

W. B. Yeats' Poem 'When You Are Old and Gray...': A Deconstructionist Study

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Abstract:

Deconstruction is associated with the writings of Jacques Derrida, especially his earlier publications from the 1960's where he employs the term. As a Post- structuralist, Derrida's rise to prominence was asserted by the publication of the three books in the following year (translated as Speech and Phenomena, Of Grammatology and Writing and Difference). It is significant to note that all of these books are on philosophical rather than literary topics, but Derrida's method invariably brings to the fore the highly detailed 'Deconstructive' works and again after borrowing these Deconstructive method have been used by critics in the reading of literary text.

Key words: W. B. Yeats, deconstruction, 'When You Are Old and Gray...'

Deconstruction is associated with the texts of Jacques Derrida, especially his earlier publications from the 1960's where he employs the term Deconstruction. To quote Derrida,

... deconstruction is not a doctrine; it's not a method, nor is it a set of rules or tools; it cannot be separated from performatives... on the one hand, there is no applied deconstruction: But on the other hand, there is nothing else. Since deconstruction, doesn't consist in a set of theorems axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods. If Deconstruction,

then, is nothing by itself, the only thing it can do to apply, is to be applied, to something else, not only in mere than one Language, but with something else. There is no Deconstruction, Deconstruction has no specific object... Deconstruction cannot be applied. So we have to deal with this aporia, and this is what Deconstruction is about." (Derrida 217-18)

Derrida's practice consists chiefly of his strategy of analyzing and dismantling texts or sometimes parts of texts in order to reveal their inconsistencies and inner contradictions. Being more technical one may say that the soul of deconstruction is aporia. Deconstruction is based on the concept of aporia which appears in logic and rhetoric. Aporia has been used by Derrida in the weak and strong forms and whether it is Plato, Levi Strauss or Rousseau, he has deconstructed the main concept of these authors using the concept of aporia. One may trace an aporatic situation in W.B Yeats' famous poem "When You Are Old and Gray...". The paper offers a deconstructionist reading of Yeats' Short Poem "When You are old. This reveals how the unity between the symbol and symbolized is broken down and at once driven to destabilize meaning instead of establishing them. As deconstruction demands close and careful reading, the subsequent stanza reveal the logical gaps, ambiguities, conflicting and contradictory aspects of the poem.

It is Important to note on Derrida's most celebrated statement from his books *Of Grammatology* 'There is nothing outside the text.' The inadequate notion of interpretation has been called by Derrida as a 'doubting commentary'. Since it makes an effort to reconstruct a pre-existing, a non-textual reality (of what the poet did or thought). The text must be produced after a critical reading since there is nothing behind it for reconstruction. Obviously therefore, the reading has to be deconstructive rather than reconstructive in this sense. Derrida famously argues:

“Reading...can't legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place could have taken place, outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general ... There is nothing outside of the text.”

(*Of Grammatology*, 158)

Deconstruction has been defined as applied post-structuralism. Terry Eagleton refers to this as 'reading against the grain' or 'reading the text against itself' One of the oft –quote definition of deconstructionist reading has been given by Barbara Johnson in the *Critical Differences*,

‘Deconstruction is not synonymous with ‘destruction’. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word ‘analysis’ which etymologically means ‘to undo’.....The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text.

(*The Critical Differences* 5)

J. A Cuddon, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, asserts that in deconstruction :

“a text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be sayingit may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying may different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single ‘Stable’ meaning. Thus a text may ‘betray’ itself.”

Derrida has made use of the both kinds of aporia when there is a switch over from one style to another, one finds aporia. He has criticised ‘logocentric’ approach of Plato by pointing to this kind of switchover from logic to mythology. Strong forms of aporia is to be found in logic.

II

The words *aporia* and *aporetic* figure significantly and frequently in the writings of Derrida. Originally in the Greek *aporia* involves doubt, perplexity and that which is impassable. Niall Lucy in his *Derrida Dictionary (2004)* opens his entry on *aporia* with the following definition: “*aporia*, a Greek term denoting a logical contradiction, *aporia* is used by Derrida to refer to what he often calls the “blindspots” of any metaphysical argument.

Aporia is the technical term applied to logical or rhetorical perplexities, impassable difficulties, logical paradoxes and puzzlements. When perceived in relation to deconstruction of the poem, *aporia* demarcates a point where a text exhibits deconstructionist tendencies as this distance itself and undermines its own rhetorical foundations. The soul of deconstruction is *aporia*.

The Oxford Dictionary avers that *aporia* is “a serious perplexity or insoluble problem”. (2006) Glossary of Literary and Theoretical Terms defines *aporia* as a way of referring to those insoluble doubts and hesitations which are thrown up by the Reading of Text. (205) Routledge Dictionary of Literary terms introduces the term under deconstruction stating that “the *aporia* is built in deconstruction, as it were; but the resistant texts go further and begin their own critique (2008).

Nicholas Royle in his book on Derrida observes that “*Aporia* is loosely a rhetorical term for ‘doubt’ or difficulty in choosing but more precisely it means a sort of absolute blockage, “A No Way”. He also talks of two senses of *aporia*-weak and strong.

Peter Barry in his chapter on *Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction* suggests that the term ‘*aporia*’ means an impasse, and designates a kind of knot to the text which cannot be unraveled or solved because what is said is self contradictory....The *aporia*, though, a textual knot which resists disentanglement ... as contradictions, paradoxes shifts.” (75-16)

Julian Walfreys in an essay Deconstruction, What Remains Unread states:

“The Language is found falling into the ruins it already is and that which remains of Language is the experience in this attempt at definition of the aporetic.

To quote Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy “Deconstruction preserves the critical spirit of Enlightenment thought while questioning its more dogmatic or complacent habits of belief. It does so primarily through the close reading of philosophical and other texts and by drawing attention to the moments of ‘aporia’ (unresolved tension or conflict) that tend to be ignored by mainstream exegetes (196)

Deconstruction pursues a more complex and critical path examining the text of philosophy with an eye to their various blindspots and contradictions (196)

Significantly therefore, Derrida cites the inherent contradictions at work in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s use of the words, culture and nature by demonstrating that Rousseau’s sense of the self’s innocence (in nature) is already corrupted by the concept of culture (and existence) and vice- verse.

The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy uses the term aporia meaning ‘puzzle’ question for discussion, solution is typical of the elenchus in the early Socratic dialogues of Plato.

For a better understanding of the term one can turn to scholars on Derrida. Nicholas Royle in his book indicates that “aporia is loosely a rhetorical term for doubt or difficulty in choosing but more precisely it means a sort of absolute blockage, “a No Way.” He also talks of two sense of aporia. Julian Wolfrey in his essay “Deconstruction What Remains Unsaid” states “The Language is found falling into the ruins it already is and that which remained of language is the experience in this attempt at definition of the aporetic.”

On the basis of definitions mentioned above one may say that aporia designates a kind of knot in the text that cannot be

disentangled as this is may be contradictions, paradoxes or shifts.

III

The Central aporia of W. B. Yeats' poem, *When You Are Old* reveals a contradiction and this may be called "Derrida's most typical Deconstructive moves." (Christopher Norris 19)

According to Norris deconstruction is the vigilant seeking out of those 'aporia' blindspots or moments of self – contractions where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it is nonetheless constrained to mean." (19)

As deconstruction is based at verbal level. The opening stanza of the poem foregrounds a graphic anticipation of the beloved's old body- an image which can spell disaster before a reader. Old age and death form a major theme in the world poetry but they are an anathema to love – poetry.

When you are old and gray and full of sleep
And nodding by the fire, take down this book
And slowly read." (32)

The first stanza symbolically deals with the youth and beauty of the beloved as inscribed in the book poetry written by the poet. It is bit to remember that Yeats was steadfast and constant in his love for Maud Gonne, a beautiful Irish patriot, since 1889 he had seen her as his muse and object of desire but repeatedly Maud rejected his proposal of marriage.

...and dream of the soft look,
your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;
How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true;
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.
And bending down beside the glowing bars,
murmur a little sadly how love fled ,

And faced upon amid a crowd of stars."
(*The Collected Poems* 32)

The poet talks of the youth – the physical beauty of the girl- soft look of the eyes and their shadows deep. In the second stanza he admires her 'glad grace' and uses the word 'beauty' in the physical sense. Then suddenly he switches over to soul, which travels like a pilgrim in the body and does not undergo changes. The knot gets further disentangled when the lover says that he also loved 'the sorrows of your changing face'. On the one hand, the poet talks of the youth and physical beauty of the girl, on the other hand he talks of the 'pilgrim soul'. The phrase 'glad grace' suggests divine gift and glad implies a notable contrast between many lovers of physical beauty and one lover (W. B. Yeats himself) who loved the 'pilgrim soul'. The lover slogged with her in moment of sadness, also, when her bright face was overcast by shadows.

The lover boldly asserts that he loves the soul of the girl but what he manifestly seems to describe is the physical charm of the girl. This is the central aporia- a textual knot and the unbridgeable gulf in the thought of the poem. This has been seen a purely verbal level.

IV

It is not very difficult to pinpoint how the poet may love a soul. Because another issue is the word 'soul' itself. When viewed in postmodern philosophy, one finds that soul is 'contrast' 'soul' has been replaced with 'self' and self is a fictional object rather than a real entity.' Therefore, in the poem, the entire edifice of love cracks down like a pack of cards.

The final stanza, while trying to raise the mood to a very high level, simply underscores meanings that one did not expect in the opening of a poem about the glory of love.

The second stanza switches over to the soul and that gives a clue to deconstruction. It is worthwhile to pay more attention to

the concept of soul. Only God is capable of loving souls. But for human beings some physical spot in the body is absolutely necessary to create the feeling of love. W. B. Yeats himself has stated clearly in the poem 'For Anne Gregory':

“Never shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured,
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone,
And not your yellow hair.”
(W. B. Yeats, *Collected poems* 208)

The next stanza puts forth another argument:

‘But I can get a hair dye,
And set such colour there,
Brown or black or carrot,
That young men in despair,
May love me for myself alone,
And not my yellow hair.

In the final stanza the speaker comes with an answer and that is an *aporia* of the poem 'When You Are Old,

I heard an old religious man but yesternight declare,
That he had found a text to prove that only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone,
And not your yellow hair.”
(*Collected Poems* 208)

The poet tries to distinguish himself from the other lovers because he loved the soul not the body. The poet himself in another poem 'for Anne Gregory' has created the contradiction. Only God can distinguish between good and bad souls, beautiful and ugly souls but mortal beings require a mark of beauty.

Here 'aporia' has been used in a strong sense. This reminds one of how Derrida deconstructs Plato to his reading of Plato's dialogue the *phaedrus*. Plato takes recourse to an exotic mythology in order to explain why writing threatens the

interest of morality and truth. To quote Christopher Norris, "What is required of a genuinely deconstructive reading is the patient, meticulous working through of those cardinal opposition which define the very nature and limits of the Plato's thought."

The main problem, therefore is the claim that one lover (W. B. Yeats himself) loved the soul. In traditional view, one cannot talk of the soul as child, adult or old. These terms are applied to the body and not to the soul. The position of lover (W. B. Yeats) rests on the claim that he loved the soul of the lady. In traditional view, the soul travels through the body but is not affected by it.

Another controversial matter is concerned with the the word 'soul'. In the introduction to the book postmodern spiritual practices Paul Allen Miller quotes 'Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault while tracing out the genealogies of the self because the thinkers are the most influential trinity of the postmodernist thought.

To quote,

"The soul, such as we still manipulate it and such as we are still encumbered by it, the notion, the image of the soul that we have and which was not stirred up out of the succession of all the waves of our traditional heritage, the soul that is our concern in the Christian tradition, this soul has an apparatus, as an armature, as a metallic stem in its interior, is the by product of Socrates' madness for immortality, we live with it still."

(Jacques Lacan 1)

As a minimum, you know what I am talking about and put yourself accord with it as best as you are able with this economy, I mean from Socrates to Freud and beyond, all the way to us understand and not. (Jacques Derrida 45)

The "essay" which must be understood as the attempt to modify oneself in the game of truth and not as a simple appropriation of others for purposes of communication- is the

living body of philosophy, if at least, it is still now what it was in the past, that is to say an "askesis" an exercise of the self in thought". (Foucault, Michel 15) "Hume in Bundles Theory of Mind, has already doubted the existence of self. According to *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* the enduring self is then a fiction, or a figment of the imagination." (49) Again this has been further elaborated:

"A tempting metaphor is that from individual experiences a self 'constructed,' perhaps as a fictitious focus of the narrative of one's life that one is inclined to give." (49-50)

As the new criticism is also based on close reading, it is fit to draw a distinction between the deconstructionist reading and the new critical practices. Whereas the new critical practices focused to show the unity beneath apparent disunity, the deconstructionist readings focused to show the reading with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions in the text.

The ultimate analysis, therefore reveals that any other like text is unique and singular to the text it reads. Such readings may be possible by close reading. The poem contains a marked aporia that can only be disclosed but not resolved by analysis.

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