



## **Creative Writing**

### *Rhetoric and Rhythm*

#### **Bill Greenwell**

Hilary Mantel reading a short passage from her novel *Vacant Possession*. She goes on to talk about her style including the influence on it of oratory.

#### **Hilary Mantel**

It's a conversation between Mr Kavalski who is a Polish landlord who works at a cooked meats factory. And one of his lodgers who's called Miss Anaemia, that's not her real name, but Miss Anaemia is a sort of professional benefits claimant and goes under a number of names. And I'm trying to get into her peculiar state of mind here so Mr Kavalski is speaking.

'All I do' he said, 'I might as well be dead all these years. This is all I do, go to a factory for preserving meat'.

He shambled across the room aimless like some large farmyard animal avoiding its pen. Tears glistened in his bloodshot eyes. Probably they'd been there all along, only Miss Anaemia hadn't noticed them. She never thought much about anybody else. Claiming benefit was a full time occupation. Her mind was getting narrowed down somehow, certain phrases like means and rebate seemed to have taken on an overriding significance. Layers and layers of portent which only peeled away for a split second just as she was waking or falling asleep. When she saw a queue, she had an urge to join it. A hundred forms she must have filled in, two hundred, all this information spinning away from her, out of her head and off into space. The process was extracting something from her, filing away at her essence. She was no more than the virgin white space between two black lines, no more than a blur behind a sheet of toughened glass.

'Toodle-oo' she said to Mr K and went out to pick up her dry-cleaning.

#### **Bill Greenwell**

One of the things I really like about that particular passage is the way in which its rhythm works. The way in which the sentences do borrow many of the rhetorical skills or draw on the kinds of rhetorical skills which we might associate with orators. The repetitions of the beginnings of sentences, the way in which phrases are gradually qualified as they move on. Is this a process which emerges through your drafting? Is this something which happens gradually?

#### **Hilary Mantel**

I think it just happens first go. The only time that I have to deliberate on this is when I think I need to take out one word and fit in a synonym but that invariably hasn't got the same rhythmic or syllabic value so if you're taking out one word and putting in another word then you're probably in for re-writing the whole thing. So the process can be pretty well endless but my memory of this is that it just fell on to the page that way. I do think a lot, actually, about public speaking, about oratory. It may be too esoteric a point to make but, at the moment this book I'm writing, I'm writing about the early Tudors, Henry the Eighth's reign, and a lot of the letters I'm reading, the preserved correspondence, they're dictated rather than written and they have this wonderful sense of rhythm, it's just innate to the speaker. And sometimes you find little superfluous words like doubled prepositions and so on and you think Why did he say that, why is that in there, we don't need it? And then you realise, if you read it aloud, that it's to preserve the rhythm of the sentence. Almost to build in an orator's hesitation. Or that pause for effect, the way that you might drop your voice, you might delay

the end of a sentence, you might look at your audience to hold back for a minute. I think what I'm saying is talking comes first for me, somehow.

Echo and re-duplication is important, I think, and you can sometimes set up a paragraph so that it almost re-sounds back to the reader. You can change the acoustics in all sort of ways during the course of a book, I think. Sometimes shutting the reader in a kind of echo chamber with, as I say, vowels that are opening up, and sometimes consonants like machine gunfire taking you down one road and one road only, but as I say, I think one does these things partly unconsciously but these are all devices that are all there for you. They're all part of the repertoire of self-expression. I think when you're beginning to write, it's quite important to put aside self-consciousness and just let yourself read your paragraph aloud. Sometimes it's quite a humiliating process. You think, Oh God, that's not possible, you hear something clatter or clang in the middle of the sentence. But having heard it, you can put it right. Beauty is not exactly what I'm aiming for. God knows, my books are sordid and ugly and so are the images that sustain them, but I think it's ideal if you can write about ugliness in beautiful prose.

### **Bill Greenwell**

You also, it seems to me, are an expert at telling dry jokes. I often think that writers, to a certain extent, should aspire to the condition of a stand-up comedian because stand-up comedians have to get the rhythms of their acts straight otherwise they won't get the laughs. Does that hold good, do you think, the analogy of the stand-up comedian?

### **Hilary Mantel**

I think it does. Because I think of a novel as something like a performance. When you have a performance, you're forging a sense of connection with your audience or your reader. I am prone to talk about the reader as the audience, I know, so that betrays my thinking. But you've got two kinds of characters, you know, again, I think this is quite important to say, but, my favourite characters are either superbly articulate or the absolute opposite. So that the former category can take care of their own timing and delivery and generate their own jokes, as it were. But the latter category, the almost inarticulate people who fill my books, well, of course, the writer is conspiring with the reader then, and what you're trying to do is, is put into the mouths of your people the dumbest words that will somehow find their own eloquence. In *Every Day is Mother's Day*, one of the two main characters, Muriel, only actually speaks once, she's only got one piece of direct speech. When her mother proposes that they drown her baby, she says, 'All right'. And that's got to carry everything. I really love the poetry that's generated by the struggles of inarticulate people with the language whose relationship with language is tangential at best. And, probably is self-indulgent but I just love writing those people, finding words almost where there are no words. And then I love my wits and raconteurs at the same time. The people who are in my books who are a bit stogy in themselves and know how to hold an audience.

### **Bill Greenwell**

There are those don't quite know how to hold an audience like, for instance, the woman in *Beyond Black* who's selling the houses on the estate, whose language is a wonderful parody of the way in which estate agents speak.

### **Hilary Mantel**

Yes. You know, I love jargon. I love the language of trades and professions and its peculiar metaphor system. And I like to know the insider terms which often have a peculiar poetry and I'm particularly fond of marketing speak and euphemism and the, do you know, God, the awful poverty of language becomes a subject in itself.

### **Bill Greenwell**

Just going back to when I was using the metaphor of the stand-up comedian. This is actually a sentence describing Princess Diana's funeral cortege in *Beyond Black*.

### **Hilary Mantel**

'By ten thirty, crowds were assembling on the bridges over the M1. Waiting for the dead woman to pass by on her way to her ancestral burial ground, just off junction 15a.' [Laughter]

**Bill Greenwell**

It's perfect timing and it has all the skill, it seems to me, that single sentence, of a well-rehearsed joke. Because there's a certain kind of elevated grandeur at the start of the sentence which is then quickly and utterly demolished by the direction at the end.

**Hilary Mantel**

Well, actually, I think that, that sentence – I hadn't thought about it – but I think you've got the whole book there. Because you're talking about layers of experience and what I'm saying there is, there is a map of England that is mythic and then there is the notional network of the motorway system overlying it. And the whole book is like that, that beneath the banality of Alison's experience, and the banality of the speech of the characters, there is a seething metaphorical pit which goes straight down to hell. And so, I suppose, I probably pulled that stunt repeatedly in *Beyond Black*, moving the reader quickly between one layer of reality and another and plunging from the terrifying and the spooky and the deep, and swimming you back up into the shallows of human experience, as shallow as the lines on the map.

I should probably say really that, when people ask you how long did this novel take? there is absolutely no answer because the answer is always, It has taken me all my life. The plot may have only occupied you for a few months or years, but the rhythm, the structure, the whole underlying basis of that novel has been generating in yourself ever since you could read and write. And I think you learn how to write novels by reading novels and it becomes unconsciously assimilated.