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Singing, Calling, Answering, and Listening: Dialogism in *Al Que Quiere!*

This was going to be a very straightforward and simple paper. I was going to present the opening stanza of “Gulls,” well-known to all of you, and consider the parts of singer, townspeople and others from the perspective of modernism, more specifically the material conditions of American modernism, activating notions of autonomy, audience, collaboration, and internationalism. This would be done by drawing parallels to Williams’s own interactions with others in the world beyond, and particularly in Europe. I would conclude that these interactions, though vigorous, are always, to some extent, fraught with difficulty because of the uneven power structure established in the poem: the American poet singer listens to the European or Europe-centered others, answers their calls, but they pay him little heed. At least this is what the poet singer seems to think. Instead, they pass, and they do so because they are free to do so, something which, by implication, our poet singer is not. All of this would, in my reading, translate into a Euro-American relationship that is affected by what is at this time still a European hegemony within the arts, a situation which neatly explains the disgruntled singer and his conflicted relationship to the townspeople to whom he has been tasked with singing. In short, in so far as the world beyond is also a cosmopolitan world of letters, Literature with a capital L, getting admitted is difficult without first having been heard, having received the attention and necessary entry ticket from Europe, where, at the time, literary capital—shall we say literariness—is awarded.

I still want to pursue much of this reading here with you today, and indeed take it further than I do in this initial sketch, but first, the basic actors in this poem, in so far as it is possible, need to be established, clarified and seen in relation to one another. My proposed reading was going rather well until I really started thinking about the various characters that this poem contains, the *dramatis personae*: the singer, the townspeople, the “ones,” the gulls, the “strange birds,” and the eagle. The singer and the townspeople seem immobile, attached or fixed to the presumed “town” to which they all belong. The singer, however, knows about the world beyond and is able to receive communications, intelligence, about and from that world. The townspeople, we gather, do so only at the mercy of their singer, who translates whatever of importance he has gathered into their tongue, or into a tongue that they can at least theoretically understand. But who are the gulls? And what is their calling? And how are they related to the eagle and the strange migrant birds, birds which—in a *roman à clef* reading—recall Marcel Duchamp, who had first arrived in New York City in 1915? Of course, that does not work very well with Williams’s own memory of having written the poem in 1912, nor, of course, with its first 1914 publication in *The Egoist* (CPI 482). But you have to admit that it was a thrilling thought.

What do we know, then? First of all, there is clearly a conflation between the many others out in the world and the gulls. Here are the opening lines:

My townspeople, beyond in the great world,
are many with whom it were far more
profitable for me to live than here with you.

These whirr about me calling, calling! (CPI, 67)

The whirring others with their insistent calling doubtless recall gulls, known for their characteristic and plentiful calls as they whirr around, wings whirring too. The songs of the local singer, however, seem to elicit no response:

and for my own part I answer them, loud as I can,
but they, being free, pass! (*CPI*, 67)

Our singer is trying quite hard to communicate with two, perhaps really three, different audiences: the others, the townspeople, and us, the readers.

Bruce Holsapple has pointed out that much of the poetry in *Al Que Quiere!* is “a poetry of enactment, largely dramatic” (64). No doubt, the speeches given by the singer to his townspeople have the makings of dramatic speeches, and one of the most haunting things about the poem is the imbalance between the voices heard: the singer sings, but who knows what the gulls are calling, what the townspeople’s reaction to the poet’s singing is, whether they too hear the gulls, but are unable to make much of their calls, and, indeed, in what way the singer and townspeople were leaping at each other, or close to doing so. Instead, this stage features only the singer, and we—townspeople and readers alike—are, unlike the gulls that simply pass, his audience. At the same time, the poet singer’s charge against the others is that they ignore him, choose not to hear him, or, at the very least, choose not to act on his replies. This creates an interesting contrast, considering his own monopolization of the conversation in the poem itself.

Calling, answering, listening, hearing, and singing. These are the main communicative verbs used in the poem. The calling done by the gulls, or others, to the poet singer; the answering done by the poet singer, who responds—in vain—to the calls of the others; the listening expected of the townspeople who have only one singer, and that one only by sheer

luck; the hearing, or overhearing, done by the poet singer, who knows the favored songs of the townspeople but rejects them as not music; and the singing, of course, performed by the singer, poet laureate of this particular town. At the end, there is also the silence, induced it seems by fear of the “circling” eagle, which puts and end to the whirring and calling, and makes the gulls “move seaward” “very quietly” (*CPI*, 68).

If we return, yet again, to the first stanza, we see that it establishes a conflicted relationship between the poet, or singer, and his townspeople:

My townspeople, beyond in the great world,
are many with whom it were far more
profitable for me to live than here with you. (*CPI*, 67)

Not only does this imply that the poet singer belongs to another, greater sphere—the global, perhaps cosmopolitan world, a world of letters—as opposed to the limited town of his townspeople, it also suggests that there is profit involved, profit that is being missed (lost) because of the poet’s emplacement within this town, with these townspeople.

Although the labels town and world subtly manage to eschew references to specific cities, nation states or continents, given the context, the world beyond seems immediately to be Europe. New York City is certainly a candidate for the cosmopolitan position implied, but the “beyond” seems to suggest something slightly further away than a city that Williams could virtually see from Rutherford.

The “many” to which the poet singer refers are not named, although we might assume that what is meant are other poets, writers and artists. Not only do they call to our poet singer, he answers – and at the top of his lungs. What this exchange consists of can only be guessed

at, but the gerund “calling” indicates that, somehow, the insistent and repeated calls of these fellow artists are taken as calls to the poet.

The word “answer”—“and for my own part I answer them, loud as I can,”—implies that these other voices govern the conversation. Thus if this poem is seen as a statement on the American poet’s position in relation to Europe, it would seem that the American poet is primarily engaged in answering these previous calls, adjusting his output to this already uttered, already written, material. This is almost a summary of the problem of originality at this time, when much of the literary conversation is about how American literature can be specific, rather than a continuation of an English tradition or, on the other hand, simply a response to French or Continental modernism. The situation for the American poet is particular, because, as Stephen Fredman has pointed out, “the poet finds him or herself in the awkward position of a latecomer to a European tradition that is both constitutive of and alien to the conditions out of which the poet writes” (17).

Williams’s stance toward Europe is not easily summed up, as he positions himself alternately as longing for it and as resenting it. Some of these stances can be suspected of being, above all, useful poses. Take this 1919 piece, “Belly Music,” published in *Others*:

Perhaps I am a sullen suburbanite, cowardly and alone. Perhaps it is true that I have not seen the cocottes of Montmartre or the Lady Diana. Perhaps it is a preposterous longing for the wealth of the world. I sit a blinded fool, with withered hands stretched out into the nothingness around me. Perhaps this is a sickness. Perhaps what I call my singing is a stench born out of these sores. I deny that that makes any difference. AT LEAST I AM THAT. (“Belly Music,” *Others* 5, no. 6 July 1919, p. 28).

The veracity of these statements is debatable. Williams had, after all, gotten a glimpse of the nightlife in Montmartre as early as 1898, when he first visited the French capital. In his autobiography, he writes: “Montmartre was only a step from where we were living, so one night out we went, a regular Sunday School picnic, to see the sights there. We drank a bottle of wine and in dark rooms heard the naughty songs with which the usual tourist is greeted” (*Autobiography*, 42). In 1919, when the *Others* piece was published, he had even visited Paris once more. In addition, and more importantly, Williams was a personal friend of influential people in publishing within this circle of artists, and his relationships with Robert McAlmon, Bill Bird and Ezra Pound respectively allowed him to publish his work in various channels. He would soon translate Philippe Soupault from the French and visit with Valery Larbaud in Paris. Although no expatriate, Williams was by no means as isolated from the goings-on of the literary and artistic scene to which he refers as he wishes to appear. It’s not like the “others,” the whirring gulls, weren’t hearing him. In fact, just like the poet singer presumably translates intelligence from the world beyond—acts as mediator between the others and the townspeople—so authors like Williams have translated cutting-edge work from other languages in order to disseminate it in his own country. The poet singer as mediator is not very different from Williams’s own translating of Soupault’s *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (1928). In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova claims that translation can be understood as “a way of diverting literary assets” (134). When it comes to the translation of avant-garde work like Soupault’s novel, it is, in Casanova’s view, usually performed by “international and polyglot” authors who, wishing “to break with the norms of their native literary space, seek to introduce into their language the modernity of the center (whose domination they perpetuate by doing just this)” (134). Williams may once have claimed in a letter to Pound (March 23, 1933), that he had no interest in being an “international figure” and that all he wanted to do was “to write” (*SL* 139–40), but in translating Soupault from the

French, he looks suspiciously like an international figure, not even remotely the sullen suburbanite of “Belly Music.”

William Q. Malcuit has claimed that “Gulls” is built on “a double sense of exile,” where, despite a physical presence and a shared locus, the speaker is exiled from his townspeople, while also being exiled from that “great world” (63). Despite the difficulty of placing the demonstrably non-exiled poet within the scheme of exile, Malcuit proposes that this should be seen as an important “strategy of exile at home” (62). As if, perhaps, the poet singer is more like the migrant birds than the townspeople, yet neither really sharing their place of exile, their conditions of exile, nor being able to leave this place of exile at home.

At the same time, place is a complex term in Williams’s thinking, as his notes on *The Descent of Winter* make clear. [Example to be given in talk but not in writing]. In “Gulls,” of course, place, this particular place, is connected to a loss of potential profit. Pound’s 1913 letter to Williams, one of few admitting to the value of Williams’s remaining as the townspeople singer, comes to mind: “You may get something slogging away by yourself that you would miss in the Vortex – and that we miss” (19 December 1913, in Witemeyer, 23). In this poem, it is clear that whatever it is that may be gotten is not as immediately profitable as it would have been to be with the others, somewhere else. *Profitable* is indeed a significant word choice in the poem, indicating, perhaps, financial success through a large readership or perhaps profit in relation to making it on the literary field, in which those other places are powerful centers. In terms of the poet’s work, profitable also indicates a richer source of material, which links back to previous, historical discussions of American literature as lacking both an audience and the wealth of materials of European literature.

As Casanova points out, the work of a writer should be seen in relation both to its position within a national literary space and the position of that space in the larger context of a literary space of world literature (41). While “Gulls” might give the impression that

Williams's position in the national literary space is debatable and communication with the space of world literature is one-sided or broken off, Williams was very much immersed in both of these spheres and by no means cut off from the literary conversations in the "great world."

It is impossible to understand the migration to Paris and the negative tone writers like Pound (or, indeed, Williams himself) take when they speak of America without the background of censorship. Williams would soon witness the effects of the verdict against Joyce's *Ulysses*. But even earlier than that, he would experience having his artistic projects thwarted by the anti-intellectual climate of early 20th-century America. In 1917, when the first three of the *Kora in Hell* improvisations were published in the October issue of *The Little Review*, "New York postal authorities" seized the issue, due to the perceived obscenity of "Cantleman's Spring Mate" by Wyndham Lewis (Morrisson 159).

The closing lines of "Gulls" gives me pause in this reading:

You see, it is not necessary for us to leap at each other,
and, as I told you, in the end
the gulls moved seaward very quietly.

Somehow, the insistent calling with which the poem begins gives way to quiet, presumably because the eagle poses a threat to the gulls. This close of the poem reads as a final choice of the townspeople over those whirring and calling others. This would be in line with many interpretations of Williams's feelings about Europe, ranging from the reading of Dev Evans's return to America in *A Voyage to Paganry* as a "rejection of the European past" (Breslin 136–37) to Williams's own sometimes heated blanket rejections of it in letters to Pound. What interests me here, however, is what this dialogue, or perhaps failed dialogue, tells us about the

material conditions of American modernism. For someone like Williams, the townspeople were not the ideal audience – indeed, Flossie has attested to his work often being misunderstood by the people in Rutherford. At the same time, there is no denying that this singer is adamant about his position: he is not free to pass – is obligated to stay. These are the people to whom, and perhaps even about whom, he has been tasked with singing. If the eagle silences the gulls, and if the peaceful passage those gulls end up getting is proof of the possibility of the peaceful coexistence of a “Danse Russe”-kind of poet and more pedestrian townspeople, then perhaps all is well. But if the eagle, American emblem *par excellence*, really silences the gulls, then we are not very far from the situation of American censorship resulting in issues of *The Little Review* being confiscated by the US Post Office and volumes of *Spring and All* being confiscated by US customs because they were printed in France. In the presence of the threatening eagle, gulls know to keep silent. This sheds new light on the freedom or lack thereof of the poet singer in the poem. He knows how to navigate all of these interlocutors and, perhaps, monitors. While the gulls seem not to reply to his answers, he can decipher their calls. While he can do little to divert the eagle’s attention from the gulls, he knows how to avoid its eagle eye. And while the townspeople might need an extra round of lecturing before knowing to listen to his singing, he knows how to translate chosen material from that world beyond to them.

Russian linguist Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s term *dialogism*, which means, roughly, that all language is dialogically oriented towards a response and emerges through dialogue, is useful for thinking about this poem. “The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it,” Bakhtin writes in his classic essay “Discourse in the Novel,” adding that “every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (279–80).

The poem, almost ostentatiously monological in tone, nevertheless suggests dialogism as the underlying tenet of modernist poetry. Yes, the dialogue is one-sided or dysfunctional. Yes, communication seems at times broken. And yes, our singer seems more interested in producing didactic monologues. Nevertheless it seems clear that the acts of listening to calls from other places and formulating answers to that input, thus adjusting the poetic output depending on the input given, form part of an artistic practice where the dialogism of language is underscored. “I am late at my singing,” Williams’s speaker would exclaim in *Sour Grapes*’ “The Late Singer” (*CPI*, 137), which points to a sense of belatedness that includes the concept of coming late in history, of American literature coming after the English tradition. The singer’s answering the calls of the others *does* indicate that they dictate the terms of his output – his production is largely in response to their calls. But if we take Bakhtin to heart, it is clear that “every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (280). Thus those others are not so unaffected by this interaction as we might think. They might pass, rather than stay and engage, but their mere calling suggests that they have already been influenced by the response our singer offers.

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