

DIALECTICAL TENSION IN SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S LIFE AND WORK¹⁷

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"La libertad es uno de los más preciados dones que a los hombres dieron los cielos; con ella no pueden igualarse los tesoros que encierra la tierra ni el mar encubre; por la libertad, así como por la honra, se puede y se debe aventurar la vida, y, por el contrario, el cautiverio es el mayor mal que puede venir a los hombres."

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*

On 12th June 1617 the last Elizabethan hero sailed from Plymouth on a voyage which meant much more than any other conventional piratical enterprise of the time. His destiny: El Dorado, or to be more exact, Guiana.

A noble player was betting his life in what was going to be the saddest hand of a long gambling life. A victory in such a risky business would mean freedom and honour; a defeat... history can tell well enough. The protagonist we refer to was no other than Sir Walter Raleigh, the last of a chosen few who, by the time we have just mentioned, had already seen an unforgettable generation disappear: Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare, Marlowe etc. He did not know, however, that the rules of such a dangerous game had changed. His long imprisonment in the Tower of London had made him, among other things, recollect and think, but his recollections no longer coincided with the realities of a time which, by 1617, had a new referee:

¹⁷ All quotations of a literary kind have been taken from the Penguin edition *Sir Walter Raleigh's Selected Writings* (London, 1984).

King James. A man who, at least in this matter, was eager to please a most peculiar character who figures among the most brilliant figures Spain has ever had in the diplomatic world: el Conde de Gondomar. Intelligent, witty, cunning and convincing, he was there to drop into James' ear the exact words at the proper moment. All with a double aim: to preserve the integrity of the Spanish American colonies and to make his royal master in Madrid, Philip III, taste revenge in the name of his father on a time and characters that only a few years earlier had made the whole of Spain swallow some of the most bitter moments of its history. Raleigh alone symbolized that time and those characters.

The struggle was long and fought at a long distance: while the English sailor moved in the dream-land of El Dorado, Gondomar and James prepared a most horrid reception which reached its climax on the 10th August 1618. That morning Raleigh was taken to the Tower for the third time in his life. On this particular occasion, however, there was not going to be a way out, not even one possibility of gambling all once again for the sake of honour and freedom as Cervantes had written in our most precious book. The voyage to Guiana had been, as can be well imagine, a failure. It had to be. The odds against it had been overwhelming. For a start the diplomatic labours of Gondomar at the Jacobean court had been in themselves a masterpiece of Machiavellian skill. In the second place, and this is perhaps even more decisive, Raleigh's pattern of life demanded such an outcome, for his, as the voyage itself, had been an existence that had nearly always moved from hope to despair and from hot dreams to cold reality:

Hero has left no lamp to guide her love
Thou lookest for light in vain, and storms arise.¹⁸

He had once called himself Death's subject and death, his master, came to him at the scaffold in a raw October morning of 1618. Not long before he had written: "It is therefore Death alone that can suddenly make a man to know himself...Thou (Death) has drawn together all the far stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet*."¹⁹ We are not to understand those words, however, as the product of a man who had consciously rejected in life

¹⁸ "The Ocean to Cynthia", 21st Book.

¹⁹ Winton J., *Sir Walter Raleigh* (1975) 342-343.

greatness, pride, cruelty and ambition knowing that they were to prove worthless at the last minute. Quite the contrary actually; he strove:

To seek new worlds, for gold, for praise, for glory,
To try desire, to try love (...) ²⁰

It is precisely this paradox which makes of Raleigh's one of the most puzzling biographies of the Elizabethan period. Nearly all his contemporaries would have agreed that he ranked as one of the greatest, proudest and most ambitious characters of the age. Cruelty can be left aside, though it is true that he was not totally ignorant of it. Six hundred corpses of Spaniards and Italians at Smerwick, Ireland, proved in 1580 that he could use the sword with a degree of coldness similar to that used by the executioners of Tyburn prison. How, then, are we to conjugate both realities? How are we to understand, for example, that the man who knew in life that ambition presents a ridiculous aspect when facing death, should have behaved as one of the most tiring 'noble beggars' to surround Queen Elizabeth? "When will you stop begging favours from me?", the virgin Queen is reputed to have asked him at a given time. The answer, despite its brilliancy, contradicts the man who had once written that "death takes the account of the rich and proves him a beggar": "when you stop granting them".

Raleigh's life, therefore, presents the historian and the critic with a good number of questions which apparently have no easy answer. It is not a unique case. Would any serious reader, for instance, believe that the author of *Doctor Faustus* was considered to be a menace to society on the grounds of his firm atheism if he ignored the information about 'secret reunions' attended, among others, by the subject of our talk?

Quevedo, our most noble cynic, may have the solution to the problem raised: "Amo la vida con saber que es muerte". Raleigh himself could have signed these words. His attitude to life, after all, shows the suitability of the statement. "What is life?" is one of his most well-known rhetorical questions.²¹ "A play of passion", "a short comedy" are the answers. True, but comedy after all. The inevitability of death is there ("we dye in earnest, that's

²⁰ "The Ocean to Cynthia", 21st Book.

²¹ "On the Life of Man."

no jest"), but also that of birth. He was always conscious of those two truths and of their inflexible chronological order. Life inevitably comes first and the stage of the Elizabethan world had a lot to offer to a man of his qualities who were ready to "act to the life". It is only natural that he tried to grasp the whole of it. "All men in one man": husband, father, parliamentarian, soldier, courtier, pirate, alchemist, philosopher, poet, hero, villain, lover, explorer, falconer, gardener, botanist, historian, war reporter and antiquary. This list, nearly always quoted to shock the reader, should show, however, the restlessness of a Renaissance spirit. If we do not understand this we will approach the analysis of Raleigh's life from a wrong angle for his was an existence impregnated of a Faustian quality and totally dominated by the consequences of the personal solution to one of the gravest dilemmas, to die living or to live dead. Raleigh's answer to it had been from the start clear and, once again, he would have agreed with Quevedo: "mejor vida es morir que vivir muerto". It was the choice of the difficult path taken at the crossroads where 'the many and the few' must part:

False love, Desire and Beauty frail, adieu
Dead is the root whence all these fancies grew.²²

The consequences, of course, are always grave as literary works well show, but it would not be especially risky to state that they were more so in the case of Raleigh for the stakes are always higher in highly competitive circles, and the one around Queen Elizabeth was indeed a tough one. 'To taste the court' alone would have demanded all the energies of a common man. That Raleigh could do so for a long time and at the same time lead a family life, study, write and risk his life in maritime expeditions only proves that he was the possessor of very uncommon qualities only shared by a selected group. Still, this 'rich' life had tremendous fissures, the most obvious ones being fear and tension. It is easy to understand the first. At a given time Raleigh counted himself among the happiest of mortals: he was the owner of vast estates in Ireland, attractive rents given to him by the Crown and several houses in London, among which Sherburne stood as a highly esteemed treasure; he enjoyed the love of a faithful wife, the delights of fatherhood and a brilliant reputation, enriched in his case by a good number of anecdotes the London audience was eager to applaud. And more important than that, he had freedom to fly, as his first expedition to Guiana had proved.

²² "A Farewell to False Love."

But all this did not rest on solid ground and he knew it. A word, a gesture could do away with it all. His was the fear of the actor to the central soliloquy of a play and from this fear arose tension. His literary lines are dominated by adversatives and by the sad awareness that man is a puppet in the hands of an always capricious destiny. He summarizes this position in a line from "Farewell to the Court": "My love misled...my life in Fortune's hand".

Raleigh's capricious destiny had a name, and a royal one at that, and her power over him rested on a contradiction: Queen Elizabeth's love for Sir Walter, her attachment to him, prevented the man from fulfilling his dreams; he was tied by her love, a love he desired and cherished throughout his life, but that he was ready to discard for more earthly attachments. He sings to his goddess and muse, but wants to walk side by side with his plain wife and sail towards fame and riches. On the other hand, Elizabeth wants to remain, and be worshipped daily, as his "Laura", "Cynthia", "Diana", his "Faerie Queene", his nymph... She is the bearer of his pain but also the hand that soothes his fancy:

Such a one did I meet, good Sir,
Such an Angelique face,
Who like a queen, like a nymph, did appear
By her gate, by her grace

She hath left me here all alone,
All alone and unknown,
Who sometimes did me lead with her self,
And me loved as her own.²³

Elizabeth proves to be Raleigh's gravity and he soars towards her through life and death, but she also constitutes an enigma never to be solved in his poems: the Queen is Raleigh's "fair and harmless light", his "glory of the night", but also "a gilded hook", a "fever of the mind". This polarized game of attraction and repulsion is probably the very essence of Elizabeth's existence, who lived fulfilling the function of a delicate balance.

The climatic literary articulation between Raleigh and the Queen is expressed in "Fain would I", a poem built upon a consistent rhythm of

²³ "Walsingham."

negatives, where a wish is uttered to be immediately thwarted by its invariability, and an action is accomplished to be proved futile right away. It is indeed the depiction of a lover chasing a falling-star. The poem has three points of articulation "I", "you" and "not": "I" stands for Sir Walter Raleigh, "you" for the Queen and "not" exemplifies the contradictory relationship of the two plus the difficult life led by Sir Walter after meeting the Queen. The audio-visual effect of repetitions in every stanza and the carefully structured lines carry the reader along riddle-like images and concepts, loaded with autobiographical experience and historical meanings. A stanza must suffice to give evidence of the poetical force:

Fain would I, but I dare not.
I dare, but yet I may not.
I may although I care not
For pleasure when I play not.

There was a time when Raleigh would spread his best cloak on a muddy puddle for Elizabeth to step on dry ground, when he still considered that:

...true love is a durable fire,
In the mind ever burning,
Never sick, never old, never dead,
From itself never turning.²⁴

Not long afterwards, however, Raleigh acquired a more accurate, more mature attitude towards his queen, but, by then, time, age, and worries had fed on her looks and Elizabeth's displeasure with herself would make her adamant to more appropriate considerations:

Our passions are most like to floods and streams,
The shallow murmur, but the deep are dumb.
So, when affections yield discourse, it seems
The bottom is but shallow whence they come.
They that are rich in words must needs discover
That they are poor in that which makes a lover.²⁵

²⁴ "As you came from the holy land."

²⁵ "Sir Walter Raleigh to Queen Elizabeth."

The contrast between "talking" and "loving" soothes, for Raleigh, the Queen's estrangement from him. He chooses to believe that their mutual affections are deep, if dumb, but the framing words command the poem: he knows that Elizabeth would only accept a passionate lover or nothing at all.

Sir Walter still played with the courtier notion of a virginal, ever-young queen in his poetry, toying around with words and structures, as in his most famous conjectural poem "Her face, her tongue, her wit", where the poet remains at a surface level, drawing an archetypical portrait, allegedly of the queen, but good to fit any renaissance ideal love, as its own structure, pointing to all directions, evidently shows. It can be read line by line or structured in semantic squares, four lines to each and each line cesured in three; it can also be read lineally or diagonally, from top to bottom or viceversa, and left to right or conversely. The poem might have been written by Raleigh or not, but it is a good example of a poet's desire to be taken as an uncommitted lover of beauty and sensuality and not as a serious, moral slave to love.

When Elizabeth's ire closes on him after his marriage and he falls from fortune, Raleigh's poems become darker with political omens, moral warnings and maxims. The peak of this period is the long poem *The Lie*. By the titles alone we can read the difference in tone: *The advice*, *The excuse*, *Farewell to the Court*, *The Hermit poor* and the definitive and eloquent *My body in the walls captived*.

The lie is a gallery of negative portraits ranging from the Church to the Court, through Physics, Art, the City and the Potentates; they are organized around a powerful coda repeated at the end of each stanza:

if reply
Then give them all the lie.

This sentence alone carries the bitterness of Raleigh's soul as his prime disappears with his best hopes and dreams. It alternates one word according to the nature of the subject in each stanza, and the command is temperate with a modal verb in some cases, but there is no doubt as to the articulation of Raleigh's feelings. The stanza that best epitomizes the course of his life runs as follows:

Tell age it daily wasteth,

Tell honour how it alters,
 Tell beauty how she blasteth,
 Tell favour how it falters;
 And as they shall reply,
 Give every one the lie.

It is a felicitous blending of Raleigh's decay and what caused it; as age and beauty (symbolizing the Queen) disappear, the honour and favour she conveyed on Sir Walter also wane. The forceful rhyme of negative concepts fits in the semantic field of the whole stanza and gives it a masterly finish.

Similarly in *My body in the walls captived* Raleigh writes a lucid blending of the two poles dominating his existence: the Queen, courtier love, romance, light and, on the other hand, death warrants, absences, silence and darkness. The effort the poet makes not only to compare them but to superimpose them throws extra-literary light on both sets of concepts: it places them as opposites poles but qualifies the love of the queen as deadly and the imprisonment in the tower as a maturing process; and, once more, Raleigh depicts himself as caught in the pains and pleasures of his contradictory life:

Such prison erst was so delightful
 As it desired no other dwelling place,
 But time's effects, and destinies despiteful,
 Have changed both my keeper and my fare.

The fragment admits two readings, depending on the value we assign to the different lines, and the clue to this duality is given, ostentatiously, in the last one. The first line contains already the pair of contraries that polarize the poem, "prison" and "delightful"; since they are antithetical by nature we tend to think immediately that "prison" has, here, a peculiar connotation having to do with the "desire" of the next line. But, in spite of the positive meaning of love, the tone of the fragment is set by the pervading negative effect of "prison", "despiteful" and "keeper", one in every line. Were this prison "delightful" and "desired", as the beginning of the fragment seems to intimate, the "But" of the third line destroys the hopeful atmosphere, and the "change" of the next line rounds the darker picture off. The prison and the keeper take on their real dimension, and the Queen remains in the background commanding destinies.

The elegiac poem *Ocean to Cynthia*, found only partially and probably left unfinished by Raleigh's untimely death, is a recapitulation of the tensions that shattered his existence. The text, allegedly consisting of twenty books, seems to be in a draft stage, considering the care with which Raleigh finished off his poems, but speaks the language it has us accustomed to:

Such heat in ice, such fire in frost remained,
Such trust in doubt, such comfort in despair.

These structural oppositions acquire further meaning as the poem progresses, an intensifying effect Raleigh has developed throughout his work, and lines 85 to 91 amplify the contradiction and admit a double reading similar to the one we have exemplified before:

So my forsaken heart, my withered mind,
Widow of all the joys it once possessed,
My hopes clean out of sight, with forced wind
To kingdoms strange, to lands far-off addressed,
Alone, forsaken, friendless on the shore,
With many wounds, with death's cold pangs embraced,
Writes in the dust, as one that could no more.

The composition of this poem coincides chronologically with the immense task of writing *The History of the World* and, as both works progress, Raleigh moves from the particular to the general in *The Ocean to Cynthia; the person, place, and passages forgotten* he embarks on considerations of "Nature's wonders", "Virtue's choices" and "Time's begettings" as they appear at different times and places in history and always tinted by a strain of pessimism and doom. Towards the end of the book Raleigh resumes the theme of his heart's desire and summarizes magnificently his "leit motiv" and his new concern (that his end is near); lines 517-522 end the poem and inscribe an epitaph to his vital trajectory:

To God I leave it, who first gave it me,
And I her gave, and she returned again,
As it was hers. So let His mercies be
Of my last comforts the essential mean.
But be it so, or not, th'effects are past.
Her love hath end: my woe must ever last.

