VOICE ELATION IN "VACILLATION"

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In an artistic world where the platonic structures of language were more and more often put into question, Yeats, a poet and a dramatist, could not but be intrigued by the question of voice and persona which he evidently tackled in poems such as "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" or "Vacillation". As Laurent Jenny [1990: 121] clearly points out:

> E*n même temps qu'on parle, la langue, le sujet et la parole même sont en débat. Non sur le mode d'une spéculation gratuite et désintéressée, mais comme la seule voie d'accès au mouvement de la parole. […] [le vers a] une prédisposition à configurer des événements dans la parole.*

This points to the poetic line as a means to generate multiple discourses and voices and this paper hence aims to illustrate how the statement applies to Yeats's poetry, taking "Vacillation" as the epitome of a polyphonic poem in which a variety of voices interact with one another. Before discussing the questions of subjectivity, voice harmony and elation, it will hence be necessary to retrace the different personae and voices in the poem.

Access to the author of a poem is obviously impossible as is the case in any literary text for, as Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni [2006: 246] has it:

> *Dès lors que [le sujet qui énonce] s'énonce comme sujet énonçant, il cesse d'être sujet d'énonciation pour devenir sujet de l'énoncé.*

She suggests that leads to a bathmologic "I say that I say that I say that…"; the word "bathmologic" being borrowed from Roland Barthes [1975: 71] and referring to the internal stratifications of language. Only the writing agency may therefore be reached through different personae that may take different voices or points of view. These may be retraced in the poem as follows.

In parts I and II very few referential pronouns may be found; there is neither I-subject nor addressee and "he" appears as a neutral or universal pronoun that is in keeping with proverb-like sentences such as "Between extremities / Man runs his course;" or "he that Attis' image hangs between /

That staring fury and the blind lush leaf / May know not what he knows, but knows not grief." These sentences are characterised by the use of the gnomic present tense, particular syntactic rearrangements which render their meaning cryptic, and references to actual myths such as the Welsh *Mabinogion* or the cult of Attis in Asia Minor [Ellmann 1964: 273]. In that light, the first voice in the poem is consistent with its original title, "Wisdom" [Ellmann 1964: 270], insofar as it corresponds to a prophetic persona, almost a voice without a body.

The voice however gradually takes shape, so to speak, in part III. It becomes more human as the addressee appears through the use of first the imperative mode and then the second-person pronoun ("Get all the gold and silver that you can"). Although the mythological references have not disappeared altogether and the maxims are still present, the tone is more casual and the topic trivial. The breach between the emphatic injunction "upon these maxims meditate" and the following aphorism ("All women dote upon an idle man / Although their children need a rich estate;") thus entails the apparition of a second more ironic voice and even of a third one if the statement is looked upon as a palimpsestic parody of the incipit of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The sudden fragmentation of voices goes hand in hand with the second stanza which is a reflection on life at forty, death and poetry. The persona leaves the mask of the prophet to put on the masks of the man and then of the poet, and it is thus not unreasonable to look at the final second-person pronouns as enallages actually meaning I.

Logically enough, the fourth part opens on the first-person pronoun and the self-definition of the persona as an ordinary man ("I sat, a solitary man,") located in time ("fiftieth year", "twenty minutes"); space ("London", "[coffee-]shop"); and reality ("An open book and empty cup / On the marble table-top.") This is a step towards the poet himself as it implies a here and now of the authorial agency contrasted to a particular memory which Yeats [Ellmann 1964: 270] described thus:

> *At certain moments, always unforeseen, I become happy, most commonly when at hazard I have opened some book of verse.... Perhaps I am sitting in some crowded restaurant, the open book beside me, or closed, my excitement having over-brimmed the page. I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them : everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or any needs; I do not even remember that this happy mood must come to an end.*

But the ungraspable voice of the author quickly fades away to be replaced once more by the voice of the prophet who is "blessèd and [can] bless." until the voice finally shatters in part V which opens on a clear breach of the iambic rhythm, namely a trochaic inversion ("Although the summer sunlight gild / Cloudy leafage of the sky." As an older persona passes judgement on a younger one, two voices are guessed at which soon multiply and echo through the repetition of "weigh me down", the rhyming pattern and the triple chiasm ("Things said or done", "things I did not do or say", "say or do").

Heteroglossia, a term coined by Bakhtin to describe the "immense plurality of experience" in language [Holquist 2006: xx] is further achieved in part VI with an implicit boundary between narration and a discourse that is doubly quoted since it stands for both the voice of the characters and a quotation from Heraclitus [Ellmann 1964: 274]. Yet, the dangerous fragmentation which occurs in part V is counterbalanced here by a clear search for voice landmarks. The first person is no longer exposed and has been replaced by the traditional bard or ballad singer which is made evident through the theme of war itself, the refrain ("let all things pass away"), and the use of typical compound adjectives such as "milk-white", "battle-weary" or "blood-sodden", to which must be added the palimpsests of Homer, Chinese mythology, the Bible, the Bhagavad-Gita and maybe even *Don Quixote*.

It seems that the landmarks finally trigger a better control of inner voices and a deeper reflection upon man and the artist to whose personae we come back in part VII. This was originally entitled "A Dialogue" and is close to looking like an auto-palimpsest in that it harks back to the poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul". Hence while two parts of the subject may be present here, there actually are five voices: the heart, the soul, the enunciator of the dialogue, the other poem, and the four combined to reach the authorial agency.

All the different voices are then combined in the ultimate part, from the prophet to the man and the poet together with the addressee, and it could be summed up by Yeats's statement: "The swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation." [Ellmann 1964: 268]. Still, despite the fact that a clear conclusion appears to be reached ("Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.") the voices are not reconciled and the first person is more fragmented than ever, as may be proved by the separation of the grammatical subject from the predicate ("I - though heart might find relief / Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief / What seems most welcome in the tomb - play a predestined part.")

The shift and fragmentation of the voices create and try to fill the gap between utterer and utterance, the world and its description, creation and the norm, while leading to the questioning of the unity and power of the lyrical subject.

The poem opens on a gap induced by the word "between", and the notion of disjunction soon appears through the way myths are dealt with, particularly the antinomic Mabinogi tree, which is described owing to a paradoxical structure as "half all glittering flame and half all green / foliage." Tentative unity first seems to fail as Welsh mythology comes into contact with the cult of Attis, a castrated god whose worship sometimes implied castration. This may be interpreted as failure of the voice to create, express or even know the world. The silence, or useless words, that may result from it is highlighted by the reference to the divine coal that burns Isaiah's mouth so that "people [may] hear ye indeed but understand not" [Isaiah 6:9]. And while death may be looked upon as the final reconciler of antinomies it is but another silent gap, an absence, a nothingness insinuating in the poem through the lexical fields of destruction and darkness, and

negative structures ("knows not", "not grief", "no man", "empty cup", "not do or say") that destroy representation. All the more so as the *hic et nunc* of the utterer can never be fully grasped.

In his book *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax*, Joseph Adams studies the cases in which linguistic variations from the expected norm lead to the evanescent voice of the lyrical subject. There are many such variations in the poem. One of them is the use of the definite article or the demonstrative adjective where an indefinite, definite or "null" article would have been expected. This includes examples such as "those antinomies of night and day" where "the" would have been sufficient; "moist with the dew" which, unlike "dew" particularises the noun; "the marble table-top", which contrasts with "a shop" or "a book"; "the field" which is a particularisation that cannot be shared with the addressee just as he cannot situate the deictic "below" in the first line of part V. Another variation consists in doing exactly the opposite, namely using the "null" determiner where a definite article would have been expected. There are four instances of these in the poem. Part V, "Things I did not do or say" which, because it is post-modified by the relative clause could arguably be "the things I did not do or say"; similarly "Cloudy leafage of the sky", is defined by a prepositional group yet is not introduced by "the", while Part VIII, the word "tomb" is referred to as a notion ("The body of Saint Teresa lies undecayed in tomb.") Finally, "heart" is deprived of the possessive adjective "my" in "though heart might find relief".

Adams [1984: 10] argues that these "syntactic masks confirm [...] Deleuze's antiplatonic view of the subject in language, showing it as something momentary and fragmented." It could even be argued that the disappearing of the possessive adjective, together with the fragmentation of the self and its pseudo-reunion with the pronoun "we" in part VIII, seem to contribute to the eventual disappearing of the subject. This becomes all the more evident if the use of multiple voices is interpreted as a cacophonic way of hiding the authorial agency. The erasing of the lyrical-I appears to reach its climax in a syntactic structure such as "a tree there is", in which the existential structure comes after the already existing tree as though it were of its own accord, independent of the subject's perception or discourse. Similarly, the default of punctuation and syntactic rearrangement in "My body of a sudden blazed", deceive expectations by introducing a complement of time instead of a complement of the noun "body". This may highlight the now only ghost-like presence of the subject, the ephemeral traces it has left in the poem, and that may be interpreted as a disappearance for in Parmeggiani's word "leaving a footprint is a way of going away" [Didi-Huberman 2001: 54], (translation mine). Is it, however, reasonable to conclude to the death of the subject and of creation or is heteroglossia a poietic or creative means?

Taking up Deleuze's definition of the "*Sujet Larvaire*", a subject without a fix identity and always on the point of becoming itself, Adams [1984: 10] analyses it as proving the "incipient" nature of the subject, adding that the different voices "perhaps underlie or build up to the more global entities traditionally called subjects." While it is true that polyphony hides

the authorial presence, the voices nevertheless converge towards harmony, what choir singers call the voice of the angel. In fact the whole poem is built on a system of differences and similarities - different voices that call for one another, linguistic variations that imply multiple utterances, personae or masks - and all aim to the authorial agency. This creates what Adams [1984: 11] calls "the primordial field of tensions" from which the "subject is never completely separate".

And where the voice is faltering, it is better to leave space for the writing process. Coming back to the ambiguous structure "My body of a sudden blazed", it may be inferred that such a linguistic choice implies a potentiality of meaning which exceeds a simple "my body suddenly blazed". As Laurent Jenny [1990 : 21] has it:

> *Un moment, tout est suspendu dans ces quelques mots qui hésitent entre deux articulations syntaxiques et où se dessine une aire de sens en attente. Ce que l'énoncé perd en représentation sémantique, il le gagne d'ailleurs en force tensionnelle.*

The moment meaning vacillates is when all the possible meanings enfold, hence the utterance may be understood as "my body was a sudden blaze", referring to a particular moment in time or "my body is but a sudden blaze", brooding on the ephemeral nature of man. Similarly, "blaze" could refer equally to Isaiah's coal, the fire of hell and original sin, or the phrase "to blaze the trail" hinting at the poem as the guide to meaning.

For the poem can be looked upon as the body of the voices, and lyricism incarnates both heart and soul, enabling their dialogue part VII. This harmony may be expressed in the chiasm "day and night" (part I line 6), "night and day" (part 6 line 12), as well as in the image of the "gaudy moon", which, to Richard [Ellmann 1964: 273], is the epitome of the reconciliation of night and day. Likewise, it is the juxtaposition of opposites as well as the dilemmas between the "swordsman" and the "saint", and linguistic variations that engineer the poem and give it its elating impetus. Therefore if the poem is a body throbbing with life, vacillation turns into pulsation, the circulation of energy being allowed by the variation in rhythm. Most of the poem is built on the pulsating iambic line, the clearest example being part II in which the vowels of stressed syllables have unconventionally been accented for editing reasons:

> *A trèè there is that fròm its tòpmost bòùgh*
>
> *Is hàlf all glìttering flàme and hàlf all grèèn*
>
> *Abòùnding fòliage mòìstened wìth the dèw;*
>
> *And hàlf is hàlf and yèt is àll the scène;*
>
> *And hàlf and hàlf consùme what thèy renèw,*
>
> *And hè that Àttis' ìmage hàngs betwèèn*

That stàring fùry ànd the blìnd lush lèàf

 May knòw not whàt he knòws, but knòws not grìèf.

　　Yet in this part, the way to rhythmical breaches is paved by the promotion of words such as prepositions and the demotion of semantically strong words as in line seven: "That staring fury and the blind lush leaf", which may thus be scanned in a way that avoids three unstressed syllables followed by a spondaic rhythm. More evident breaches occur in part IV, however, where lines 3 ("In a crowded London shop") and 5 ("On the marble table-top") start with anapaests as though memories were to be fetched from the recesses of the mind. Similarly, part V line 10 ("weigh me down, and not a day.") is a trochaic line which contrasts with the iambic rhythm of the stanza and emphasises the weight of responsibility. Finally, looking back on lines 7 and 8 of the second part, it is not unreasonable to scan them with three consecutive stresses. This would create a mirror effect between the two rhythmic patterns, the first being propelled into the second by the spondaic "know not":

That stàring fùry and the blìnd lùsh lèàf

May knòw nòt what he knòws, but knòws nòt grìèf.

　　Again, this is subjectivity here, the authorial breath or, in more Yeatsian terms, the "ghostly voice" that gives life to the poem.

　　There is, ultimately, one quotation by Yeats that sums up what has been demonstrated in this paper: "I am in the place where the Daimon is, but I do not think he is with me until I begin to make a new personality... and yet ... not knowing when I am the finger, when the clay" [Adams 1984: 11]. The conflicting tensions that are created by the personae and their voices, and that were close to leading to the loss of the subject, are in fact its essential power reinvested in the poem which gives them a shape. There is thus a constant flow of exchange between the subject and the text:

Avant l'oeuvre, oeuvre d'art, oeuvre d'écriture, oeuvre de parole, il n'y a pas d'artiste, ni d'écrivain, ni de sujet parlant, puisque c'est la production qui produit le producteur, le faisant naître ou apparaître en le prouvant. [Blanchot in Monseu 2009: 20].

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