K. A. Zinovieva
Minsk, Belarus

THOMAS CROMWELL'S SELF-IDENTITY IN HILARY MANTEL'S TRILOGY

As suggested by H. Ferguson in her book "Self-Identity and Everyday Life", human identity is "an organic and continuously developing process in which each individual becomes increasingly differentiated, internally and externally, from every other" [1, p. 17]. The modern concept of self-identity is undergoing a crisis,

blurring the boundaries of the self in the globalized digital age, which has intensified scholarly search for what makes the self and how the self is formed. A significant part of this research lies in studying the historical phases of the formation of the self. In the epochs preceding modernity, people's understanding of life was tightly connected to religion. The Medieval understanding of the self was that of the "soul" [2, p. 8], the body of a person was viewed as mundane and filthy – the opposite of the soul, meaning the physical aspect of a person was fully discarded. Such interpretation was dominant before Descartes came up with the alternative of the "mind" as the self, which marked the departure from the ecclesiastical approach to this concept. Even though Descartes' version also disregards the body, it has brought a new perspective on personality.

Thomas Cromwell – the protagonist of Hilary Mantel's historical trilogy – is a historical figure that stands at the transition route from the concepts of the Middle Ages to the Renaissance mindset. He was an English lawyer, statesman and chief minister to Henry VIII who helped to organize the English Reformation and to establish the tenets of the English governance. In this man, H. Mantel personifies the modern way of thinking, which is marked by the Renaissance, according to M. Mauss [3], the final stage in the philosophical development of the concept of the self.

The narrative form of writing of *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) in the 3rd person in the present tense, which is also a kind of Thomas Cromwell's controlled stream of consciousness, provides a private, almost intimate connection with the character and the epoch, as well as the illusion of co-presence. A big part of the trilogy is, in fact, the narrating mind of Thomas Cromwell with occasional interruptions made by the author. According to S. Lawler, "[n]arrative provides a means of conceptualizing people in the context of history: if the past is always interpreted through the present, then, equally, this (interpreted) past informs the present" [4, p. 32], which means the narrative may serve as a tool of conceptualizing Cromwell's identity. The author also interprets England's monumental historical figure with the help of contemporizing Cromwell's personality, building a bridge between the past and the present.

Self-identity is composed of what a person knows and perceives about oneself. In order to dissect these components, U. Neisser suggests a model of five types (or dimensions) of self-knowledge. The first type – an "ecological self" – describes the self perceived with respect to its physical environment, meaning the sensory self-awareness. The second type – an "interpersonal self" – presupposes the self as it is engaged in interacting with others. The third type – an "extended self" – refers to the self as experienced over a long period of time which produces memories and a vision of the future, which highlights the importance of memory in the psychological continuity, as the self is "an individual regarded as conscious of his own continuing identity and of his relation to the environment" [5, p. 244]. The fourth type – a "private self" – points to the experiences only available to that self,

including thoughts, dreams, feelings, actions, etc. The fifth type – a "conceptual self" – refers to the personal characteristics and roles and abstract representations about oneself that unite the four types mentioned above into one whole self [6].

The depiction of Cromwell's ecological self is predetermined by H. Mantel's "use of the gothic mode, her sustained focus on the strangeness of bodies and her treatment of the precariousness of identity" [7, p. 416]. The chancellor has high sensitivity to his surroundings, to different smells and colors, and the women of his household even ask him about the dresses that the Tudor court is wearing. Cromwell is also aware of his aging body: "He thinks, that's the bleat of the man of fifty: Welsh, tennis, I used to, I can't now. There are compensations: the head is better stored with information, the heart better proof against chips and fractures" [8, p. 73]. He feels his body's limits and, as follows, the restriction of certain activities, but he sees the benefits that come with experience, which, in the case of his profession, grants him more knowledge about the world and people, and his brain is efficient.

The greatest impact on Cromwell's interpersonal self is made by the childhood trauma inflicted by his father. In the scene that opens the trilogy we see the small Tom being beaten up on the ground, then him running away to his older sister who helps him sail to Europe. Such breach of trust at a young age has made the character always suspicious of people. Another impactful factor is that many of his younger years were spent in Italy in servitude, so the books of the trilogy are filled with Thomas's memories of first being helpless, then finding himself in various activities and trades. The protagonist undergoes a transformation from Tom to Tomasso and only becomes Thomas when he comes back to England. Having spent a long time abroad, Cromwell has developed a "secondary language personality" [9, c. 118], and becomes a kind of mediator who carries out a dialogue of cultures due to his ability to adapt to new realities.

His interpersonal self is also linked to his dependence on a network of other people in his profession. Interaction with the Tudor court and foreign diplomats requires a high level of shrewdness, and Cromwell is skilled at "reading" people: he detects the personal qualities of the interlocutor, guesses his or her motives, estimates the person's background and manages to employ a most suitable approach in the conversation, never letting out his own thoughts and feelings. This leads us to the next point: in order to work efficiently in the political sphere, Cromwell needs to master rigid self-control, to be "bullet-proof". In *Bring Up the Bodies*, for example, there is a scene, when Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, angers Cromwell, and this is how the character reacts towards the situation: "He had eased from within his coat an imaginary knife; he pressed it home, softly, easily, under Gardiner's ribs" [8, p. 77]. Years of interaction with people of the court have strengthened Cromwell, and his ruthless policies have made many uncomfortable to be one-on-one with him, which is proven in this excerpt: "'I mean, we should be at ease with each other.' Avery looks at him as if to say, do you have any idea how impossible that is?" [10, p. 406].

A weak spot Cromwell knows others take advantage of is his class: born and raised by a drunken blacksmith in Putney, Thomas shuns his origins although never his "untitled" position. Yet, the absence of a noble class background to back up his name inflicts what Cobb and Sennett term as "hidden injuries": "These injuries are hidden because they inhere not in the more visible and obvious manifestations of lack – which may also be present – but in the ridicule, shaming, silence and self-scrutiny which go along with a position of pathology" [4, p. 145]. His absence of class is visible in his way of thinking which often separates him from all the other people of the court: "Thomas Cromwell thinks we need able men, but the Duke of Norfolk thinks we need noble men" [10, p. 448]. No matter how skilled Cromwell is, he is never overly proud of himself and his achievements are not celebrated the same way as those of the nobility.

The stark difference from his surroundings puts Cromwell, a man gaining power from the king of England, in opposition "Us vs. Others", where he IS the Other. T. Matveicheva states that "the "Us vs. Others" opposition is interpreted as one of the most significant epistemological tools that determine the modes of interaction between representatives of different cultures" [9, c. 117]. The protagonist is seen as bearing differing cultural and moral views and identified as an outsider. In terms of interpersonal contact, this can complicate his political and religious work.

As for his extended self, Cromwell is conscious of his continuing identity: he's great at remembering and retaining a lot of information. In *The Mirror and the Light*, we witness a moment when Cromwell talks about his numerous sins: " 'I sin,' he says, 'I repent, I lapse, I sin again, I repent and I look to Christ to perfect my imperfection. I cling to faith but I will not give up works. My master Wolsey taught me, try everything. Discard no possibility. Keep all channels open' " [10, p. 263]; "My list of sins is so extensive that the recording angel has run out of tablets, and sits in the corner with his quill blunted, wailing and ripping out his curls" [10, p. 293]. A big part of the trilogy is Cromwell's memories of time past and how these memories are connected to his present self.

The trickiest part of Cromwell's personality is his private self, as his time alone is highly limited, only at night is he by himself, when he stays up late working with letters and documents. When Cromwell comes back to his estate, Austin Friars, he functions there as the manager of the house, where everything depends on him. As a political figure, he faces espionage, so he has to be mindful of everything he says and does. We can even argue that his rigid self-control comes not only from strategic communication but also as a form of defense mechanism: he can't keep his actions secret and private, so he fully blocks his thoughts, feelings and dreams from others, and it becomes the centre point in the trilogy. But even with this information provided to the reader, it is hard to judge Cromwell, as his thoughts are too ambivalent and the descriptions of his feelings are very rare. Another private experience of Cromwell's in the trilogy is his talking with ghosts. Cromwell's late master – cardinal Wolsey – appears before him after his death, and

Cromwell keeps him close and waits to exact his revenge for Wolsey's downfall. Another prominent ghost is that of Thomas More who first shows up in *Wolf Hall*. More was executed after his defiance of the king's new faith and the dissolution of Catholicism in England: "Thomas More stands before him, more solid in death than he was in life" [11, p. 644]. More's ghost appears to tease the protagonist, reminding him of his stubbornness. Such conversations reflect the complex nature of Cromwell's relationships with people and his present time, his profound reflections on society and culture. The presence of ghosts in the novel also reinforces the idea that in the Middle Ages it was almost impossible to be alone and to have personal space, to have the ability to reflect on one's actions.

Cromwell is satisfied with his conceptual self, as, when he looks in the mirror and sees the heights he has reached – being the second most powerful man in England – and feels reassured: "There are moments when as he goes about his duties he feels a fierce exultation – he, Cromwell, Lord Privy Seal" [10, p. 365]. From early on in his life, he wanted to advance in his socioeconomic position, even though it took time for him to fully realize the extent of his power thirst: "I was happy in my lawyer's black <…> Did I not have a doublet of purple satin, long before the cardinal came down?" [10, p. 405].

Cromwell lets others gossip about him, invent stories about his cruelty, and it is made possible because he purposefully holds back all the information about himself, while so little is known to the public: "It is the absence of facts that frightens people: the gap you open, into which they pour their fears, fantasies, desires" [11, p. 359]. With the absence of new facts and almost no details about his background, other than his father's profession, more myths about Cromwell are produced, for instance: "Sir, they say, do you not know him? He is the devil in guise of a knave. He wears a hat and under it his horns" [10, p. 298]. It seems that the negative public image of Cromwell's persona also influences him: he partakes in poking fun at himself, addressing the jokes and scary stories, and as the trilogy progresses, he becomes more violent with his prisoners.

An important aspect in this case is that Cromwell holds a lot of power and influence, and, as is known, power can corrupt and distort the person's vision of the world, which is proven in the excerpt mentioned earlier about people not feeling at ease with Cromwell. The only downside of such public image is people's disbelief in Cromwell's reforms of the church. Because of his part in the Reformation the nation sees the changes as devil's work and resists the formation of the Anglican Church. This makes the character's work go to waste: "When he thinks of the blindness of these earnest men, he wants to weep" [10, p. 439].

To conclude, Thomas Cromwell's self-identity is shaped by such factors as childhood trauma, travelling around Europe at a young age, his base birth and his actions in reforming the church of England. Cromwell's conceptual self becomes crooked due to others constantly villainizing him. His private self is invaded because of his work environment, so he creates a hole in people's knowledge of him by omitting all information about his thoughts and feelings. He is mythicized

as a devil, cruel and calculating. The protagonist becomes an outsider in power: his power is almost equivalent to that of the king, he has enough money and connections to do what he pleases, yet he cannot gain the respect and trust in the Tudor court, many courtiers and ministers defy and ridicule him, and the overall attitude towards him is very hostile and unwelcoming.

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