

A Deconstructive Reading of W.B. Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium” and William Blake's “London”

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Abstract

This paper examines W.B. Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium” (1927) and William Blake's “London” (1794) from a deconstructive critical perspective. Though the two poems belong to two different ages in the history of English poetry—the former is modern while the latter romantic—both can be quintessential examples of deconstructive criticism.

The paper begins by discussing the meaning and significance of deconstruction in modern critical theory. It reveals to the reader an overview of deconstruction as a theory of reading texts. The paper, moreover, proceeds to examine how deconstruction can illuminate the above-mentioned poems by analysing their verbal contradictions in terms of meaning and structure. Under the scrutiny of deconstruction, these characteristics ultimately uncover the instability of literary language and meaning. This deconstructive reading of the two texts will allow the reader to gain a better understanding not only of the two poems but also of deconstruction as a literary theory.

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I am not sure that deconstruction can function as a literary method as such. I am wary of the idea of methods of reading. The laws of reading are determined by that particular text that is being read. This does not mean that we should simply abandon ourselves to the text, or represent or repeat it in a purely passive manner. It means that we must remain faithful, even if it implies a certain violence, to the injunctions of the text. These injunctions will differ from one text to the next so that one cannot prescribe one general method or reading. In this sense deconstruction is not a method.

Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other", 124.

Sentences of the form 'Deconstruction is so and so' are a contradiction in terms. Deconstruction cannot by definition be defined, since it presupposes the definability or, more properly, 'undecidability' of all conceptual or generalizing terms. Deconstruction, like any method of interpretation, can only be exemplified, and the examples will of course all differ.

J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then*, 231.

The above-mentioned quotes testify to the contradictory responses of critics and theorists alike concerning the nature of deconstruction. The quotes also suggest the different perspectives deconstruction may elicit. Unable to make up his mind about the nature of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida comes to the conclusion that deconstruction is not a method of textual reading. Similarly, Miller suggests that deconstruction cannot be defined simply because it is undecidable. He agrees, however, that deconstruction is "a method of interpretation", or rather textual interpretation. Yet Derrida's and Miller's quotes reveal the complex nature of not only deconstruction but also of language itself. Naturally a thing is defined by what it is. Though Derrida suggests that

“deconstruction is not a method” of reading, this can be considered a definition in itself, albeit a definition by what deconstruction is not. Miller, on the other hand, gives a definition of deconstruction by what it is: a method of interpretation that can only be exemplified.

Though “deconstruct” and “deconstruction” may embody negative connotations, “deconstruction” has lately gained currency since it very often permeates fields as diverse as architecture, theology, and geography. Yet the use of deconstruction in a variety of contexts could be quite problematic. On the one hand, it is difficult to define “deconstruction” because, as Gregory Jay points out, “deconstruction has now become an indeterminate nominative”.¹ This statement suggests that the difficulty associated with deconstruction stems from a problem of reference. That is, it is difficult to decide what it refers to. On the other hand, if the assumptions of deconstruction are correct, deconstruction is then an uncertain term. That is, if deconstruction assumes that all terms are unstable, then this must apply to deconstruction as well. However, we always attempt to explain deconstruction anyway, despite the fact that some points in the text cannot be explained.

Deconstruction was first coined by Jacques Derrida, one of the pioneering figures who have inexorably exposed the uncertainties of using language, and he is definitely the most important figure in the issue of deconstruction. The basis of deconstruction emerges from Derrida’s argument that people usually express their thoughts in terms of binary oppositions. For example, they may describe an object as white but not black, or masculine and therefore not feminine, true and not false. Derrida then provided his well-known theory that the signifier (i.e. the word) and the signified (i.e. its reference) have an arbitrary and random, rather than a straightforward and clear-cut, relationship. The function of

¹ Gregory S. Jay, *America the Scrivener: Deconstruction and the Subject of Literary History*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), xi.

deconstruction is to unravel the inconsistencies of language most outstandingly by highlighting the contradictions embedded in a text. In so doing, it demonstrates how a text destabilizes itself, thus undermining its fundamental premises.

Deconstructing a text seeks to unravel the struggle between signifiers and signifieds. As Barbara Johnson suggests, "The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself"². Johnson observes that there is organization in deconstruction, and that the text is weaved out of clashing forces that could be the basis of deconstruction. In addition, for Jonathan Culler, "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies"³. This process of uncovering the various contradictions in any given text is possible since meaning is always debatable and/or unstable. There is always a gap between the reader and the text's assumptions.

Yet we are fascinated with the way deconstruction uncovers the text when we come to one of its dead ends. For most knowledgeable deconstructionists, however, deconstruction is not so much a method the purpose of which is to eliminate the meaning of a text inasmuch as it is a technique used in order to enhance the various meanings a text or a reader may (re)produce. In this sense, rather than making us accept specific assumptions about a given text, deconstruction helps us question our positions and statements thoroughly, even encouraging us to read texts against themselves or against the grain.

2 Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 5.

3 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 86.

Deconstruction has so much to do with the New Criticism school. Like the New Criticism, a deconstructive critical reading of any text will overlook the author's intention and the reader's response in favour of a better understanding of the text in question. In his seminal study *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), Cleanth Brooks provides a New Critical reading of Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927). In his analysis of the poem's various premises, Brooks spots some of the tensions or oppositions in the poem: "One seems to celebrate 'natural' beauty, the world of becoming; the other, intellectual beauty, the world of pure being."⁴ Brooks observes that the world of "becoming" contradicts that of "being", and the world of "natural" beauty contradicts that of "intellectual" beauty. To this one can add other tensions between "here" and "Byzantium", "ageing" and "timelessness". In the first stanza, the speaker, who appears to be an old man, views himself in opposition to nature and the new-born aspects of natural life:

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 —Those dying generations—at their song,
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.⁵

The title of the poem suggests another tension. The speaker yearns to see another country, Byzantium (modern Istanbul). The word "That" could possibly refer to the speaker's/ poet's own country (possibly Ireland). So the first line oscillates between two different places, and the speaker seems to favour one over the other. Since he is now one of "Those dying

⁴ See Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1947), 186.

⁵ See *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 163.

generations", the speaker prefers to travel to Byzantium. The last two lines suggest that he views himself among "Monuments of unageing intellect". His body is ageing; his mind is not.

In the second stanza, the speaker embarks on a spiritual journey to Byzantium in order to revive his spirit. He contrasts his spirit with "gold mosaic", "artifice", and "hammered gold". In the context of the poem, these elements are viewed as works of art. Commenting on the speaker's "prayer", which begins in the third stanza (where the speaker asks the "sages" to "come from the holy fire" to gather him "Into the artifice of eternity"), Brooks suggests that the word "artifice" solves the contradiction between "nature" and "art":

The word 'artifice' fits the prayer at one level after another: the fact that he is to be taken *out of nature*; that his body is to be an artifice hammered out of gold; that it will not age but will have the finality of a work of art. (Brooks, 188-89)

Yeats transcends the finality of death and ageing by imagining the body "hammered out of gold", thus becoming a work of art. However, Brooks argues that the word "artifice" complicates matters:

But 'artifice' unquestionably carries an ironic qualification too. The prayer, for all its passion, is a modest one. He does not ask that he be gathered into eternity—it will be enough if he is gathered into the 'artifice of eternity'. The qualification does not turn the prayer into mockery, but it is all-important: it limits as well as defines the power of the sages to whom the poet appeals. (Brooks, 189)

Brooks indicates that the word "artifice" unifies the various contradictions but also carries an ironic connotation. Brooks suggests that Yeats is not interested in eternity but in the "artifice of eternity" which means that he enjoys art because it is transcendental. Brooks finds it difficult, however, to answer the question: "To which world is Yeats

committed? Which does he choose? The question is idle... Yeats chooses both and neither” (Brooks, 186-87). This state of indeterminacy indicates the various tensions critics such as Brooks find in the poem. Brooks then argues that

The irony ... is directed, it seems to me, not at our yearning to transcend the world of nature, but at the human situation itself in which supernatural and natural are intermixed—the human situation which is inevitably caught between the claims of both natural and supernatural. The golden bird whose bodily form the speaker will take in Byzantium will be withdrawn from the flux of the world of becoming. But so withdrawn, it will sing of the world of becoming—‘Of what is past, or passing, or to come’. (Brooks, 189-190).

Here Brooks suggests that this “intermixture” could be the force that unifies the poem’s various oppositions and contradictions such as the natural and the supernatural. The speaker will take the form of a golden bird in Byzantium, and so the bird will become transcendental when it sings “Of what is past, or passing, or to come”. The poem deconstructs itself through these binary oppositions. Indeed, Yeats’s ideology is manifest when he makes the symbols of the poem (such as the golden bird) represent a timeless and everlasting world.

Furthermore, for some critics Yeats does not resolve the poem’s contradictory meaning. According to Lawrence Lipking,

the elementary polarities that seem to provide its [the poem’s] frame—the dialectic of ‘that country’ and Byzantium, of young and old, of time and timelessness, of body and soul, above all of nature and art—do not hold up under a careful reading ... When the speaker claims that “Once out of nature I shall never take/ My bodily form from any natural thing,” he seems to ignore the blatant fact that

every bodily form must be taken from nature, whether the form of a bird or simply the golden form embodied by an artist.⁶

Lipking admits that there are polarities in the poem but these polarities do not cohere probably because they are so different. The use of the word "polarities" suggests a group of irresolvable contradictions in the poem. Lipking finds a contradiction in Yeats's lines that it is impossible to be taken out of nature and remain in nature at the same time. Sturge Moore wrote once to Yeats that "a gold-smith's bird is as much nature as a man's body," especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies"⁷. In fact, art seems already to be present in the world of nature, which is described so artfully in the first line of the fourth stanza. Thinking probably of T.S. Eliot's "unreal city" in *The Waste Land*, Lipking argues that both the country and Byzantium "are equally unreal; they acquire significance only by being contrasted with each other" (Lipking, 433). Yeats does not elaborate on "That" country, and its presence is not strongly felt in the poem because it is absent. "That" country is mentioned in the first line only to be contrasted with Byzantium, the poetic city of the mind to which the speaker is sailing. Yet Yeats succeeds in creating a virtual reality through the power of imagination. Perhaps through symbolism and dream vision the two contradictory cities—"That country" and "Byzantium"—can be united: "For Yeats the gilded, hieratic Byzantine empire symbolised the perfection of the distanced, crafted, formal art he aspired to, the place where art and spiritual life become one"⁸. This suggestion is an example of how most readers may respond to the poem. The reader is encouraged to unite these oppositions which, from a deconstructive point of view, defer meaning.

6 See Lawrence Lipking, "The Practice of Theory" in *Literary Theory in Praxis*. (ed.) Shirley Staton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 432-33.

7 Quoted in Lipking, 433.

8 See Antony Gray's introduction to *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, x.

In William Blake's "London" (1794), there are contradictions in the speaker's presentation of a unique vision of the city. In the first line, the word "charter'd" is repeated to emphasize the idea that the Thames river has become a private property owned or rented out by the rich:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

Obviously, there is a contradiction in the idea that the rich who charter the city and its river are the same people who contribute to the city's destruction, weakness, and anguish. The repetition of the word "charter'd" is also symptomatic of the hopelessness of the speaker and how the poor are being manipulated and oppressed. The word "each" suggests multiple, chartered streets. The various repetitions in the poem (such as the word "mark") call attention to the poem's structure and its role in the overall meaning of the poem. In deconstruction, which emerged out of structuralism and formalism, structure is of paramount significance. As J. Hillis Miller points out, "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently-solid ground is no rock, but thin air."⁹ Thus any deconstructive approach to the poem will definitely look at the poet's choice of words and the overall structure of the poem.

In *The Pursuit of Signs*, Jonathan Culler points out that there is a parallelism in the third stanza: "The Church will be an oppressor of the sweep as the Palace is an oppressor of the soldier."¹⁰ Culler also suggests that there is a "semantic density" in the word "appals" which refers to a contradiction in meaning, because it means "to darken" and so the church

9 J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" *Georgia Review* 30 (1976), 34.

10 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. (London: Routledge, 2001), 78.

is supposed to "sweep" rather than darken (Culler, 2001, 80). No critic, Culler suggests, takes the statement that the chimney sweeper's cry appals the church at face value (Culler, 2001, 70).

The second point that Culler makes about the structure of the poem relates to what Culler calls an "*aletheic reversal*: first a false or inadequate vision, then its true or adequate counterpart" (Culler, 2001, 76). In the second stanza Blake shifts from a series of statements beginning with "every" to more specific ones related to the church and the soldier. The idea of the "mind-forg'd manacles" serves as a metaphor to the structure of the poem, where the speaker is unable to free himself verbally from the shackles imposed upon his mind. The speaker of the poem hears "the sweeper's cry", "the soldier's sigh", and "the harlot's curse". This poetic structure refers to parallel meanings, but there are problems that result from this juxtaposition. This juxtaposition does not ultimately lead to meaning; it refers to a contradiction. And so the reader is encouraged to ask the following question: is it the Church, the Palace, or the Marriage that produces what Blake calls "The mind-forg'd manacles"? Though Blake mentions "The mind-forg'd manacles" in the second stanza, the third and fourth stanzas become a manifestation of this momentous phrase.

Blake's "London" offers multiple perspectives and this is what makes the speaker's position quite ambiguous. Within the context of the poem, the speaker seems to be both an observer and observed. He comments on the scene, but he is also part of what he observes. He is a vulnerable citizen suffering from the imperfections of the industrial system which Blake holds responsible for the problems of the city. By "The mind-forg'd manacles" Blake probably means oppression. Enslaved by the rich and the government, people's minds and bodies become the epicentre of the whole poem. The speaker witnesses "marks of weakness" and "marks of woe" in "every face" he encounters. The poem's repetitive structure indicates that the speaker is trapped in a vicious circle, unable to

break his own “mind-forg’d manacles”. Thus the “mind-forg’d manacles” can be seen as the poem’s “aporia”, to use Jacques Derrida’s popular term in deconstructive criticism. This term literally means an *impasse*, designating the moment when the text reaches a kind of knot which cannot be unravelled or solved because what is said is apparently self-contradictory.¹¹

Arguably, the idea of the “marriage hearse” in the poem’s last line is another example of “aporia”. As Peter Barry points out, “For the deconstructionist...exposing contradictions or paradoxes might involve showing that the feelings *professed* in a poem can be at odds with those *expressed*.”¹² The poem deconstructs itself through contradictions. Within the context of the poem, “marriage hearse” is ideally what the whole poem was aiming to reach. It is possibly the most devastating effect of the governmental, industrial system. The expression, however, is contradictory, since it seeks to show how marriage – a sacred institution in eighteenth-century Britain – becomes lethal and devastating. It refers literally to how the groom will pass a venereal disease to his wife as a result of his sexual or physical contact with street prostitutes. Thus, the newly-wed couples, who are supposed to give birth to new lives, are going to their graves or are going to beget unhealthy children. For Blake, and of course for the inhabitants of London, this is the utmost dreadful experience one can ever witness. Consequently, the couple’s experience acutely represents the poem’s vision of London as a harsh and desperate urban space.

In conclusion, we have seen how the two poems can be approached from a deconstructive point of view. A deconstructive reading of the two poems requires moving beyond individual phrases in order to have a

11 For a detailed overview of “aporia” see Julian Wolfreys, *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 19-24.

12 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd edn. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 77.

wider perspective on the poems. Deconstructionists have to be aware of the text's shifts or breaks that may eventually create instabilities in attitude and meaning. At the verbal level, a close reading of the text will highlight its paradoxes and contradictions, a reading against the grain, in order to reveal how the "signifiers" may clash with the "signifieds".

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