill Greenwell

One of the things which really entertains your readers, it seems to me, is your use of metaphor and perhaps, particularly simile. How important are they to your writing?

### Hilary Mantel

They enliven, almost, every page, I think. They're often quite humorous. Often, you can heighten the seriousness of what's on the page by an image that cuts against it, that is quite playful and giddy. And I suppose what I'm trying to reflect is that the seriousness of the contents of people's heads doesn't always fit neatly with the kind of weight and gravity of the conversation they're having. We tend to perceive all sorts of absurdities about every situation which we suppress and I'm thinking about this just as I'm saying it. Sometimes it's almost as if the simile, the metaphor expresses the character's unconscious or the unconscious of the writing, in a way, it can work with the main text or against it. But I can never calculate these. I can never think, Time for a big metaphor. It's just got to arrive on the screen and then I think, where did that come from? So I can be very calculated about structure but not at all calculated about style. And I do think that there is a time and a place to write much unadorned prose, just strip it down, subject-verb-object, keeping the voice active and the tenses as simple as you can. But the metaphors are like the bubbles on the Champagne, they're a kind of exuberance.

### Bill Greenwell

There's a great image in *Eight Months* on Ghazzah Street in which Jasmine looks at Raji and her look is described as 'the face of a nun in a lingerie department, baffled, almost hungry,

and yet full of a growing appreciation that things are much worse than one thought.'  
[Laughter]

### **Hilary Mantel**

Yes. Now I'm going to say something quite sentimental but day by day, these are the things that make it all worthwhile. Because when something just appears before you on the screen, it's like a little gift. You can't ask for it because you don't know what to ask for. But it just arrives. And you accept that you've generated it but it looks as if it's come from heaven. And, there's a moment of going, yes. And knowing when it's exactly right. Now, in the long haul that is a novel you need these moments to keep you going just as you hope they'll keep the reader going. My ordinary everyday conversation tends to be a little baroque [laughs] and I'm sometimes hard to follow and somebody said to me once that I talked in paragraphs and I put the semicolons in; and I think that's probably true. So, you are trying to capture something like a natural voice. I almost want to say this to people when they're beginning to write and they're very unsure and, what they're putting on the page is terribly constrained, cramped and minimal, I just want to say, Just let yourself breathe and be yourself for better or worse. Because the strength and the, as it were, the taste of the text is going to come straight through from your own personality, and if you're quite a horrible person, well, that serves you a turn as well. [Laughs]

In the ideal world, you should be able to read your prose aloud, paragraph by paragraph and it will have its own rhythm. And you may need to write that paragraph thirty times, and I think that is not too much. To draft it as carefully as if it were a poem. And then, it will pay off in the reader's satisfaction in a way that is beyond analysis. But also, don't think that the unit of prose is the sentence, the unit is the paragraph. So it's no good making one beautiful sentence, it's got to be embedded in the larger structure so the rhythm has to work right through a paragraph. When you begin to get this right, it's something like singing, as if you could stand up and sing with perfect confidence. But a song is of course, quite a small unit. So I think of a book like *The Giant O'Brien*, it's almost a performance. You can do that with a short book, you want it to have the unity of a performance.