

“A short story that wouldn’t work
after the opening lines”:
Frustrated Maternity
in First-Person Narratives

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Les écritures intimes proprement dites appartiennent aux premiers cercles de la vie privée, á la respiration de l’organisme intellectuel et spirituel, aux pulsations de l’existence en recherche d’équilibre.

Gusdorf, George (1991) *Les Écritures du Moi*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1992, 287.

This article will address two different narratives by contemporary British women authors: the short story, “Jackson’s Pollock’s Curtains,” by art critic and writer Sue Hubbard² and Hilary Mantel’s memoir, *Giving up the Ghost: A Memoir*.³ Even though belonging to different literary genres, they share a common theme—frustrated maternity—and illustrate the same type of narrative situation, being both first-person narratives, and will allow me to exemplify two of the

¹ This article is an output of research developed under the Project *Medicine & Narrative—(Con)texts and practices across disciplines* [Ref. PTDC/CPC-ELT/3719/2012], held in CEAUL/ULICES-University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, and funded by FCT (*Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia*). It is an expanded and revised version of a paper delivered at the International Conference, *A Narrative Future for Healthcare*, held at King’s College, London, 19-21 June 2013.

² In her anthology of 2008, *Rothko’s Red and Other Stories*, henceforward referred to as RR.

³ Hilary Mantel’s *Giving up the Ghost: A Memoir* (2003), henceforward referred to as GG.

three different types of illness narratives proposed by Arthur W. Frank in his book *The Wounded Storyteller*, namely: chaos narratives and quest narratives, while at the same time allowing me to complexify things somewhat more.⁴

1. Sue Hubbard's "Jackson Pollock's Curtains"

The twelve-page-long short story by Sue Hubbard concerns the case of a mature married woman who, obsessed with the idea of losing the opportunity of experiencing maternity, before it was too late,⁵ got pregnant, even though her self-centred, contented husband was not very keen on the idea, and ended up by losing her 49-hour-old newborn she-baby, while still in hospital.

The narrative is told in the first person by the woman herself, sometime after the traumatic event has occurred, and it takes place while she is shopping at the supermarket, on a Friday, before the weekend when her husband will be away from home for the first time since the fatal happening. In spite of her husband entreaties that she stays at home, oppressed by solitude and by the ghosts of her past traumatic experience (especially by the colour pink in the empty baby's room), she decides to go shopping and prepare for hosting her husband's employer and wife, in anticipation of a possible job promotion for him.

We gradually understand in a circuitous and intermittent way that she has been having a slow and difficult recovery from that psychologically damaging event and it soon becomes apparent by the circular and obsessive nature of her reasoning that she is not yet well and has not really been able to cope with it. The reader realizes this little by little, since the narrative is rendered in the form of an interior monologue, echoing the modernist stream of consciousness technique, by means of a chaotic and at first sight disconnected flow of ideas, words, idioms, and quotations from songs and

⁴ The third type in Frank's classification is "restitution narratives," which will not be addressed here.

⁵ The sentence "it'll-soon-be-too-late" (occurring on pages 49 and 56, for instance), emphatically suggests the urgency the woman felt.

other audio-visual sources, casual words that evoke other more psychologically charged ones.⁶ The reader is confirmed in his/her own worst suspicions as, at the conclusion of the story, s/he is surprised by the protagonist's kidnapping of a baby that lies in a pram momentarily left unattended at the till. This decision, having been determined by a sudden impulse rooted however in one of the many lines of mental associations that had just run through her consciousness, is seen as replicating a childhood loss, that of a rabbit, named Bouncer, which succeeded in escaping, and echoes her grand-father's soothing words to ease her tears: "If he doesn't come back, we'll get another one; *we'll go to the shop and you can choose another Bouncer*" (RR 55 - emphasis added).

One of the striking things about the style in this narrative piece is the way in which the reader is invited to draw a parallel between the chaotic mesh of interweaving lines of thought the narrative builds itself upon and the type of painting its title alludes to, namely, Jackson Pollock's well-known effect of interwoven "squiggly black lines and spilt paint" (RR 53), dense webs of apparently random patterns resulting from his method of drip painting that the woman sees reproduced in the pattern of the curtains in her hospital room. As in the case of Pollock's method, this woman's way of dealing with her predicament is as much dictated by impulse (bodily impulse)⁷ as by a sort of implausible logic or order that accounts both for the randomness of what we read and, paradoxically, a sense of overdetermination or necessity that nevertheless pervades the piece inevitably leading to its unorthodox conclusion.

When confronted by one of his critics' complaints that there was no method in his paintings, but only chaos, the painter maintained that it was

⁶ Dorrit Cohn, in *Transparent Minds*, uses the expression "interior monologue" to name this narrative device that aims at registering the stream of consciousness occurring in first person narratives (Cf. 186 ff). Significantly she adds: "[o]nly fictional characters can be heard as they put thoughts into words without speaking them aloud or writing them down; or rather, they can be 'overheard,' for they address their discourse to no one, least of all to a reader" (189). And see also note 11 of present article.

⁷ Echoed ironically in her remark: "I should have made a list, and then you only buy what you need, and don't shop on impulse" (RR 52).

“[n]o chaos, damn it.”⁸ One is tempted to add here: not chaos but the complex (dis)order of nature. Indeed Pollock believed “his free yet controlled application of paint had a connection to his inner being—his unconscious—which in turn connected to larger forces outside the self.”⁹ The same could be said in the case of this fictional character’s behaviour: that behind its apparent randomness lies the compulsion of natural laws. This is nowhere more apparent than in the reference to the spilling of maternal milk that occurs overnight after delivery but becomes totally useless, since the child dies. As in Pollock’s case, the spilling of paint from the painter’s arms and hands, while executing a sort of dance over the outstretched canvas on the floor, is seen as something coming essentially from the body, so in this story we have this physiological unstoppable mechanism asserting itself blindly in spite of the dramatic circumstances of the newborn’s death and making these circumstances even more unbearable. No wonder then that milk becomes a leitmotiv resurfacing throughout the story—as a sign of inexorable natural laws asserting themselves, beyond the individual’s will.

Concentrate or you will forget something. You should have written a list. Coffee. Yes, we’ll need coffee after the meal. We’ve run out. Continental medium roast or Kenyan? I’ll need milk for the coffee. The milk leaked. Can’t cry over spilt milk. Little yellow patches of cholesterol leaked onto the pale blue flowers of my nightie. Smelt of sick when it dried. It wouldn’t stop. Just went on and on. Seemed such a waste. They had to give me pills to dry it up. It seems the body just keeps going no matter what. Like clock work. Tick-tock. (...) (RR 51)

The unnamed protagonist is thus caught unawares by the compulsion of her bodily mechanisms as well as by the more superficial demands of her

⁸ See http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=78386 (accessed 4-4-2013).

⁹ *Ibidem*. Moreover, as we read on: “[w]hen asked to describe the relationship between his work and nature, Pollock stated emphatically, ‘I am nature.’”

daily life (leaving her job, her housewifely duties) and interweaves both in a seemingly chaotic flow of words and sentences where the banal as well as the traumatic are so levelled as to become hardly distinguishable. It is for the reader to disentangle them, diagnose her case and assess her condition, thus reconstructing her clinical case report.

To accomplish this task successfully, the reader, positioned in a role similar to that of a psychotherapist, has to pay attention not only to the linguistic devices shaping her particular utterance but also to interruptions in the flow of words, to sudden breaks in sentences that correspond to silences. The repeated use of reticence marks signals the unsaid or unacknowledged event at the heart of this female character's predicament,¹⁰ whose presence is hinted at by indirect scattered allusions. The three dots, mere reminders of an absence, correspond to that which is never fully uttered and therefore not accepted, as is the case, for instance, in the following example: "I wonder if the Humphries eat fish. It's the first time I've done any real entertaining, the first time since (...)" (RR 48). According to Arthur W. Frank, this is: "the hole in the story that cannot be filled in (...). The story traces the edges of a wound that can only be told around" (Frank 98). And, still according to Frank, this is one of the defining features of what he calls "chaos narratives."

The key issue here is this woman's inability to cope with her traumatic experience which is reflected in her inability to speak out, to verbalize it (Freud's famous talking cure).¹¹ In other words, she is caught in a vicious circle where words or, better still, mental reasoning (instead of having a cathartic or liberating effect) are a means of justifying to herself an unacceptable deed (the kidnapping of someone else's baby) that nevertheless appears as the only possible outcome for satisfying

¹⁰ In fact, repetition plays a central role underlying the free-associative technique that throws light on her mentally deranged state of mind (repetition of words and phrases, repeated use of leitmotifs, such as milk, curtains, and rabbits, etc.).

¹¹ Here again, Frank explains: "the chaotic story cannot be told" (*Ibidem*). In the case under scrutiny, it is the fact that this is a fictional rendering of the chaotic stream of consciousness of a deranged character that makes the narrative emerge as possible. In true life, the narrator of this story would never be able to tell it.

her yet unappeased maternal impulse, for her “body is imprisoned in the frustrated needs of the moment” (Frank 98).

The above quotation, on the other hand, signals the temporal dimension inherent in this case. In fact the frustration of pressing physical needs makes it impossible for trauma to be overcome and this in its turn hinders any possibility of change, as the past impinges continually upon the present. In the case of this text it is the past (and/or plans made in the past) that is given room. Even though the action takes place while the protagonist is in the supermarket and attending to her immediate shopping list, her thoughts continually travel to the more or less immediate past. And when she evokes past plans these do not translate into moves for change but rather emphasize the unbearable sense of loss curtailing any future beyond the ever-present fulfillment of frustrated wishes.

As Cathy Caruth argued, taking up some of Freud’s ideas and his own writing experience, trauma manifests itself in the belated repetition of an overpowering experience that dominates the person who lived it, like ghosts from the past haunting their victims.¹²

2. Hilary Mantel’s *Giving up the Ghost*

As in the painting by Gustav Klimt, entitled *Hope II*, the theme of pregnancy in Hubbard’s story is shockingly linked to death or unaccomplished (physical) hope¹³ and this too is the theme of Hilary Mantel’s memoir, *Giving up the Ghost*, where, however, the situation is totally different, even though frustrated maternity is also very much at the centre of it, as the last lines of the poem by Judy Jordan chosen as an epigraph to the book show: “My children who won’t hear. / The night full of cries they will never make.”

Mantel’s life story is here revealed also in a devious way since ghosts of her past are pervasive presences throughout the narrative and chronology becomes irrelevant rather submitting to the whimsical irruptions of previous

¹² Cf. Caruth 19-24.

¹³ Notice also the unexpected inclusion of a skull in the womb of the standing pregnant woman in Klimt’s painting.

deeply felt experiences or expectations. But at the heart of her life story is also the inexorable reality of the body, of physiological ailments with their attendant psychological sequels. As a critic rightly summed up: “she chronicles a long history of misdiagnosis and neglect, in which her symptoms of unidentifiable pain were thought to be depression caused by unrealistic ambition. Courses of tranquillisers followed, with disastrous side effects. She was 27 when endometriosis was diagnosed and a hysterectomy performed. The babies who would never be born to her are plaintive, poignant ghosts in this unrelenting story of losses and defeats” (Niall).

Based on her own life experiences as a child and as a young woman on her path to maturity, Mantel’s book insists moreover on the idea that it is not so much the actualities experienced in life, but rather the imaginary anticipation of things yet to come that shapes and nurtures our lives and therefore, when dreams are cut short and expectations aborted, can shatter them. This, undoubtedly, is at the heart of the thought by Portuguese poet Sebastião da Gama: “Dreams are what pushes us forward”,¹⁴ but when dreams fail to materialize the remnants are ghosts of aborted stories, narratives half told or, in Mantel’s words: “A short story that wouldn’t work after the opening lines.”

At this stage it makes sense to quote the entire paragraph from which this sentence was taken, in order to introduce Mantel’s world view as it is presented to the reader:

You come to this place, mid-life. You don’t know how you got there, 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 warp and the weft of your curtains, they lurk in wardrobes and lie flat 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, what happens*

¹⁴ Sebastião da Gama [1924-1952] used this sentence as the title of one of his books of poetry.

to the child that has already formed in your mind? You keep it filed in a drawer of your consciousness, like a short story that wouldn't work after the opening lines. (GG 20-21, emphases added)

This quote makes us ponder on what it means to write an autobiographical report. To include just that which actually happened and simply give up the ghosts of what might have been, will be inadequate, since in our lives so much depends upon this dimension of possibilities to be fulfilled, a dimension tied up with daydreaming, planning ahead and surrogate living, which I will call poetical, drawing from Aristotle's description of the difference between history and poetry:

[I]t is not the poet's function to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of thing that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary. (...) The difference [between the historian and the poet] is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts. (Aristotle 43-44)

In this sense, one could argue that the way we live our lives has in it a lot of poetical activity, taking place in the uncontrolled flow of our daily consciousness, where plans and dreams yet to be fulfilled act as catalysts to the painful need of pushing on our day to day routines, and thus adding to our living an extra temporal dimension beyond the chronology, very often a fantasy of a compensatory nature. According to Adam Phillips, it is as though we would learn to live in-between two realms: the life we actually live and the one we would like to experience (Cf. Phillips xi).¹⁵ This I will call, for lack of a better word, the "surreal" dimension, where dreams are acted out and juxtaposed to the narrow contingency of lived

¹⁵ Still according to Phillips: "one realizes how much of our so-called mental life is about the lives we are not living, the lives we are missing out on, the lives we could be leading but for some reason are not" (*Ibid.*).

experience.¹⁶ The admission of this poetical activity in our daily lives is, I think, what is behind Mantel's use of the writing metaphor that closes the paragraph I have just quoted and which poses the questions of the nexus between daydreaming and (creative) writing, namely narrative.¹⁷ That both generate a sort of breathing space that counteracts the drawbacks and difficulties we all experience in life seems obvious. Imagination, according to Phillips and Morley, "is one of humankind's major adaptative tools" (112). A lot of testimonial statements from writers in justifying their craft could here also be invoked, but the epigraph taken from George Gusdorf suggests precisely this dimension of physical compensatory wellbeing that corresponds to the act of autobiographical writing, just as in our daily living daydreaming is as natural and as necessary as breathing to keep us moving on.

However, it is Mantel who also signals in her memoir the difficulty of writing about the events of her past life, much more so than devoting herself to imaginative writing. Here is what she says:

I have hesitated for such a long time before beginning this. For a long time I felt as if someone else was writing my life. I seemed able to create or interpret characters in fiction, but not able to create or interpret myself. About the time I reached mid-life, I began to understand why this was. 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. I began this writing in an attempt to seize the copyright in myself. (GG 70-71)

¹⁶ In narratological terms this dimension could be called "psychological time," "subjective time," or "time in the mind," or even, according to Henri Bergson, "durée," as opposed to the chronological time of narrated events. Cf. Bergson, *Œuvres* (Paris: P.U.F., 1963), 88-89.

¹⁷ The existence of a relationship between the frequency and intensity of daydreaming in children and adolescents and the possibility of their becoming artists was evidenced by a series of studies carried out in the NY City area by Charles Schafer. Cf. Jerome L. Singer, *Daydreaming and Fantasy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 67.

To her, it was fiction that came first, not life writing! Fiction was easier for it kept the ghosts alive, gave them space to creep back and reclaim her past as theirs—fiction somehow kept her ties to her past untouched, alleviated her life pains, but did not kill them. Writing her memoir was her attempt at getting rid of those ghosts and reclaiming her rights over her past life. This, in turn, made it possible for her to move on into new territories.

In the novel *Goldberg's Variations* by the British writer, Gabriel Josipovici, one finds an illuminating passage that clarifies this issue. One of his characters confesses:

[W]riting things down, bending over the white page, dipping the pen in the ink, pausing, looking up, staring again—all that brings release and appeasement, such as merely closing the eyes and imagining never does. Mama is gone today, I remember writing down, she will not return for at least a week. Papa died yesterday in his sleep, I wrote later. I held his hand before but I am not sure he knew it was me.

Why do we feel the need to write down this sort of thing? It explains nothing. It does not alter the facts. It tells nothing we did not already know. And yet it brings relief. Of that there can be no doubt. The feeling is palpable. As one writes the pain round the heart eases, the knots inside one are loosed, the state of shock into which one had been thrown gives way to something else, one picks up ones normal rhythm of breathing again, of moving. (Josipovici 103)

If imagining and daydreaming create a play strategy (akin to the child's play¹⁸) making us able to cope daily with dire routine, difficulties, aborted aspirations, disillusion and/or trauma, life writing about such critical events, about dreams that were cut short by contingency and/or illness, loss or disaster replicates and gives space to the development (at another level, or at a remove) of this "surreal" dimension of our lives and thus contributes also to a redressing of our human balance as we go by. But in Mantel's case, as we have seen, it is not simply a question of making life

¹⁸ Cf. Winnicott.

breathable but emancipating from her past by writing, thus creating a life where future developments are possible.

And just as the figure of the wandering artist, invoked in Josipovici's narrative quoted before and inspired by Paul Klee's *Wandering artist (a poster)* [*Wander-Artist (Ein Plakat) I*] (1940), Mantel closes her memoir with a similar hardly sketched author figure, moving in the distance and packed with the burden of yet untold stories, pregnant with narratives for which she will have to find a voice, in an incessant quest:

Sometimes, at dawn or at dusk I pick out from the gloom—I think I do—a certain figure, (...). It is a figure shrouded in a cloak, bearing certain bulky objects wrapped in oilcloth, irregular in shape: not heavy but awkward to carry. This figure is me; these shapes, hidden in their wrappings, are books that, God willing, I am going to write. (GG 251-52)

It will be apt to conclude with a quotation from Arthur W. Frank to highlight the difference between Mantel's predicament as the finally empowered teller of her own story/ies and the entrapped impotent protagonist of Hubbard's text: "The quest narrative affords the ill person a voice as teller of her own story, because only in quest stories does the *teller* have a story to tell." (Arthur 115) And one could add: in quest narratives, beyond a story to tell, the teller has the expectation of a future to live, even if that future turns out to be unenvisioned and unwanted. Such is the power of narratives.

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ABSTRACT

I propose to offer an analysis of two first-person narratives, one fictional—“Jackson Pollock’s Curtains” by Sue Hubbard (in her 2008 volume, *Rothko’s Red*)—and the other, a memoir by Hilary Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003), in order to explore two contrasting ways of dealing with situations of frustrated maternity. The differences will be illustrated by looking at the formal characteristics of the two texts, by references to painting, especially in the case of Hubbard’s short story, and by relating them to two of the types of narratives of illness as proposed by Arthur W. Frank in his *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), namely: “chaos narrative” and “quest narrative.”

KEYWORDS

“Chaos narrative”; “quest narrative”; frustrated maternity; Hilary Mantel; Sue Hubbard

RESUMO

Analisarei duas narrativas literárias de duas escritoras britânicas contemporâneas: um conto de Sue Hubbard, da antologia *Rothko’s Red*, publicada em 2008 e o livro de memórias de Hilary Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost: A Memoir*, de 2003. Apesar de diversas, ambas são narrativas de primeira pessoa, com uma temática comum—maternidades frustradas, e servirão para ilustrar dois tipos diferentes de narrativas de doença, segundo as categorias propostas por Arthur W. Frank na sua obra de 1995, *The Wounded Storyteller*: a narrativa caótica (“chaos narrative”) e a narrativa de demanda (“quest narrative”). Far-se-á igualmente alusão a pinturas para as quais os textos remetem ou com os quais podem relacionar-se (em particular o conto de Hubbard).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

“Narrativa caótica”; “narrativa de demanda”; maternidade frustrada; Hilary Mantel; Sue Hubbard
