

BODYING FORTH LINGUISTIC EXCESS IN *THE BOOK OF DAVE* BY WILL SELF

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1. As it attempts to display a “narrative aesthetics of embodiment, where meaning and truth are made carnal” to quote from Peter Brooks’s *Body Work*¹), Self’s novel entitled *The Book of Dave* makes the reader experience language as excess. Indeed, Will Self turns language into an visual and oral lingo which, because it seems to exceed the limits of the written page, appears as a fleshed out body of significance. Writing the body into the text requires a way of tinkering with words and syntax which exploits the very resources of the linguistic remainder, which can be defined as the apparently chaotic linguistic proliferation whereby “language is not longer a mere instrument, it seems to have acquired a life of its own. Language speaks, it follows its own rhythm, its own partial coherence, it proliferates in apparent, and sometimes violent, chaos”². The remainder in *The Book of Dave* is based on language’s capacity to play with, and exceed, its own rules. Self’s textual politics of fleshing out the text therefore not only appears as a stylistic device that introduces the excess of the body into language, but it also tells us something about the excess in and of language itself in the way it foregrounds language as inherently unruly. In Self’s novel, it is the visual and aural materiality of language, its capacity for corruption³ and its resistance to interpretation that strike the reader as excessive. Thus, in *The Book of Dave*, the excessive body appears as a symptom of the presence of excess in language, an excess taking the form of the remainder in and of language, of a “dark side of language”⁴ which grammatical maps leave out.

2. At this point, a few words about the plot of Self’s novel are in order. *The Book of Dave* falls into chapters alternately taking place in the recent past and in the distant future, as is indicated by the subtitle of the novel, “A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future”. The chapters dealing with the recent past relate the story of Dave Rudman, a taxi driver who got divorced from Michelle, with whom he had a son, Carl. Driven to a breakdown by the discovery that his wife never loved him, and by the restriction of his access to his son, Dave indulges in self-pitying monologue as he drives his dirty cab, prozacs his depression and, following the advice of his

1 P. Brooks, *Body Work*, 21.

2 J.-J. Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, 5.

3 *Ibid.*, 181.

4 *Ibid.*, 6.

psychiatrist, writes a book which he buries in Michelle's garden, as a legacy to his son. That Book spells out Dave's *Weltanschauung*, a mixture of racial and sexual hatred which advocates a clear separation between men and women, and exploitation of women by men. The chapters dealing with the evocation of a distant future take place five hundred years after Dave was shot by Turks he owed money to. Those anticipatory chapters vividly conjure up a world where language and civilisation have broken down into shreds. In this world, people speak Mokni, a mixture of text-words and of the visual transcription of Cockney, and Arpee, a corrupted variant of English made of puns, slang, onomatopoeias, neologisms, eponyms and examples of Dave's idiosyncratic spelling. The materiality of Mokni and Arpee which visibly stand out on the page, contributes to the shaping of linguistic excess in Self's post-apocalyptic world where England is reduced to pockets of small communities living under the absurd constraints of the rules edicted by the Book of Dave, which has become the new and only Sacred text.

The excessive body as a symptom of excess in language

3. Self's description of a post-apocalyptic world where humanity has regressed to a benighted stage of short, nasty and brutish life, gives the writer occasion to inscribe excessive bodies in his text. Gruesome and abject corporeality is omnipresent, starting with the monstrous animals called the motos which play the role of nannies and protectors to the inhabitants of Ham, one of the islands that make up the country of Ing, Self's post-apocalyptic England. The grotesque heterogeneity of the motos' bodies is linked in the text with excess in language, which strikes the reader as rooted in bodily experience:

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

4. The slight man's exclamation that the moto's body does his "fucking head in", when put in resonance with the fact that he has a "fresh trepanning wound", induces meaning to shift from the figurative to the literal, thus revealing inherent instability. The text's ironical intuition here is that the body's semiotisation, which makes it such an apt recipient of the tell-tale signs of violence, is rooted in the collusion between the body and meaning making. As Peter Brooks puts it:

Bodily parts, sensations, and perceptions (including the notorious recognition of the anatomical distinction between the sexes), are the first building blocks in the construction of a symbolic order, including speech, play, and the whole system of human language, within which the child finds a libidinally invested place⁵.

5. This collusion between text and language is in itself a source of violent transgression, which Self exploits to literary purposes. His novel further dramatizes the violence that consists in drawing an equation between words and the body in the gruesome destiny of the character of the “Beastly Man”, the young protagonist Carl Devush’s father, who falls a victim of bigoted Authorities who elinguate him for spreading alternative versions of the dominant religious dogma. Thus, as the young protagonist, Carl Devush, explores his world on Ham, he comes across his father who has become an exile on the far side of the Ferbiddun Zön, after having been tortured by the London Authorities (called the PCO), for his deviant interpretation of the dävine doctrine. This encounter, which evokes the violence of religious fanaticism, is described in graphic anatomical details :

Carl was confronted by an emaciated figure, clad in a long filthy cloakyfing, its beard and hair matted with dirt, its hands cracked and broken [...]. The beastly man opened his mouth and tried to give voice as well, and Carl saw in the dark cave the red root where his tongue has once been, uselessly writhing in the gargling gale of the dad’s madness. Carl said, Ware2, guv, but the Beastlyman only flinched as if struck by the greeting, then scabbled round on the rocks and scrambled away (7).

6. Although the word “dad” is commonly used to designate a man in Self’s post-apocalyptic world, the fact that this dad is actually Carl’s real dad, Symun Devush, who has been tortured and elinguated in the Tower of London for not following the Dävine dogma, gives this encounter a cutting edge. Not only does the image of the rooted out tongue strike us as excessively violent, but it also points to the violence that consists in interpreting the link between body and meaning too literally. Indeed, as a Flyer, i.e. as a man who spreads deviant interpretations of the sacred Dävine text, Symun Devush is silenced through the rooting out of his tongue, because his executioners believe that the rooting out of the organ of speech eradicates the possibility of deviant meaning. However, in Self’s cataclysmic post-apocalyptic world where any deviation and hesitation in spelling out the doctrine of the Book gets punished, violent inscription in the flesh is revealed as excessive only when based on the linguistic instability of the “remainder”⁶.

7. As an echo to Kafka’s *The Penal Colony* where the criminal’s sentence is written into his body

5 P. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 7.

6 J.-J. Lecercle, *op. cit.*, 147.

for him to decipher, and die of it, the violent fragmentation of the condemned Flyers' bodies in the world after Dave spells out the crime they have committed. But what is striking enough is the fact that Self's tempering with language is based on language's very own capacity of language for punning:

The least severe punishment was branding and exile. The most severe penalty — which was frequently applied — was death. Dads were wheeled until their brain haemorrhaged, then they were disembowelled. Then, as the poor unfortunate was mindlessly gawping at his guts lying on the ground at his feet, his genitals were cut off and thrust in his mouth. Death came within units. The dead dad's head was then severed and stuck on a spike at the water's gate; beneath it a placard was hung that read: VIS MANNE SPEEKS BOLLOX (184).

8. The literal inscription of the sentence in the body (“his genitals were cut off and thrust in his mouth” corresponds to “vis manne speeks bollox”) appears to the reader as all the more brutal when supported by the work of the remainder in language, which induces meaning to shift from the metaphorical to the literal, thereby revealing language's inherent instability⁷. Semiotising the body in itself carries dangerous overtones, since it threatens it with objectification, but it is when this semiotisation is literalised and when metaphor is revealed to be rooted in the literal that the text seems to be piling up excess upon excess, revealing language as inherently violent. The question as to whether “we speak language” or “language speaks us” in *The Book of Dave* is resolved as metaphor is shown to belong to the remainder, the excessive, rule-defying, unstable part of language: “The relation of grammar and the remainder is one not of opposition or inversion, but of excess”⁸. In the *Book of Dave* it is neither we who speak language, nor language that speaks us, but the body in and of language that speaks, and very eloquently so, when Self traces back linguistic excess to its very organic roots, its collusion with the body, which the excessive text conjures up on the page in the graphic evocation of the tortured prisoners' bodies.

9. As the first chapter in the novel describes the slaughter of one of the motos, the scene enables Self to explore and describe in graphic details the intimacy of organic matter, which, when put in the open, bespeaks the violence that has been done to the body as an enclosing whole:

Ozzi Bulluk pulled the rope that kept one of its hind feet lashed to the gibbet as tightly as possible, splaying the moto's legs; its genitals, tanks and ribs were all thrown into prominence. Taking a deep breath and crying out, Stikk í 2 im, Dave! Fred thrust the knife into the notch beneath the rib cage and, sawing vigorously, yanked it up. Hide and flesh parted with a loud popping sound, and Runti's guts

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

flumped down in a tangled mass on to the cloth. Fukka moved in at once with a shorter knife and, feeling around in the moto's abdominal cavity, cut the intestines away. Behind him came Carl with a pail of sea water, which he sloshed up into the gory hole, slooshing out any shit or half-digested fodder. (16)

10. Significantly enough, the capacity for the ruptured body to evoke the passage of violence produces an image that is violently disturbing. But even as it bears the imprint of violence in the very process whereby it is made to signify, the body also appears as elusive and unreadable. Opacity and unreadability trigger a desire to probe deeper into the meaning of the body and of the text.
11. Semiotised bodies in Self's novel often prove unreadable, opaque, generating misreading, the dire consequences of which Carl Devush experiences directly, when his incapacity to recognise his own father in the tortured Beastlyman sends him on a trip to London during which he gets arrested and threatened with the same fate as his father: "2 B browkin on ve Weel. Yaw fungus crakked, yaw 4ed brandid, yaw tung cut aht, an U 2 B Xeyeled" (198). For, as Peter Brooks notes in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, the representation of the body in signs makes it present in the text only within the context of its absence, since "use of the linguistic sign implies the absence of the thing for which it stands"⁹. This is why the text's and the reader's desire for a meaningful body in the text is frustrated because the ultimate signified cannot be reached; it exceeds meaning, so that the body in the text invites more probing, prising open, and dissecting, for it to yield more meaning. Fleshing out language to an excess is therefore a way for Self to invite the excess of violent interpretation into his text.
12. It is my contention that the opaque body in *The Book of Dave* also induces the reader to ponder over the unruly nature of language. When the process of semiotising the body is met with resistance so that the body becomes unreadable, excess appears to be inherent in the work of language itself, in the guise of the remainder. I would like to show that reading out Self's characteristically fleshed out style requires from the reader to go through a physical experience of language which gives her a first-hand experience of the existence of the remainder as excess in and of language.

Exploiting the remainder in and of language

13. The materiality of Self's invented language provides texture to the words on the page and
- ⁹ P. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 8.

fleshes out the dystopian world his novel conjures up. Language in *The Book of Dave* appears as visually and aurally modified, and forms a material body of collective utterance. Thus, on the occasion of the killing of the moto, when the master of ceremonies intervenes, shifting from Arpee to Mokni, the shift makes the materiality of language visible and audible to the reader, as she perceives words on the page to resist her usual mode of apprehending them:

— Be that as it may, said Mister Greaves, pulling his shirt still tighter around his tank, I've been Hack here at Ham for twenty-five years now and I've learned to love the moto well enough. I'd advise you, dads of my party, to love this fine beast too. His flesh will preserve you, his fat will grease you, and once it's extracted his oil will — as you well know — prove the most effective remedies for whatever ails you. Is this not why you've been allowed to come here, to this most distant and yet divine island of our Lawd's, Nah — he slewed angrily into Mokni — pissoff ve ló-uv U — go an kip in yer gaff. Yaw oasts av wurk 2 do — rispek vem (15).

14. It is clear from this quotation that Arpee, which is the language in which the master starts speaking, can be understood through meaning inferences based on the repetition of words in different contexts and in different syntactic positions, whereas Mokni, the language he reverts to when angry, is best understood when compared with the sounds of the Cockney dialect. But reading and understanding both Arpee and Mokni imply a different type of reading, a more participative and even physical way of apprehending the text without which the meaning of Self's verbal creations remains elusive:

The foglamp beat down on them out of a blue screen that tinted at the southern horizon, the sea pitter-purled against shingle, the gulls cawed over the Gayt, the flying rats coo-burbled from the top of the home filed, the sweat stood out on the grafters' rbows, and the mummies — with the Driver gone — risked loosening their cloakyfings. When free-flowing, the Hamsters' chitchat had the intimacy of thought, so when the old moto-skinning rap started up it was like a mummy humming to her sprog.

— Allö, mö-ö, cum 2 feed us, cum 2 eel us, the mummies called.

And the daddies responded:

— Tara, öl mayt, gissa cuddul B4 U di. (17)

15. This is because Self's corrupted and reinvented language appears as excessive and violent to the reader. It strikes her as excessive, as unreadable at first. Mokni and Arpee, the two most frequent instances of Self's dialectal creativity, escape the strictures of grammatical rules and conventions, except for those of the "phonics" which constitute them, and which shape the material reality of

words on the page, for those words to be vocalised. Indeed, Self's language resists eye-reading, it is visually opaque. Thus, after Symun Devush has been struck by the revelation that the main religious doctrine on his island, the Island of Ham, needs to be revised and the rules of the Book of Dave humanised, he comes back among the flock of his fellow Hamstermen, and the text proceeds with the following conversation:

— Ware2, guv? Gari had hailed him, and then, as Symun wafted closer, he said, Orlí, mayt?

Symun only looked straight through him, his blue eyes glassy. Gari stepped forward and made to take his shoulder, but Symun twisted away and blurted:

Bakkoff? Eyem nó Symun no maw, Eyem ve Geeze nah, Eyev ung aht wiv Dave, C, an ees toll me ve troof.

W-wotcher meen? Gari spluttered.

Lyke Eye say, Eye bin in ve ZÔN, EYE BIN 2 ve playce vair ee berried ve Búk, an ee cum 2 me, an ee giv me anuvvah Búk — yeah, a nú 1 — an we cauled í ovah togevva, yeah, an ee toll me 2 cum an tell U ló abaht í, rí.

Bluddyel.

Bluddyel iz abaht ve syze uv í, mayt, coz iss awl chaynj fer nah. Dave sez weev gó ve rong end uv ve stikk — ee doan wannus livin lyke vis, nó torkin wiv ar mummies, treetin em lyke shit an vat. Iss ve saym wiv ve Nú Lundun stuff, ee sez iss awl bollox, ee doan give a toss abaht bildin Nú Lundun, aw ve Pee-See-bleegin-Oh. Ee sez we shood liv az bess we can an nó wurri, if we wannar do fings diffrent iss fyn bí im... (78)

16. It is only when auralised, and even rapped and engaged with, bodily and rhythmically, that the text becomes understandable. No wonder if rap has become common practice among the inhabitants of Self's post-apocalyptic world, who punctuate their daily lives as well as their occasional celebrations with the familiar beat of the music: "Makk-daar-nal, makk-daar-nal, kennuckëfrichikkin anapeetsa-hut! Makk-daar-nal, makk-daar-nal, kennuckëfrichikkin anapeetsa-hut!" (126). Rap furnishes a model whereby the excessive opacity of Self's language can yield meaning. It is only when made audible and rhythmical, if only to our inner ear, that Self's invented language can be understood, which involves the reader's own body. For the reader deciphers Arpee in the manner of Symun Devush when deciphering his Daveworks, that is to say by matching the words she has found, with the words she could see when handling the Book ("[...] While the first few phrases had cost her whole tariffs of frustration, once he had cracked the code entire rants of

the Book leaped off the page at him” (76). With Arpee, we understand the new words that appear, through their repeated contextual inferences, a task that is somehow facilitated (but not always, given its lack of explicitness), by the dictionary of Arpee into English with alternative Mokni Orthographies, provided by the author at the end of his novel. But with Mokni itself, the street language that is spoken in the world after Dave, the reader’s experience is that of the necessity to overcome visual resistance through vocalisation, which reminds her of the primacy of the written trace, or visibility in language, when read. That visual materiality of language is not only ornamental, decorative, and extrasemantic, but, as Johanna Drucker argues in *Figuring the Word*, inherently constitutive, and ontological. The reader’s initial puzzlement and difficulties when reading Mokni give her first hand experience of the fact that “gesture precedes language as an expressive indication”¹⁰. For Self does not so much reinvent language as Russell Hoban does in *Riddley Walker*, a novel with which *The Book of Dave* has repeatedly been compared, as it makes language resistant from a visual point of view, thus doing a type of violence to language, which forces the reader into the awareness that words are physical realities, both in their visual and their aural sensuousness. It is only when visual physicality yields to aural fluidity that the text becomes meaningful. What the physical resistance of Mokni tells us, is that language is haunted by the body, which it materialises even as it signals its absence, much in the same way as the body itself calls for a semiotisation which it simultaneously resists.

17. The fact that Mokni’s visual materiality requires vocalisation for it to be understood implies the reader’s bodily participation to accommodate the strangeness of the language she reads. Self’s language forces the reader to read with her body, not only because she often has to try out different possibilities for vocalising the text, before finding the right tone, but also because the Cockney accent which Mokni transliterates requires a different bodily posture from standard English, with its glottal t sounds (“butter” becoming “bu’er”, “it” becoming “i’”), and its “darker vowels”, as in “lyke”, so that the material difference of the cockney accent as an example of collective utterance becomes perceptible to the reader in her own body, in the different postures her body, her throat, her tongue, her jaw have to take, for her to be able to decipher the text. Indeed, not only does the Cockney accent induce different body positionings, but it also requires the participation of the whole face and of the whole upper part of the body. The mouth opens wider, the vowels require the tongue to move deeper in the oral cavity, which in turn has consequences for the position of the jaw, the neck and the breast muscles. The reader is thus made to experience otherness through her body,

10 J. Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics*, 64.

if only in imagination when she reads out the text to her inner ear. Mokni make her perceive language as excessive, because it is characterised by the materiality of a community of sounds.

18. Interestingly enough, not only does Self's invented dialect present us with a collective type of utterance which strikes us as a foreign material body, but it is also pregnant with the body of historical materiality. This is foregrounded in the alternation between the chapters situated in the recent past and in the distant future, which induce what Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls "Brissetizing remotivation" in language¹¹. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle shows, Brissetizing remotivation is grounded in the belief that etymology contains the truth not only about the word but also about the world, because the history of mankind is contained in language: words have a history, which reflects on the history of the people who speak them, and which does violence to language by corrupting it¹². The reader's ability to decipher the words in the chapters situated in the distant future with the help of those from the chapters in the recent past makes this Brissetizing remotivation of language literal, since it shows that "language is not a rational construct but the product of a historical conjuncture"¹³. Indeed, the materiality of Arpee or Mokni in the chapters situated in the distant future is a product of the invasion of our communication means by the new technologies in the recent past, as is demonstrated by the numerous text-words and eponyms such as "Evian" for "water". Arpee words such as chellish for evil, or toyist for real, as opposed to "real" for "manufactured", take on meaning when the reader learns about Dave's difficult relation with his wife Michelle, and his habit of making his son's toys appear as real. Deciphering Mokni or Arpee in the light of the chapters situated in the recent past forces the reader to practice "mad etymology", whereby she realises that the excess of the remainder in language is the very body of historical time.

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¹¹ Brissetising remotivation consists in making meaning proliferate through remotivation by means of etymology "gone mad" and "multiple analysis" (J.-J. Lecercle, *op. cit.*, 61) which forces a multiplicity of interpretations out of language. (J.-J. Lecercle, *op. cit.*, 217).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

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