

ROBERT KUSEK
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

“To Seize the Copyright in Myself.” *Giving Up the Ghost* by Hilary Mantel as an Exercise in Autopathography

Abstract

Though *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, two Man Booker Prize-winning historical novels by Hilary Mantel, ostensibly deal with the life of Thomas Cromwell, a chief minister to King Henry VIII, their major motif, I should argue, is that of disability, of illness, of bodily failure. As Mantel herself stated in an essay titled *Royal Bodies*, “historians are still trying to peer inside the Tudors, [...] are they healthy, are they sick, can they breed?” She further added: “The story of Henry and his wives is peculiar to its time and place, but also timeless and universally understood; it is highly political and also highly personal. It is about body parts, about what slots in where, and when: are they body parts fit for purpose, or are they diseased?” (Mantel 2013). Bodily dysfunction appears to me to be one of primary thematic preoccupations of Mantel’s writing. Handicapped Muriel from *Every Day is Mother’s Day*, disfigured “Irish giant” O’Brien from *The Giant, O’Brien*, ailing Henry VIII from her Tudor triptych – these are just a few of a panoply of disabled/ill/afflicted characters that populate the pages of Mantel’s work.

The aim of the present paper is to examine Mantel’s 2003 memoir entitled *Giving Up the Ghost* which tells the story of the writer’s struggle with endometriosis as well as doctors’ indifference and medical neglect. I will attempt to discuss Mantel’s autobiographical account not only as a narrative about the writer’s illness, but as a work which investigates interrelatedness of writing and suffering, and which tries to both make sense and take charge of one’s life story which has been otherwise claimed by the demands and limitations of an ailing body. In short, I wish to see Mantel’s memoir as an exercise in autopathography.

Keywords: autopathography, illness/disability narratives, memoir, life writing, Hilary Mantel.

You have to employ some fantasy to keep brute reality at bay.¹

The iambic pentameter of the saline stand, the alexandrine of the blood drain, the epidural's sweet sonnet form.²

1.

Half-way through Hilary Mantel's Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Bring up the Bodies*, its principal character Thomas Cromwell dwells on a correspondence between the score sheets of the tournament held at Greenwich and the human body. A piece of paper is divided into sections which relate to various body parts of a knight and, hence, individual strikes on his breastplate or the helm can be accurately recorded by a judge. However, as Cromwell points out:

You can pick up the score sheets afterwards and read back a record of the day, but the marks on paper do not tell you about the pain of a broken ankle or the efforts of a suffocating man not to vomit inside his helmet. As the combatants will always tell you, you really needed to see it, you had to be there.³

Writing about body – despite combatants' distrust in the power of words to accurately represent it – appears to lie at the very heart of Hilary Mantel's rich and varied oeuvre. However, writing not about a healthy body, but the one which has failed or betrayed its owner. A body which is disfigured ("Irish giant" O'Brien from *The Giant, O'Brien*), handicapped (Muriel from *Every Day is Mother's Day*), decapitated (a panoply of characters from *A Place of Greater Safety* and Mantel's Tudor triptych, including Georges Jacques Danton and Camille Desmoulins as well as Thomas More and Anne Boleyn, respectively), marked (stigmatised Sister Philomena from *Fludd* or deeply scarred Alison Harte from *Beyond Black*), fractured and wounded (young Danton after his unfortunate encounter with a bull). A body which is abused, violated and humiliated, like in this petrifying passage from *The Giant, O'Brien*:

He saw that on the ground was Bride Caskey, and Claffey was on top of her. He saw that Claffey's buttocks were white, and meagre in form though energetic in action, and that the woman's eyes were closed and that she was bleeding from her mouth. Her kerchief was pulled off her head and laid beside her, lifting in the wind; the merest inch was trapped beneath the boot of the man Slig, and Pybus watched it flapping, fighting to be free. Slig was unbuttoned, and he held his member in his hand, rubbing the tip and watching and listening as the woman's skull tapped the cobbles, tip, tap, tip, tap, with every lunge of Claffey.⁴

Finally and, perhaps, most importantly, a body which is ailing: a diseased body. It seems to me that bodily failure – be it of 16th century English burghers,

¹ H. Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety*, London 2010, p. 293.

² Eadem, *Diary*, "London Review of Books", 2010, November 4, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/hilary-mantel/diary> [access: 3.12.2013].

³ Eadem, *Bring up the Bodies*, London 2012, p. 163.

⁴ Eadem, *The Giant O'Brien*, Toronto 1999, p. 158.

noblemen and monarchs, of 18th century French peasants and Parisian "citizens", or of 20th century Irish nuns – remains, singlehandedly, the most important of all thematic preoccupations identifiable in Mantel's writing. She unequivocally acknowledged this "thematic dominant" in a controversial essay titled *Royal Bodies* in which she said: "historians are still trying to peer inside the Tudors, [...] are they healthy, are they sick, can they breed? [...] The story of Henry and his wives is [...] about body parts, about what slots in where, and when: are they body parts fit for purpose, or are they diseased?"⁵

But Mantel's interests are not exclusively limited to narrating a variety of ailments that a given body may suffer from. Surely, she is deeply concerned with narratives about illness, but at the same time she remains determined to explore the idea of "illness as narrative,"⁶ namely the way narratives of illness are used (by writers and readers equally) "to make meaning of the experiences of living *at risk*, *in prognosis*, and *in pain*."⁷ Looking at her own sutured body, Mantel will confess: "When I sit up and see the wound in my abdomen, I am pleased to see it has a spiral binding, like a manuscript."⁸

The aim of the present paper is to examine Mantel's 2003 memoir entitled *Giving Up the Ghost* which tells the story of the writer's struggle with endometriosis as well as doctors' indifference and medical neglect that she detrimentally suffered from. I will attempt to discuss Mantel's autobiographical account not only as a narrative about the writer's illness, but as a work which investigates interrelatedness of writing and suffering, and which tries to both make sense and take charge of one's life story which has been otherwise claimed by the demands and limitations of an ailing body. In short, I wish to see Mantel's memoir as an exercise in autopathography.

2.

In the mid-1990s, when the so-called "memoir boom"⁹ was still in its infancy, the American literary critic G. Thomas Couser recognised the need to propose a term which would embrace a number of autobiographical accounts, produced at the time, which, despite their formal differences,¹⁰ shared a single thematic preoccupation, namely failure of/in the body:

I became interested in the emergence of life writing, much of it autobiographical, centered on medical conditions and impairments once considered stigmatic. Exploring this new development, I wanted to designate a particular set of narratives with a single-word term. To devise one, I merely substituted *patho* – the Greek root for suffering (as in *pathology*) – for *bio* (life) in *autobiography*. Or to explain it a different way, I added *auto* to the existing

⁵ Eadem, *Royal Bodies*, "London Review of Books" 2013, May 9, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n04/hilary-mantel/royal-bodies> [access: 3.12.2013].

⁶ A. Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative*, Pittsburgh 2012, p. 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ H. Mantel, *Diary*, op. cit.

⁹ L. Anderson, *Autobiography*, London–New York 2011, p. 113–124.

¹⁰ E.g. first-person vs. third-person narrative, present vs. past tense, female vs. male narrator.

term *pathography*, which refers to clinical studies of illness in patients. The point was that in these new narratives, people with certain kinds of problematic conditions were writing about their *own* bodies, rather than leaving the job to medical professionals.¹¹

Since the publication of *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing* in 1997, the study in which Couser used his neologism for the first time¹², not only have new “categories” been proposed to refer to what is generally known as narratives of illness and disability,¹³ but also a group of medical conditions, which the narratives in question address, have widely expanded (from the four originally listed by Couser, i.e. breast cancer, HIV/AIDS, deafness, and paralysis).¹⁴

It seems more than plausible to see the arrival and recognition of autopathography as a distinctive genre of life writing as secondary to a larger issue which looms over contemporary autobiographical studies, namely an attempt to undo Cartesian exclusion of body and to castigate the philosopher’s prioritisation of mind: the “thinking substance.” Paul John Eakin’s *How Our Lives Become Stories* can well be listed here as an example of an influential inquiry into anti-transcendental ontology of the self and a move to anchor the subject in the body. From this point of view, autobiographical “I” cannot ever escape being considered “an

¹¹ G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*, “Auto/Biography Studies” 2003, vol. 28, no 1, p. 43–44.

¹² Idem, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing*, Madison 1997, p. 5.

¹³ Among alternative terms one can encounter the following categories: 1) “autosomatography” (according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, G. Thomas Couser in private correspondence has recognised “autosomatography” as a “more useful” concept than autopathography since the former term, unlike the latter, refuses to acknowledge a specific body condition as pathological [S. Smith, J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography. A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis–London 2010, p. 143]; however, in his 2012 study *Memoir*, Couser insists on using the term “autopathography”, which might suggest that he has changed his mind concerning “autosomatography” being the “better” term; Smith and Watson also claim that – possibly – “autosomatography” might be used to refer to third-person illness narratives, while “autopathography” to designate first-person illness narratives [ibid., p. 261]), 2) “memoir of physical/mental catastrophe” (L. Adams, *Almost Famous*, “Washington Monthly” 2002, April, <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0204.adams.html> [access: 4.12.2013]), 3) “memoir of some body” also known as “odd body memoir” or “odd-body-ographies” (Couser’s adoption and variation on a term first used by Lorraine Adams which he defines as being “concerned with what it’s like to have, to inhabit – to be – a particular body” [G. Thomas Couser, *Introduction: Disability and Life Writing*, “Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies” 2011, vol. 5, no 3, p. 229 and idem, *Memoir...*, op. cit., p. 148]). In *Signifying Bodies. Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*, Couser also isolated a new type of autopathographical writing, which he labelled the “new disability memoir” (G. Thomas Couser, *Signifying Bodies. Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*, Ann Arbor 2009, p. 164). What characterises this subgenre is writers’ acceptance of illness/disability and embracing their impairments as well as their self-identification as an ill/disabled person. More on illness/disability narratives prior to the memoir boom at the end of the 20th century (e.g. sanatorium narratives [Sheila Rothman] and pathographies [Anne Hunsaker Hawkins]) one can find in Couser’s and Jurecic’s studies.

¹⁴ Couser lists the following conditions which over the last two decades have generated narratives of illness/disability: amputation, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, autism, eating disorders including anorexia, asthma, bipolar disease, blindness, borderline personality disorder, cerebral palsy, chronic fatigue syndrome, cystic fibrosis, deformity, depression, diabetes, epilepsy, insomnia, locked-in syndrome, multiple sclerosis, Munchausen syndrome, obesity, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Parkinson’s disease, stuttering, stroke, Tourette’s syndrome. G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir...*, op. cit., p. 140.

embodied subject"¹⁵, while the body becomes increasingly acknowledged by contemporary life writing theorists as a true "site of autobiographical knowledge."¹⁶

Having said that, one also has to admit that, when it was first proposed by Couser, autopathography was not unanimously and enthusiastically welcomed by all critics working in the field. Some, like Thomas Joseph Gerschick, emphasised (though, in my opinion, without enough conviction) that since ab-normativity is culturally fabricated, then all types of discourse that consciously acknowledge disability (which autopathography undoubtedly does) necessarily need to reproduce and strengthen normativity. And it is normativity that stigmatises various ailments and impairments as abnormative.¹⁷

Couser responded to those concerns stating that autopathographies are not simply stories of sick, disabled or impaired individuals whose one and only wish is to narrate their ill-fate and who show no desire whatsoever to challenge the social construction of their identity. Autopathographies are not stories of helplessness or submission. Likewise, they are not necessarily the narratives of happy-endings which succumb to "the tyranny of the comic plot."¹⁸ According to Couser:

autopathography is typically, if not essentially, *anti*-pathography, in two senses. First, in the sense that by taking control of their own narratives, patients are resisting medical authority. Second, in the sense that such patients are challenging the medical scripts and/or cultural constructions attached to their conditions. The *auto* in *autopathography* was meant to highlight the impulse to define one's condition in one's own way – to recover one's body, so to speak, from those who would determine its story.¹⁹

It is precisely this understanding of autopathography – a narrative that does not simply chronicle a journey through illness but investigates its cultural construction and, crucially, offers an attempt to re-claim the writer's alienated body – that will guide my reading of Hilary Mantel's memoir.

3.

Giving up the Ghost is a mosaic and collage²⁰ of genres: a treatise on the nature of memoir²¹ and the workings of memory,²² a master class in creative

¹⁵ P.J. Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories. Making Selves*, Ithaca–London 1999, p. 21.

¹⁶ S. Smith, J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography...*, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁷ T.J. Gerschick, *Toward a Theory of Disability and Gender*, "Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society" 2000, Summer, no. 25.4, p. 1263–1264.

¹⁸ G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir...*, op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ In an interview with Mark Lawson for the BBC Front Row, Hilary Mantel admitted the following: "the way I write... like a collage", M. Lawson, *Front Row* 2013, December 13, Monday, BBC Radio Four, <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/radio4/frontrow/frontrow_20131202-1955a.mp3> [access: 7.12.2013].

²¹ E.g. "Do you know what worries me about this memoir? That I'm always the smart one."

H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost. A Memoir*, London 2010, p. 209.

²² For example, memory is at one point compared to "a great plain, a steppe, where all the memories are laid side by side, at the same depth, like seeds under the soil." Ibid., p. 25.

a master class in creative writing,²³ a childhood memoir,²⁴ a filial narrative²⁵ and – vitally for the present discussion – an autopathography. The narrative – which by resisting unequivocal generic affiliation fully embraces the borderline²⁶ nature of any life writing project – opens with Mantel’s declaration of her own incapability to tell her life story: “I hardly know how to write about myself. [...] I argue with myself over every word.”²⁷ She further adds: “I used to think autobiography was a form of weakness, and perhaps I still do. But I also think that, if you are weak, it’s childish to pretend to be strong.”²⁸

Weakness – physical, not intellectual or creative – is, in fact, the very origin of Mantel’s self-conscious memoir which one reviewer classified as a contemporary “book of Job.”²⁹ Mantel’s physical plight stems from decades of suffering from undiagnosed disease and faulty treatment by various medical professionals. Consequently, the writer’s life is populated by ghosts – these of lives that might have been led, children she might have given birth to, books she might have written:

You come to this place, mid-life. You don’t know how you got here, but suddenly you’re staring fifty in the face. When you turn and look back down the years, you glimpse the ghosts of other lives you might have led. All your houses are haunted by the person you might have been. The wraiths and phantoms creep under your carpets and between the wrap and weft of your curtains, they lurk in wardrobes and lie down under drawer liners. You think of the children you might have had but didn’t. When the midwife says “It’s a boy”, where does the girl go? When you think you’re pregnant and you’re not, what happens to the child that has already formed in your mind? You keep it filed in the drawer of your consciousness, like a short story that wouldn’t work after the opening lines.³⁰

As the title of the memoir unambiguously states, the narrative’s major objective is to repudiate these ghosts, to renounce them and free oneself from their

²³ E.g. “Trust your reader, stop spoon-feeding your reader, stop patronizing your reader, give your reader credit for being as smart as you at least, and stop being so bloody beguiling. [...] Concentrate on sharpening your memory and peeling your sensibility. Cut every page you write by at least one-third. Stop constructing those piffing little similes of your. (...) But do I take my own advice? Not a bit. Personage is my *nom de guerre*. (Don’t use foreign expressions; it’s élitist).” *Ibid.*, p. 4–5.

²⁴ Part Two titled “Now Geoffrey Don’t Torment Her” and Part Three “The Secret Garden” in particular.

²⁵ I.e. a narrative about the writer’s parents. (G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir...*, op. cit., p. 154).

²⁶ Among the life writing critics who have borrowed the term “borderline” from the psychology lexicon and have been consistently using it to refer to auto/biographical practices, one should mention Leigh Gilmore (L. Gilmore, *Autobiographics. A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*, Ithaca, NY 1994), Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir (G. Gudmundsdottir, *Borderlines. Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Amsterdam, New York 2003) as well as Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson (S. Smith, J. Watson, op. cit.). However, it appears that the credit for introducing the term to life writing studies needs to be given to Linda Hutcheon and her 1989 study titled *The Politics of Postmodernism* (L. Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Abingdon 2002, p. 157).

²⁷ H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost...*, op. cit., p. 4–5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁹ However, the one “without the purposeful deity”, but, instead “the bleak contingencies of period, place, poverty and gender.” I. Clendinnen, *Unsuited to Everything*, “The New York Times” 2003, October 5, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/05/books/unsuited-to-everything.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>> [access: 7.12.2013].

³⁰ H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost...*, op. cit., p. 20–21.

paralysing and stultifying power. The book's aim is, in Mantel's own words, "to seize the copyright in myself"³¹, as she painfully realises that "the book of me was indeed being written by other people: by my parents, by the child I once was, and by my own unborn children, stretching out their ghost fingers to grab the pen."³²

I have already mentioned that Mantel's memoir boasts a great variety of thematic preoccupations and, consequently, can well be classified as belonging to a number of generic templates within life writing forms. I believe that all these aspects deserve, in fact, separate and fully fledged studies which would pay due tribute to the memoir's unparalleled and – in my opinion – singular merits. To address all of them is beyond the scope of the present paper, hence my decision to focus almost exclusively on those aspects of Mantel's narrative that directly deal with the writer's illness and, consequently, her childlessness. Especially, that the two threads seem to link and tie individual episodes of Mantel's life story.

Since the very first pages of *Giving up the Ghost* Mantel does not wish to conceal that the life of her body is the writer's primary concern and she soon discloses to the readers her regular struggle with migraines which powerfully affect her senses: taste, hearing, sight and speech: "I knew the migraine was coming yesterday, when I stood in a Norfolk fishmonger choosing a treat for the cats. 'No', I said, 'cod's too expensive just now to feed the fish. Even fish like ours.'"³³ We also learn about her addiction to pills (painkillers, steroids and barbiturates, sometimes ten thousand a year "at a conservative estimate"³⁴) and body issues ("wider still and wider, shall my bound be set"³⁵).

Problems related to Mantel's identification with her body already feature prominently in her recollections of childhood spent in a small town close to Manchester. Having been tormented by an older cousin Geoffrey, she realises that her small and fragile body is an obstacle which makes it impossible for her to show her true "superior"³⁶ self. She will constantly expect to be changed into a boy as it appears that only a male body could accommodate greatness. Hence, the characters that she associates herself with are male warriors: Sir Gawain, a "Red Indian", or an altar boy – a soldier of Jesus. Already as a young girl Mantel feels alienation from her body – the feeling which will intensify in her 30s when, having been subjected to an invasive therapy of steroids and hormones, she will become "solid, set, grounded, grotesque, perpetually strange to myself, convoluted, mutated, and beyond the pale."³⁷ In *Strangers to Ourselves* Julia Kristeva says: "foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided."³⁸ Though Mantel seems to repeat Kristeva's diagnosis, especially when she states: "we can be made foreign to ourselves, suddenly, by illness, accident, misadventure, or

³¹ Ibid., p. 71.

³² Ibid., p. 70.

³³ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁸ J. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York 1994, p. 181.

hormonal caprice,”³⁹ foreignness for Mantel in not within but outside, in “a suit of fat”⁴⁰ that she has been forced to wear.

When Mantel is ten years old she starts having her first aches. “By now, [...], I am disconnecting from my body”⁴¹, the writer will say. But her complaints are not taken seriously by the doctors. Those are “growing pains,”⁴² she is informed by an irritated physician who further advises that if young Hilary has difficulty breathing, she should simply stop thinking about it. He also calls her “Little Miss Neverwell”⁴³ and, thus, provides a label that will haunt her throughout her entire life. As she grows into adulthood, the pains increase and they cannot any longer be ludicrously explained as a sign of growing. Large doses of aspirin are not helpful either. “Each day I was taking, though I didn’t know it, a small step towards the unlit terrain of sickness, a featureless landscape of humiliation and loss,”⁴⁴ Mantel says in *Giving up the Ghost*.

Unable to deal with the aches any more Mantel – now a student of law in Sheffield – goes to her GP and, in her own words, makes “the big mistake.”⁴⁵ What unveils before us, the readers, on the subsequent pages of Mantel’s memoir is a collusion of ignorance, misogyny and indifference. First, she is suspected of being pregnant. Then, as someone suffering from an idiopathic disease and she is given anti-depressants which result in blurred vision and apathy. When “therapy” proves to be ineffective, her GP decides that body is not the problem: the mind is. Mantel is sent to a psychiatrist, “Dr. G,” who soon diagnoses her condition as psychosomatic. She is a woman who dares to study law, an ancient domain of males, so, according to the psychiatrist, what she clearly suffers from is “stress caused by overambition.”⁴⁶ She is transferred to a university clinic and put on anti-depressants and some major tranquilizers as well as anti-psychotic drugs which only bring about vision and speech problems, sickness, hallucinations⁴⁷ and, ultimately, acathisia. Most importantly, Mantel is denied any right to claim authority over her own condition:

The more I said I had a physical illness, the more they said I had a mental illness. The more I questioned the nature, the reality of the mental illness, the more I was found to be in denial, deluded. [...] Every time I spoke I dug myself into a deeper hole.⁴⁸

Having incautiously shown one of her short stories to Dr G, she is also forbidden to write and, consequently, become an active narrator of her experiential history, or, to quote Smith and Watson, occupy a site of “agentive narration.”⁴⁹ But

³⁹ H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost...*, op. cit., p. 54.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 74.

⁴² Ibid., p. 82.

⁴³ Ibid..

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴⁵ Ibid..

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

⁴⁷ One of those hallucinations is painfully prophetic with Mantel getting for herself a dress size 16, instead of 10. Ibidem, p. 179.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 177, 181.

⁴⁹ S. Smith, J. Watson, op. cit., p. 54.

it is writing that ultimately helps her have her revenge on the nefarious creature of Dr G and his fellow doctors. When after weeks of devastating treatment Mantel, "ignored, invalidated and humiliated,"⁵⁰ is discharged from the clinic, she makes a promise never to see a psychiatrist or take a psychotropic drug again. Crucially, she decides to start a book:

I went to the library and got out a lot of books about the French Revolution. I made some notes and some charts. I went to a bigger library and got more books and began to break down the events of 1789–94 so that I could put them into a card index. [...] I began to read about the old regime, its casual cruelties, its heartless style. I thought, but I know this stuff. By nature, I knew about despotism: the unratified decisions, handed down from the top, arbitrarily enforced: the face of strength when it moves in on the weak.⁵¹

The book in question is *A Place of Greater Safety*, one of Mantel's masterpieces which was published in 1992.⁵² But the years of writing the book, were also the years of Mantel re-making herself and taking control over the life of her body. Research into the French Revolution was accompanied by research into the workings of body and its "brute biology"⁵³:

I went up to the capital [of Botswana], to the university library, and combed through the medical books. I found a textbook of surgery, with a female figure. Her organs clearly depicted, and black lines – like the long pins with which they used to stick witches – striking through her hips and ribcage, carrying a name for each organ. For each organ, there was a pain, and of each pain, I had a sample.⁵⁴

When in 1979 Mantel returned to Britain after some years spent in Africa she did not only bring a manuscript of her novel and submitted it to a publisher. More importantly, she arrived with a diagnosis – the name for the condition that she had been suffering from and which she discovered when studying medical textbooks being endometriosis.

By the time her condition is finally confirmed by "professionals", Mantel is forced to undergo a surgery. Descriptions of her stay in the gynaecological unit and the behaviours of doctors and nurses might well be listed among some of the most terrifying passages in her oeuvre, which is, otherwise, permeated by visceral accounts of ruthlessness, sadism and cruelty. "How can I write this?" Mantel wonders and adds: "I am a woman with a delicate mouth; I say nothing gross. I can write it, it seems; perhaps because I can pretend it is somebody else, bleeding on the table."⁵⁵ When she is taken to a different hospital to have USG scans of

⁵⁰ H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost...*, op. cit., p. 184.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 184–185.

⁵² Though *A Place of Greater Safety* is Mantel's first completed novel, it was published only as her fifth piece. Publishers were reluctant to publish it due to its topic and size. Only when Mantel's writing (first four books, i.e. *Every Day is Mother's Day*, *Vacant Possession*, *Eight Months on Ghazal Street* and *Fludd*) was met with critical appreciation and favourably reviewed in the media, the publisher took a chance on releasing the bulky historical volume.

⁵³ K. Hughes, *Ghost Stories*, "The Guardian" 2003, May 10, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/may/10/featuresreviews.guardianreview18>> [access: 7.12.2013].

⁵⁴ H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost...*, op. cit., p. 191.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 189–190.

her abdomen and womb taken, she realises that a recognition of her ailment has come too late and that, by now, her body has been disconnected from her: “For the first and last time, I saw my womb, with two black strokes, like skilled calligraphy, marking it out: a neat diacritical mark in a language I would never learn to speak.”⁵⁶

The surgery removes Mantel’s reproductive apparatus. But it also definitively and irrevocably alienates her from her own body:

Now my body was not my own. It was a thing done to, a thing operated on. I was twenty-seven and an old woman, all at once. I had undergone what is called a “surgical menopause” or what textbooks of the time called “female castration.” I was a eunuch, then? Castration is a punishment; what was my crime?⁵⁷

This process further exacerbates when after some time endometriosis returns (despite doctors’ ignorant insistence that it cannot do so). Mantel is put on hormones and steroids which gradually change her body, “a sad sack enclosing a disease process”⁵⁸: she loses her hair and develops a steroid moonface, fluid puffs up her eyelids, arms and legs, her voice deepens, she turns into size 20. The war for authority, for self which she used to wage against her body and which she seemed to have won begins anew:

When you get fat, you get a new personality. You can’t help it. Complete strangers ascribe it to you. When I was thin and quick on my feet, a girl with a head of blonde hair, I went for weeks without a kind word. But why would I need one? When I grew fat, I was assumed to be placid. I was the same strung-out fired-up persona I’d always been, but to the outward eye I had acquired serenity. A whole range of maternal virtues were ascribed to me. I was (and am) unsure about how I am related to my old self, or to myself from year to year.⁵⁹

However, it is not what the body gives (in fact, produces in excess), but what it cannot provide that lies at the very heart of Mantel’s narrative. The writer’s childlessness is hinted at quite early in the story when Mantel comments on a family treasure: a brooch which, on one side, displays her maternal grandfather and, on the other, a little girl called Olive who burnt to death in a house fire long before the writer’s birth. Olive is never put on display and always gazes backwards: “blurred eyes on someone’s breastbone; looking inside the body, like a child who has never left the womb.”⁶⁰ Olive anticipates unborn children of Mantel which remain the major ghosts haunting the writer’s life. In her early 20s, Mantel together with her then lover fantasise about their future daughter whom they would call Catriona after Catriona MacGregor Drummond, a character in Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1893 novel. “I assumed I would be able to have Catriona at a time of my choosing”, Mantel confesses in the narrative. And adds: “I didn’t know

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26–27.

she would always be a ghost of possibility, a paper baby, a person who slipped between the lines."⁶¹

After the surgery Mantel needs to face the fact that "there would be no daughter, no Catriona."⁶² However, this brute realisation on the part of the never-to-be mother does not prevent her ghost child to inhabit Mantel's world. Mantel confesses to missing her unborn daughter and imagining what she would have been like. Most importantly, she acknowledges her immaterial presence:

Children are never simply themselves, co-extensive with their own bodies, becoming alive to us when they turn in the womb, or with their first unaided breath. Their lives start long before birth, long before conception, and if they are aborted or miscarried or simply fail to materialise at all, they become ghosts within our lives.⁶³

In hindsight, this ghostly presence of Catriona can be detected as a powerful and determining factor not only for Mantel's life but for her fiction as well. A poignant brooding of a historical figure of Annette Duplessis, a character of Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety*, which I used to find disturbingly "foreign"⁶⁴ to the novel's diegesis – "l'univers où advient cette histoire"⁶⁵ – is, thus, offered an additional context – the one autobiographical in nature:

She remembered, for some reason, a couple of occasions when she'd thought she might be pregnant again, and in the years before she and Claude had separate rooms. You thought you might be, you had those strange feelings, but then you bled and you knew you weren't. A week, a fortnight out of your life had gone by, a certain life had been considered, a certain steady flow of love had begun, from the mind to the body and into the world and the years to come. Then it was over, or had never been: a miscarriage of love. The child went on in your mind. Would it have had blue eyes? What would its character have been?⁶⁶

In the introductory remarks to the present paper I have emphasised the fact that auto-pathography is primarily anti-pathography – a narrative of resistance which hopes to determine its writer's condition and, consequently, recover his or her body; to "reclaim [patients'] voices from the biomedical narrative."⁶⁷ *Giving up the Ghost* can, indeed, be seen as a narrative which delineates, so to speak, a trajectory of survival in the maze of the body's "mad pathways."⁶⁸ Mantel does not only manage to resist various medical scripts (e.g. a mad woman), but, single-handedly, discovers and tags erroneous mechanisms operating within her body. Still, her losses (and – quite literally – gains) are grave. Hence, on the pages of Mantel's memoir, one will not find the writer "surfacing safely into 'normality'"⁶⁹ – a characteristic feature of a number of illness/disability memoirs which hope to offer some kind of consolation to their writers and readers. In a truly "human-

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 158.

⁶² Ibid., p. 208.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 228.

⁶⁴ I.e. not in line with the rest of Annette's characterisation provided in the narrative.

⁶⁵ G. Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Paris 1982, p. 419.

⁶⁶ H. Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety*, op. cit., p. 86.

⁶⁷ A. Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative...*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁶⁸ H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost...*, op. cit., p. 230.

⁶⁹ L. Anderson, *Autobiography...*, op. cit., p. 115.

ist” fashion, Mantel’s singular method of coming to terms with those losses is precisely by means of writing. In this sense, *Giving up the Ghost* appears to me to be the “truest” form of autopathography as it does not only provide a chronicle of survival, but, in its very essence, is the means of survival. In a sheer act of narrating her story, Mantel “writes herself into being” and shows what Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith aptly called “consubstantial embodiment of language and materiality.”⁷⁰ The following passage from the closing pages of *Giving up the Ghost* seems to irrefutably support my claim:

I am not writing to solicit any special sympathy. [...] I am writing in order to take charge of the story of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, if not within a body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are. Spirit needs a house and lodges where it can; you don’t kill yourself just because you need loose covers rather than frocks. [...] You need to find yourself, in a maze of social expectation, the thickets of memory: just which bits of you are left intact? I have been so mauled by medical procedures, so sabotaged and made over, so thin and so fat, that sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being – even if the writing is aimless doodling that no one will ever read, or the diary that no one will see till I’m dead. When you have committed enough words to paper you feel you have a spine stiff enough to stand up in the wind. But when you stop writing you find that’s all you are, a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen.⁷¹

For Mantel, indisputably, writing means life. Metaphorically speaking, she considers her writing to be a “dress” with which she can cover her battered body: “something to go out in and face the world.”⁷²

The final pages of *Giving up the Ghosts* show Mantel selling her beloved house, Owl Cottage, and moving to a different place: an apartment in a converted lunatic asylum in Surrey. It is a brilliant coda to the whole narrative as by means of leaving the house, the writer also manages to give up the ghosts that have inhabited the place and her life: including Jack, her stepfather’s ghost, who appears on the staircase on the first page of Mantel’s memoir, and, above all, her unborn children:

Then a thing occurred to me, about ghost children. They don’t age unless you make them. They don’t age so they don’t know it’s time to leave home. They won’t without a struggle, be kicked out of your psyche. They will hang on by every means they know; they won’t agree to go, until you make your intentions very clear. [...] It’s not enough to tell them; you have to show them as well.⁷³

But the titular ghosts are not only members of Mantel’s family – long dead or never born. The ghosts are also her works – books she should have written but did not, stories that she started and abandoned. In her dream, she sees the books as foetal beings, “frozen corpses”, “malign forms”, which – she fears – “will range about the world and will bad-mouth me and misrepresent me.”⁷⁴ In this sense,

⁷⁰ S. Smith, J. Watson, op. cit., p. 52.

⁷¹ H. Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost...*, op. cit., p. 222–223.

⁷² Ibid., p. 223.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 240.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 232.

moving to a new home also means shaking off the fears and embarking on some new literary projects – free from the haunting presence of the past. On the final page of the story Mantel imagines herself as a figure shrouded in a cloak who carries some bulky objects and traverses the fields of Surrey. "This figure is me", she says: "these shapes hidden in their wrappings, are books that, God willing, I am going to write. But when was God ever willing?"⁷⁵

Apparently, (s)he is from time to time, as in 2009 – nine years after moving places and giving up her ghosts – Hilary Mantel published the bulky volume she dreamed of on the last page of her memoir: the novel *Wolf Hall*.

4.

In 2010 Mantel wrote a post-script to *Giving up the Ghost*: an excerpt from her diary which she first published in *London Review of Books* and, later, as a separate piece titled *Ink in the Blood: A Hospital Diary* which was released as an e-book by Fourth Estate, her regular publisher.⁷⁶ The piece explores Mantel's hospitalisation and surgery she was forced to undergo – immediately after winning the Man Booker Prize (and other awards⁷⁷) for *Wolf Hall*. It can well be seen as an extension of her investigation of illness and suffering that she first embarked on in her 2003 memoir. In her diary, Mantel returns to the topics she explored before: writing and suffering,⁷⁸ the nature of illness and its demands,⁷⁹ the language of medicine,⁸⁰ attitudes of medical professionals,⁸¹ childlessness.⁸² Most importantly, she enters into polemics with a writer who is claimed to be among the first to make illness the subject of art, namely Virginia Woolf. In her seminal essay "On Being Ill" Woolf famously says: "English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache."⁸³ Mantel's fierce criticism of Woolf's inquiry into the "hidden drama of the sickroom"⁸⁴ is not only an attempt to prioritise body and physical pain (over mind and its suffering), but a way to establish an alternative tradition of illness writing. By writing against Woolf⁸⁵ (who – according to Mantel – fell victim to the limitations and

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 252.

⁷⁶ H. Mantel, *Ink in the Blood: A Hospital Diary*, London 2010.

⁷⁷ E.g. the National Book Critics Circle Award and Walter Scott Prize.

⁷⁸ "Pain is a present-tense business." H. Mantel, *Diary*, op. cit.

⁷⁹ "Illness involves such busywork!"; "Illness strips you back to an authentic self, but not one you need to meet." Ibid..

⁸⁰ "It's just another border post on the frontier between medicine and greengrocery; growth and tumors seem always to be described as 'the size of a plum' or 'the size of a grapefruit.'" Ibid.

⁸¹ "Some take the human body to be made of flesh, some of jointed metal." Ibid.

⁸² "Perhaps it was because of the weight of dressings on my abdomen that I dreamed I was carrying a child." Ibid.

⁸³ V. Woolf, *On Being Ill*, [in:] *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, New York 1967, p. 194.

⁸⁴ A. Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative...*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁸⁵ As well as against Susan Sontag who in her *Illness as Metaphor* famously argued that writing about illness should not be considered a literary endeavour.

constrictions of her social class and gender), Mantel makes a strong argument in favour of her own writing:

I read “On Being Ill”, by Virginia Woolf. What schoolgirl piffle, I think. It’s like one of those compositions by young ladies mocked in *Tom Sawyer*. I can’t understand what she means when she complains about the “poverty of the language” we have to describe illness. For the sufferer, she says, there is “nothing ready made.” Then what of the whole vocabulary of singing aches, of spasms, of strictures and cramps; the gouging pain, the drilling pain, the pricking and pinching, the throbbing, burning, singing, smarting, flaying? All good words. All old words. no one’s pain is so special that the devil’s dictionary of anguish has not anticipated it. [...] Virginia has only decorous illnesses. She has faints and palpitations, fevers and headaches, though I am mindful that at one stage they tried to fix her by pulling out her teeth. But she is seemly; she does not seep, or require a dressings trolley, she does not wake at dawn to find herself smeared with contact jelly from last night’s ECG. Virginia never oozes. Her secretions are ladylike: tears, not bile. She may as well not have had bowels, for all the evidence of them in her book.⁸⁶

The final paragraph of Mantel’s hospital diary returns to the issue of correspondence between writing and survival – the way the latter is dependent on the former. Mantel – overwhelmed by pain, sutured, and struggling with hallucinations – would always “contrive to get [her] pen in [her] hand, however far it had rolled.” “The only thing that would really have upset me”, she continues, “was running out of paper. The black ink looping across the page, flowing easily and more like water than like blood, reassured me that I was alive and could act in the world. When Virginia Woolf’s doctors forbade her to write, she obeyed them. Which makes me ask, what kind of wuss was Woolf.”⁸⁷

Mantel did not obey the doctors’ commands. *Giving up the Ghost*, Mantel’s very own “on being ill”, is a proof that she, unlike Woolf, is no wuss.

⁸⁶ H. Mantel, “Diary,” op. cit.

⁸⁷ Ibid.