

Voices and Silence
in the Contemporary Novel in English

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Edited by

Vanessa Guignery

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

SO MANY WORDS, SO LITTLE SAID

VANESSA GUIGNERY

(ÉCOLE NORMALE SUPÉRIEURE, LYON)

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom, playing the role of Pyramus, indulges in synesthesia when he claims: "I see a voice" (V, 1, 189). This might very well reflect the experience of the reader who can see voices on the page but cannot hear them, since writing and reading are essentially silent activities. According to Pascal Quignard, both processes are mechanisms of devocalization: "The book is a piece of silence in the hands of the reader" (1990, 87). Quignard argues that *logos* is the site of the lost voice and the role of the writer is to gather silences and perceive that lost voice from within the *suavitas* of silence (1996, 81). One could add that reading actually consists in listening to the voice of the text, to its resonance, from the very silence of the page, and a successful book is one that manages to make voices heard or at least to create the illusion of voice in all its variations and tonalities. It is thus necessary to challenge the common opposition between the presence and vivacity of the live voice and the supposed absence of voice in a written text. As the eponymous character in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) exclaims, "[w]riting is not doomed to be the shadow of speech" (142). Be they strident or lulling, vociferous or muted, live or spectral, effusive or reticent, voices are palpable in literary texts and are not only an aesthetic object but also an efficient tool of characterisation as well as a resourceful metaphorical and metonymic device. As for silence, which Jonathan Rée defines as "a positive absence of sounds" (43) in his book on Western attitudes towards deafness, *I See a Voice* (1999), it is a language of its own which also has psychological, emotional, ethical and political implications.

The objective of this volume is to study the various processes at work in expressing silence and excessive speech in contemporary novels in English, covering the whole spectrum from verbal overflow to aphasia, from effusiveness to muteness. On the one hand, our purpose is to examine

the mechanisms involved in the purification and the contamination of silence by analysing ellipses and reluctance in narration and dialogue, but also typographical blanks which literally inscribe silence on the page. On the other hand, we wish to study devices of excess, emphasis, verbiage and proliferation of words from a poetic and political perspective. By confronting these two apparently opposed dimensions in narratives, we want to examine what each reveals and determine what they might have in common, especially as some authors employ both strategies. In his analysis of the work of Samuel Beckett and Henry Miller, *The Literature of Silence* (1971), Ihab Hassan calls silence “the new attitude that literature has chosen to adopt towards itself”, either stretching itself beyond the usual limits or shrinking itself to naught. For Hassan, “expansion and contraction end by having the same purpose, which is to alter drastically the function of words within any given literary form” (31). In certain conditions, excessive or redundant speech may indeed amount to an indirect form of silence, and some forms of reticence can be said to be more powerful and meaningful than explicit statements. In an essay included in *Making an Elephant* (2009), Graham Swift argues that “the spaces between and around words can have their unspoken resonances” and he compares writing to music, “a communication without words, in which the silences count as much as the notes” (103). Thus silence is not necessarily the opposite of speech, and needs not be equated to absence, lack, block, withdrawal or blank (as is often the case in Western tradition), but may be seen as a wilful decision not to say or else to unsay.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that some areas of reality cannot and should not be expressed in language: “[w]hat we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (74). In literature, such reticence can take on extreme expressions such as Rimbaud’s, Hölderlin’s or Beckett’s poetic silence, and be variously interpreted as an aesthetic ideal, a liberation from the constraints and limitations of verbal language, an act of renunciation emblematic of the distrust of words and signs or the exhaustion of their possibilities, or an inability to capture experiences which have been psychologically and emotionally traumatic. In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the narrator tries to define the silence against which he is struggling when trying to relate painful and meaningless past events:

All I know of it is what it is not. It is not, for example, the silence of an imperfect memory. Nor is it a silence enforced by a ruthless state [...]. I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words—that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words. (218)

In twentieth-century literature and in the aftermath of colonisation, the two world wars and the holocaust, narratives of trauma confront the aporia of speaking the unspeakable, voicing the unvoicable. They reflect the difficulties involved in the process of anamnesis, in the exhumation of the past, be it private or public, and in any attempt to reveal, expose or explore the realm of the intimate and the traumatic. To quote George Steiner in *Language and Silence* (1967), the propagation of silence stems from “the failure of the word in the face of the inhuman” (51).

Silence may thus be part of a deliberate strategy aimed at distancing oneself from painful subjects. In contemporary literature, a recurrent figure is the reluctant narrator, defined by Mark Leon Higdon as someone “who has seen, experienced or caused something so traumatic that he must approach the telling of it through indirections, masks and substitutions” (174). In Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Saleem Sinai often finds it difficult to move on with his painful story as evidenced by the dashes, dots and conflictual inner dialogue that regularly interrupt his narrative: “No!—But I must. / I don’t want to tell it!—But I swore to tell it all.—No, I renounce, not that, surely some things are better left ...?—” (421). In Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), the narrator’s pauses and frequent digressions reflect his difficulties in confronting his wife’s adultery and suicide: “My wife ... Not now, not now” (120). Hesitations, verbal lacunae, incomplete writings, fragmented stories, concision, procrastination, displacement, deferral, avoidance strategies, delaying tactics and aposiopeses marked by suspension points, blanks or dashes are all rhetorical ways of suggesting a reluctance to tell or to confess. As Dominique Rabaté suggests in *Poétiques de la voix* (1999), contemporary narratives have renounced the utopia of totality and continuity, and have opted instead for the fragment and the murmur (13). It then falls to the reader to be especially penetrating and clear-sighted in order to fill in the narrator’s embarrassed silences, to complete the stories contained within the suspension marks which fissure a text, and to recover the truths and dramas hiding between the lines and beneath the aposiopeses. In contemporary novels by Kazuo Ishiguro, Graham Swift, Ian McEwan, J.M. Coetzee and others, occurrences of silence and gaps in the narratives reveal more than they hide, and the first person narrators indirectly encourage the reader to look for that hidden realm of truth which stands “on the other side of silence” to quote George Eliot (189). Torn between a powerful reluctance to say the unsayable and an urge to indulge in wordy confessions, these characters are confronted by the aporia summed up in Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1958): “the inability to speak, the inability to be silent” (153).

One may argue contrarily that the idiosyncrasies of narrators suffering from acute logorrhoea such as Rushdie's Saleem Sinai or Beckett's Unnamable, as well as the ramblings or verbiage of certain characters, for instance in Will Self's overflowing novels, conceal more than they outwardly reveal. As a character argues in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005), "words are just air [...]. When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard" (258). Compulsive verbosity in confessional writings can indeed work as a smokescreen to confuse or hide an issue: one may sidestep a trauma that cannot be addressed by submerging it in an endless flow of words. Incessant chatter saturates the text with such intensity, urgency and density as to suggest a need to take up the whole linguistic space and to prevent the emergence of any discordant and embarrassing voice or version. In J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1976), the female first person narrator monopolizes speech and silences other voices, but she has to admit that she is "a prisoner [...] of [her] stony monologue" (12) and that language is much less comforting and protective than "the long satisfying silence into which I shall still, I promise, one day retire" (84).

In cases of obsessive volubility, not only the speaker or narrator is involved, but also the addressee—the reader or implied reader—as the loquacious "need to be stimulated by the conviction that they are listened to" (148), or read, as stated by the narrator of Louis-René des Forêts's *Le Bavard* (1947). In Martin Amis's *Money* (1984), John Self literally begs the reader to listen to his story: his plea "Lend me your time" (322) implicitly means "Lend me your ears". Tom Crick, the narrator of Swift's *Waterland* (1984), also desperately fights to retain his pupils' and the reader's attention with his hypnotizing anaphora of "Let me tell you". In Hanif Kureishi's *Something to Tell You* (2008), the main character, a psychoanalyst, understands very well his patients' need to "find someone to talk to" (205). Just as the reader of fragmentary texts needs to fill in the gaps, the addressee of verbose speakers or narrators needs to pierce through the wall of words to make sense of proliferating stories. This is even more necessary when a novel presents a polyphony (or, in some cases, a cacophony) of voices which meet, blend together or clash, proposing contradictory versions of the same event. This "transvocalisation" as Gérard Genette calls it (45), exemplified in novels such as André Brink's *A Chain of Voices* (1982), Graham Swift's *Out of This World* (1988) and *Last Orders* (1996), or Julian Barnes's *Talking It Over* (1991) and *Love, etc.* (2000), provides a multiplicity of perspectives and thus challenges any claim to a monological truth, but it also suggests the failure of any narrative stability and epistemological reliability.

In the context of postcolonial and feminist studies, the poetics of silence and speech has clear political implications. Authoritative voices have been used to dominate and subjugate the other, impose the official version and suppress the dissonant story. In J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and André Brink's *The Other Side of Silence* (2002), the tongues of the young African Foe and of the reject German woman Hannah X, transported to what is now Namibia during German colonial rule, have been literally cut out, thus preventing any direct access to their life stories and sufferings. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* (1994), "[t]here is a conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth" (175). Various strategies are therefore implemented to propose an alternative and fight against the hegemony of the Ur-voice. In that case, silence, as a means of self-preservation and self-protection, is not necessarily synonymous with absence and submission, but can be a wilful way for the victim, the colonised, the marginal, to defy language's claims to power and resist participation in the discourses of patriarchy and domination. In *Without a Name* (1994) by the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera, the female protagonist, after being raped by a soldier, chooses silence as a means of resistance and reconstruction: "The silence was not a forgetting, but a beginning. She would grow from the silence he had brought to her" (29). The victim wilfully retains the possession of her own story by resisting what Jacques Derrida calls the "demand for narrative, a violent putting-to-the-question, an instrument of torture working to wring the narrative out of one as if it were a terrible secret" (78). Silence may therefore be interpreted as a political stance, a way to deny the authority of the oppressor.

However, the mute Other also runs the risk of being spoken for by the vociferous majority, and thus silence can be an instrument of disempowerment and appropriation. Several novelists have therefore tried to lend a voice to the oppressed minorities who had until then been deprived of speech, and more particularly to female subjects. As Gayatri Spivak explains in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", "[i]f, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (32). Spivak argues that the postcolonial attempt at retrieving lost voices from historical archives and restoring them to history is a complicated issue, as even when the subaltern does speak, her words are interpreted by scholars from within a patriarchal and imperialist model of discourse. As John McLeod sums it up, "the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of *interpretation* and not a failure of articulation" (195). Spivak's uncompromising views on critical methodological and conceptual

approaches should not however obliterate fictional achievements in engaging with the dissident voices of the dispossessed.

In postcolonial and postmodernist writing, the submerged voices of history do come to the surface and propose alternative counternarratives, sometimes returning as spectral expressions, disembodied, ghostly and haunting voices. This is for example the case in *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) where Fred D'Aguiar gives voice to the murdered slaves of the ship *Zong*, who were thrown overboard during the 1783 passage from Africa to America, or of course in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a novel haunted by the horrific memories of slavery and by the "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" of the women of 124 Bluestone Road (199). Many lost, forgotten or erased lives are thus retrieved and reclaimed, not as a unified and coherent whole but as a myriad of voices and stories sometimes bordering on cacophony. As the narrator of Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987) notes, the voice of history is composite: "the uniform grey pond of history is [...] fractured into a thousand contending waves; I hear the babble of voices" (15). In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai is also the repository and "swallow" (9) of countless monologues—"voices are speaking inside my head" (164)—while the voiceover artist Saladin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is a ventriloquist who can put on "a Thousand Voices and a Voice" (60). In Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight* (2005), set in Bombay, first-person narratives accumulate, intertwine, echo each other and clash: the abortionist is haunted by "the cacophony of unborn-baby voices in [his] head—discordant and raw and numbing" (12), and the voice of God is lost in the racket: "In a hell like this, I guess God too must yell to be noticed" (18). This multiplicity and diversity of utterances challenge monolithic narratives and logocentrism, and break the bars of the prison of silence. By articulating their suffering, by speaking out and speaking back, the unsung and unheard fight to come to terms with the traumas they have experienced and to reconstitute a sense of self, identity, memory and history. The chorus of personal and collective voices thus defeats not so much silence as the censoring process of silencing, and demands an ethical commitment based on the acknowledgment of otherness.

For all its silent status, writing thus continues to conjure up voices, not only for their orality and musicality, but also for their function as sources of dialogism and epistemological, ethical and political metaphors. Speech and silence are instruments of power, of self-assertion and self-definition: they take part in the constitution not only of an individual and his or her life story, but also of a group, a community, a nation, and their history. Even if in the postmodern episteme, words are no longer trusted and

language is deemed inadequate for speaking the unspeakable, contemporary authors still rely on voice as a mode of representation and a performative tool, and exploit silence not only as a sign of absence and renunciation, but also as a token of presence and resistance. By submitting their texts to both excess and retention, hypertrophy and aphasia, writers persistently test the limits of language and its ability to make sense of individual and collective stories.

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PART I:
WILL SELF OR THE LANGUAGE
OF RESISTANCE

CHAPTER ONE

RADICAL NO-SAYING.
THE CONTRADICTIONS AND PARADOXES
OF THE WILL/SELF

DIDIER GIRARD
(UNIVERSITY OF HAUTE ALSACE)

Abstract

This article explores Will Self's art of fiction over the past fifteen years. Does this controversial writer write too much or too little? What does his style hide? What do his silences reveal? What do his words (and books) refuse to communicate? Is it a post-humanist tactic to force the reader to feel words (what else?) with more intensity? By drawing impossible parallels with a French writer of the previous century (the aristocratic anarchist Félix Fénéon) and a contemporary German painter (the sensationalist Neo Rauch), the author of the article questions the traditional reception of contemporary writers who do not write for the masses.

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.¹

—Felix Fénéon, *Nouvelles en trois lignes*.

¹ “Nantes - The Audouys who had been married for three months, committed suicide with laudanum, arsenic and a gun.

Paris, Place Clichy - A smart young man threw himself under the rubber wheels of a stage coach. Unwounded, he stood up and did it again, this time under those of a truck that literally crashed him.” All translations in this article are mine.

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 Sorbonne, in itself, sets up challenges which are not entirely dissimilar—although as some kind of a social and political 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)²*

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

² “Yes, Crack Down on liberties!

O shameless, shapeless liberty/ Romantic and ignorant of the five unique and perfect polyhedrons/ Ignorant of the iron bars of Divine geometry/ Happy retinacage/ Ignorant of the continuous pleasure of relentless and rigorous networks/ Sweet brain constraint/ Desired ligament/ Palisade, interlaced web in glory, golden frontier/ Casket, ermined crown/ For men the sublime duty to die for their country/ For me, a concave and convergent universe/ And to Gala, the supreme rapture of being a slave”.

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” (in 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” (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* and 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. (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. (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' " (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' " (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. (250)

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" (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. (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" [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” (254). Brian Finney, in what is maybe today the best inspired article on Self, “The Sweet Smell of Excess. Will Self, Bataille and Transgression”, 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.

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 canvas³. Yes there is nothing abstract in the 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 Odyssey 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

³ 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.

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, 104⁴).

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 his 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. 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.

⁴ The whole section, from which the extract is taken, is entitled “Scale”!

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. (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)

The aesthetic and ethical tactics behind such a literary game feed on a sense of the Absurd that reminds one of Félix Fénéon's in the early twentieth century. To an announcement that appeared in *Beaux-Arts* on July, 7th 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”⁵ (106). Whereas Fénéon the anarchist is using and abusing the nineteenth century clichés of well-to-do bourgeois' faith in the laws of reproduction⁶,

⁵ “The National Alliance for birth rate increase in the French population”: “The propaganda of the French Secretary for the P.T.T. [French Post Office and Telecommunications] in favour of birth increase is flabby and will prove sterile. Why doesn't he galvanize the people by displaying on stamps such good examples as a rabbit family or two herrings! Those are what I call serious breeders!”.

⁶ See for instance the following “short” stories :

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" (3). 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 surface was levelled off. H was turning to leave—for it was done—when she saw him. (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". 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?

"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" (1997, 13). "Louis Lamare had neither a job nor a place to live, but a few pennies. So he bought one litre of petrol at some general store in St Denis and drank it up".

"Au bal de Saint-Symphorien (Isère), Mme Chausson, son amant, ses parents et ses amis ont tué à coups de couteau M.Chausson" (1997, 19). "At the St Symphorien ball (Isère), Mrs Chausson, her lover, her parents and her friends stabbed Mr. Chausson to death".

"Catherine Rosello, de Toulon, mère de quatre enfants, voulut éviter un train de marchandises. Un train de voyageurs l'écrasa" (1997, 29). "Catherine Rosello, a mother of four in Toulon tried to avoid a freight train. A passenger train ran over her".

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CHAPTER TWO

DEMOTIC ENGLISH IN *THE BOOK OF DAVE*

WILL SELF

(LONDON)

Perhaps predictably, I am going to deliver some rather English and empirical remarks about *The Book of Dave* rather than Gallic and theoretical ones. My French translator, François Kerline, who has translated my works for years, has resigned over *The Book of Dave*. Even set against my other texts, this book is perhaps rather difficult to translate. The text presents problems for anybody to translate into another language, and perhaps particularly into French. What is difficult is certainly the future dialect that is extracted from cockney and which is used in the alternate chapters of the book. We may take as an example a very brief section of that dialect from the beginning of the novel:

Í lúks lyke an abominowotsit 2 me, said a slight man, whose bald head was cloven by a fresh trepanning wound. Í az ve eyes ovva ooman, ve teef, ve cok an balls 2. Iss feet ar lyke ands wiv pads uv flesh mell-éd intavem, but iss muzzle iz lyke a burgakynes an iss bodi iz lyke vat uv an idëus bęcön ... Í duz me fukkin éd in. (14)

It actually does not sound that odd, it sounds like demotic cockney, English London cockney. Anybody who has been to London and who has got into a cab could hear somebody talking like that or more or less like that. But I do not think it is that that is putting off translation. The problem is how that accent is being rendered in the text. The orthography is a phonetic transliteration. So I use my own diacritical marks, accents, and I incorporate certain coinages and neologisms, which is why there is a lexicon or a glossary of terms and vocabulary at the back of the book. I also incorporate into the orthography, into the written version of it, certain abbreviations, garnered from mobile phone texting. So there is the use of