

Radical No-Saying. The Contradictions and Paradoxes of the Will/Self

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RADICAL NO-SAYING.

THE CONTRADICTIONS & PARADOXES OF THE WILL / SELF.

Didier GIRARD

Mariés depuis trois mois, les Audouy, de Nantes, se sont suicidés au laudanum, à l'arsenic et au revolver.

À Clichy, un élégant jeune homme s'est jeté sous un fiacre caoutchouté, puis, indemne, sous un camion, qui le broya.

Felix Fénéon, *Nouvelles en trois lignes*.

Telling / writing too much or too little seems to have something to do with the self-recognition, the remembering, but also with the renaissance (or what is sometimes referred to today as renaissance imprints, especially in Italian academia) of the self –not the self in Freudian terms, but with the re-collecting of the essentially heterogeneous components of the other-self within, or without, or in parallel with the self, so to speak.

With Self, with Will Self, no effort should be wasted in attempting to represent a post-modern reconstructed / deconstructed / psychoanalyzed / reconciled self, but rather to present things as they are, organically complex, literally, as they stand – incidentally – in front of us today. The presence of Will Self within the premises of the Sorbonne¹, in itself, sets up challenges which are not entirely dissimilar –although as some kind of a social and political

¹ The present article is the written version of a talk given at the Sorbonne on Dec 15th 2007 in the presence of Will Self during the conference “Voices and silence in the contemporary novel in English” organized by Vanessa Guignery.

counterpoint— from that of Salvador Dalí and his fractal cauliflowers in the rebellious atmosphere of 1968.

Oui à la répression des libertés (1971)

*Infâme, informe liberté,
Romantique, ignorante des cinq polyèdres uniques et parfaits,
Ignorante des cages de la géométrie divine,
Heureuse prison de la rétine,
Ignorante du plaisir continu des impitoyables et rigoureux réseaux,
Douce contrainte du cerveau,
Ligament désiré,
Palissade, entrelacs glorieux, limite dorée,
Corbeille, couronne 'herminée'.
Pour les hommes, le devoir sublime de mourir pour la patrie.
Pour moi, un univers convergent, concave.
Et envers Gala, la volupté suprême d'être esclave. (Dalí: 121)*

We will see that Dalí the poet and writer, not the other one, is overwhelmingly present throughout this presentation as we are indeed going to explore the contradictions and paradoxes of the Will, of the Self, and of the Will Self considered as a rare specimen, at least on the contemporary literary scene despite too many recent attempts to neutralize and sublimate his own achievements – or non-achievements for that matter. With Will Self, we are entering a strange / foreign / idiotic world in which complexity and singularity are given full rein but after all, as Jean-Luc Goddard's now proverbial remark goes, why make anything simple as making things complicated is so easy? Dalí said he found “one thing in life excruciating, and that was precisely simplicity” (Halsman: 69). When Estelle, one character in Rose Tremain's *Sacred Country*, is reproached with seeing difficulty in everything, her response is a flow of sentences culminating in “There is some difficulty in everything. There is difficulty in waking up in the morning. There is difficulty in remembering why you're alive” (Tremain: 317). This kind of complexity is no mere provocation or cop-out; it is to be understood as a writer's fissure/dark hole through which to pry into the world, his world, a world, any world –especially in our so-called *easy* age where nothing actually is as easy or as

simple as that. Fiction thus becomes an exploration of the complex, or a plunge in the “innerscape” rather than a conquest of outer space which always implies a taming process of the quintessentially “other”. The old William Burroughs’ lesson teaches one that, if one really wants to hide something, one must first try to get rid of outsiders’ motivations to discover anything in the first place. Full, obscene, literal exposure of the heterogeneous is often the best weapon for a secret agent. In other words, saying no, no, no -Amy Winehouse-like- is quite a different thing from no-saying.

Anybody who has read Will Self’s latest novel, *The Book of Dave*, knows what it means to speak or write too much and what the multiplicity of voices means in contemporary fiction and yet there has probably never been so little post-modern textual historicizing, so little attempt at psychological realism and so little credible characterization in a novel – and that is precisely what is remarkable in Self’s fiction. Take these two portraits *zum beispiel*, taken at random from two very different pieces by Will Self, Michelle in *The Book of Dave*, or Dan’s mother in *Cock and Bull*:

Michelle stayed inside. She sat at the kitchen worktop, coffee cup cold on the marble slab, her fists ground so hard into her eye sockets that a belated eternity ring Cal had given her drew blood. (Self 2007: 476-477)

She was possessed of the pear-shaped figure that English women of a certain class and disposition inevitably acquire. And to go with it she had astonishing tubular legs, encased in nylon of a very particular caramel shade. The effect was one of kneelessness, tendonlessness – Dan’s mothers legs, one felt, if cut into, would not bleed. They were somehow synthetic, plasticized. (Self 1993: 18)

Such a radical naturalistic technique, however odd it may sound to use such words to describe Will Self’s writing style, is based on an outrageous denial of psychological realism, verging on a rather humorous form of surrealism. Often decried as obsessively “verbose”, Will Self’s style is remarkably stingy with subjective discourses or interior monologues in his

fiction. One could almost go as far as saying that his relatively traditional story-telling technique exposes –in a most non-traditional manner– transmission (in the art of the novel) as a myth. The characters are real, idiosyncratic, flesh and (especially) bones and yet, never convincingly realistic because of the strange focus the narrator puts on the apparently absurd phenomenological environment in which they evolve: “She gets up and, placing the empty mugs on the draining board, turns to the telephone. She lifts the receiver and says as she dials, ‘I think that the so-called ‘talking cure’ has turned into a talking disease, that’s what I think’”. (Self 1996: 286, “The end of the relationship”). The *mise en abyme* of direct speech in the previous quote is an evidence of the pathetically comic juxtaposition of idiolects, hers (in a soliloquy, not a monologue!) and what we might call imported speech: in other words, the use of an “alien” phrase such as ‘talking cure’ which the Edith Wharton-like character resorts to in order to deplore the vacuity of contemporary psycho-babble. This is an old trick used by Will Self, as early as in his best-seller *Cock and Bull*, in which the female protagonist, Carol, is reported to comment to herself: “So while men weren’t necessarily stupid or chauvinistic, neither were they ‘phallogentric’ or ‘empowered by the male phallic hegemony’. And women, on the other hand, they weren’t depressed, oh no. And neither were they ‘alienated’. Of them, never let it be said that their ‘discourse was vitiated’”. (Self 1993: 3). This is just one of many examples of Will Self’s art of satire which takes language, and human verbal communication at large, as its main political target. We find ample evidence of that in a text such as “Return to the Planet of Humans” in which the protagonist is blissfully deprived of this most baleful of human abilities: speech!

The humans told him that his weakness was good. They told him that the low cries he increasingly uttered were a sign he was recovering. <...> He stared at them, they stared back at him. They groaned their pathetic reassurances, he groaned back his excruciating sense of total dislocation. <...> Because their fingers were so still and their toes were sheathed in leather he could not fully believe in anything they tried to communicate. (Self 2005).

In the social context of London-based journalists and hacks, verbal expression expands to the literary scene and Will Self's singular message seems to imply that literature in its printed form is indeed a form of addiction and a very unhealthy human activity. In fact, in this context of cultural commerce, all is buzz and white noise or, to use Self's phrasing, "hauling out great truckles of frothy verbiage". (Self 1997: 10-11)

It was the provision of a dark, humid environment in which fungal tittle-tattle could swell overnight. <...> Nor did anyone huddle in corner earnestly discussing her view of The hacks who frequented the Sealink, yakking in the bar, gobbling in the restaurant, goggling in the television room, wobbling in the table-football room, and snorting in the toilets, occupied a quite different position in the cultural food chain. They were transmitters of trivia, broadcasters of banality, and disseminators of drek. <...> They trafficked in the glibbest, slightest, most ephemereal cultural reflexivity, enacting a dialogue between society and its conscience that had all the resonance of a foil individual pie dish smitten with a paperclip. (Self 1997: 39)

In Will Self's fiction, there is nevertheless an anthropological approach to the circumstances of the production of literature (the social organization of society as a theatre of evil is accomplished first and foremost by acts of communication: "a new clique will be constructed on the basis of mutually assured destruction. We believe in it at the time. Believe that this collusion of interests is for ever, as thick as family blood that has coagulated over centuries. Yet invariably it will all be picked away at within days, weeks at the outside, creating a ragged, exposed patch, a new area of potential healing" (Self 1996: 5))– but it hardly coheres with what we might describe as part of a meta-fictional writing technique since Self's style is overwhelmingly and almost obscenely present, never diffuse. His is definitely a "writerly" writer's style, as one might describe J.M.N. Whistler as a painterly painter. Hyperfictional mannerism is maybe Self's own updated version of nineteenth century decadentism.

This is so maybe because Will Self is not –contrary to what is usually assumed by British critics– merely toying with ideas and concepts in his use of the English language. He is more like an agnostic witch-doctor collecting and recording various demotic verbal usages to actually rub the words, a practical magical manipulation of the current collective imaginary indeed. And that explains why Self’s literature is more a matter of praxis and *semiosis* than one of revelation and initiation. In the already mentioned “Return to the Planet of Humans”, the protagonist has to paint a chair into life to indicate or refer to this “something” from the other world, and the narrator mischievously adds: “Perhaps in the process he would discover an idiom which would make I bearable to speak of being human”. Brian Finney, in what is maybe today the best inspired article on Self, “The Sweet Smell of Excess. Will Self, Bataille and Transgression” (online article, see bibliography for details), argues that satire is not his principal preoccupation, but that something much more timeless is at stake, something like the penumbra surrounding the light of rationality and order, a penumbra which is not the result of emotions but the side effect of an experience of violence and excess. In particular, Finney stresses:

the novelist’s pleasure in making things up. The creative imagination is constantly transgressing the limits of homogeneity. What needs adding is that Self is more concerned to offer us a vivid image of our contemporary world in its heterogeneous complexity than to satirize its pretensions to homogeneity, although he is quite prepared to do the latter as part of the former. The confusion of genders, pure fictional fantasy, is simply a logical extension of the way subjectivity has been handled from the start. The narrative has returned Richard to the state of polymorphous perversity that preceded his location in the symbolic/homogenous order. The unconscious has prevailed and subjected subjectivity to linguistic displacement. The verbal and visual suggestibility of the hoarding has anticipated Richard’s psychotic transgression of the limits of gendered subjectivity. “All my books are fantastical because I don’t believe in the real,” Self has said. (Finney online)

In fact, what Will Self manages to do is to conceal the seams of reality, a bit like what the German painter Neo Rauch does on the canvas². Yes there is nothing abstract in the

² See the exhibition *Neo Rauch, “Para”* (Gary Tinterow, curator) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (May 22 – October 14, 2007) and consult bibliography for catalogue references.

productions of these two artists, and we may wonder whether they are not inscribing themselves in a new form of realism in the arts, especially in their endeavour to achieve non-representation. What they are realistically trying to communicate is the false proximities of perceptions and in that respect they are not far at all from Lichtenberg or Hogarth, or to take another example in another field, Stanley Kubrick in his *Space Odissey 2001*. Those cultural and sensational productions are maybe the artistic equivalents of a perfect crime, not at all the post-modern avatars often described with too many words in high-brow circles. Neo Rauch has also publicly confessed that he never aimed at shocking his viewers (in a surrealistic sense) simply because there is no real shock to be expected today and above all, in his canvas as well as in his mind, everything is possible. There is no hierarchy either in the abject, the unacceptable or the bizarre. The other common denominator between writer and painter is that they both deplore their absence or denial of any sense of scale whereas they certainly have a sense of proportion as the following example shows:

Terribly unfair. And anyway, if the tax is determined by the individual rather by the property, what if that individual has a hazy or distorted sense of self? Shouldn't people with acute dissociation, or multiple personalities, be forced to pay more? (Self 1996: 104³)

Human language is also fictionalized as an allegory of something much more physiological, almost medical, than the world of ideas and sentiments. It's what we could call body-talk (or rather body talking), literally the conjuring up of fluxes and spasms which articulate sounds as signs, just as (if not more) meaningfully as any encoded grammatical string of words.

The codeine linctus was wearing off and he could feel the tightness in his chest, the laval accumulation of mucus, flowing down hi bronchi and into each little sponge bag of an alveolus. Felt this fearfully, as his nervous system reintroduced him to the soft internality of his diseased body, its crushable vulnerability. <...> The discovery of the hidden musicality of his own lungs transfixed Simon-Arthur.

³ The whole section, from which the extract is taken, is entitled "Scale"!

He sat breathing in and out, attempting to contort his thorax in various ways, so as to bring off various effects. (Self 1996: 150-151)

The dialectics between the expression of silence (“Richard was stunned with a vibrating, cacophonous silence. He felt as if someone had clubbed him round the head with a two-pound fillet of wet fish.” (Self 1997: 24)) and the latent excess of a permanent logorrhoea force the unwilling reader to respond to the narrative, almost any narrative by Will Self, as a gigantic metaphor (or is it an allegory?) of the circulation of bodily fluids in the organic circuits and canals presented as the true constituents of any “existing” human being. Self’s bodies are not without organs; on the contrary, they seem to exist only through the substances that pass through them. Hence, it is not rare (unfavourable critics would even add this has become some sort of an *idée fixe* that the author too easily resorts to) to read whole pages filled with descriptions of liquid absorptions, diarrhoea, colonic ructions, micturition, mastication and so on and so forth whereas the characters usually do not utter a single word.

And how could we forget pissing and shitting? We mustn’t forget those. Sometimes *I* feel that my body is nothing but one enormous, snaking bowel, stuffed full of ordure but thinly covered with skin. <...> I digress. On the toilet then, Carol’s usual sense of micturition was muted, she felt the stream somehow trammelled – funnelled externally. Looking down she would catch sight of a bead of flesh and set into it a bead of urine. Then Carol’s fingers would brisk and freeze as if skewered, on confirming the testimony of her eyes: it was *still there*. And now poking forward, out from the lips. <...> not any greater import or connotation of the bizarre than an adulterous liaison or a dumped foetus. But on the other hand, or *in* the other hand, the wormlet was there. (Self 1993: 41-42)

Total excess like shuddering silence are of course nothing but a lure. Brian Finney, in the article on Self mentioned before, takes Georges Bataille as a precursor to this contemporary trend of post-humanistic fiction, buttressing his argument on the fact that taboos, their transgressions and the social conventions they stem from or give birth to, are all interdependent on one another: “Organised transgression together with the taboo make social life what it is” (*Eroticism* 65). Bataille is representative of a complex view of the modern condition that reconciles Self’s need to shock us in his seemingly arbitrary scenes of animal

torture and human excess with his claim to be occupying the high moral ground of the moralist.” (Finney online). The aesthetic and ethical tactics behind such a literary game feed on a sense of the Absurd that remind one of Félix Fénéon’s in the early twentieth century. To an announcement that appeared in *Beaux-Arts* (07.07.1939) in relation to the publication of new stamps being sold to raise money for “L’Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française”, the latter actually answered: “La propagande du ministre des PTT ‘pour la natalité’ est molle et sera stérile. Que n’exalte-t-il les populations, en leur offrant en exemple sur ses timbres-poste, une famille de lapins, ou deux harengs ! Voilà des reproducteurs sérieux.” (Fénéon 1996:106). Whereas Fénéon the anarchist is using and abusing the XIXth century clichés of well-to-do bourgeois’ faith in the laws of reproduction⁴, Self is giving a twist to the common place tropes of contemporary hard core pornography. In his recent rewriting of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Self starts his novel *Dorian. An Imitation* with the following lines on the first page: “Was it this century or that one? Was she wearing this skirt or that suit? Did he take that drug or this drink? Was his preference for that cunt or that asshole? Brutal and savage is also a sensation of the myth of the Immaculate Conception”. In an even more recent novel, Self makes the following esoteric description which epitomizes Man’s incapacity to leave a hole alone, while Self the moralist seems to suggest that minding the gap should not boil down to filling it up, but considering it in all its potential vacuity and endless latent excess.

The hole was thigh-deep. Deep enough, surely, to withstand the delving of public-school-educated landscape gardeners. Deep enough to remain undisturbed until – by some mysterious signal that Dave could not yet divine – Carl would be informed and excavate it <...> He stomped with his claggy trainers until the

⁴ See for instance the following « short » stories :

“Louis Lamare n’avait ni travail, ni logis, mais quelques sous. Il acheta, chez un épicier de Saint Denis, un litre de pétrole et le but”. (Fénéon 1997: 13)

“Au bal de Saint-Symphorien (Isère), Mme Chausson, son amant, ses parents et ses amis ont tué à coups de couteau M.Chausson”. (Fénéon 1997: 19)

“Catherine Rosello, de Toulon, mère de quatre enfants, voulut éviter un train de marchandises. Un train de voyageurs l’écrasa”. (Fénéon 1997: 29)

surface was levelled off. H was turning to leave – for it was done – when she saw him. (Self 2007: 355)

According to Brian Finney, Self “can liberate us into a world of partiality and temporality, but only we can decide where to draw our own tentative and vulnerable line in the ever-shifting, heterogeneous sands. In facing his readers with the necessity of making such a choice he can be seen to be writing against the very emptiness that he is too often assumed to be reproducing.” (Finney, online). Artistically speaking, MORE has indeed become superfluous, conspicuous and even embarrassing in an age when memory adds up to boredom. While mainstream literature is thriving on post-modern celebrations of overloaded memory, there is certainly no room left for decadence. And who would be too bothered to care anyway?

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