# Poetry and Literary Theory: A Critical Reading of three Poems Using Deconstruction

## Dr. Bassel Almasalmeh*

## Abstract

This paper examines three poems using Derrida's theory of deconstruction. These poems are Andrew Marvell's "The Definition of Love" (1681), William Wordsworth's "After-thought" (1820), and Emily Dickinson's "A Thought Went Up My Mind Today" (1891). By examining the *differential* and the *deferential* nature of language, this paper highlights the multiple contradictions in these poems, and thus they can be considered quintessential examples of what we call deconstructive criticism.

Providing the reader with an overview of deconstruction as a "method" of reading texts, this paper discusses the problems we encounter in defining "deconstruction" in modern critical theory. The paper, moreover, examines how deconstruction can illuminate the above-mentioned poems by analysing their verbal and linguistic contradictions which the texts yield in their meanings and structures. Under the scrutiny of deconstruction, these characteristics ultimately uncover the instability of literary language and meaning. Yet the aim of this deconstructive reading is to allow the reader gain a better understanding of these poems and deconstruction as a literary theory or method.

1 Department of English – Faculty of Arts and Humanities – Damascus University

*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", 173-174.

*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 concludes that deconstruction is not a method of textual reading. Similarly, Miller argues that deconstruction cannot be defined simply because it is undecidable. He agrees, however, that deconstruction is "a method of interpretation", or rather a textual interpretation. Yet Derrida's and Miller's quotes reveal the complex nature of not only deconstruction but also of language. Naturally a thing is defined by what it is. Though Derrida suggests that "deconstruction is not a method" of reading, this statement could be 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"[2]. This statement implies 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 elements 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, masculine and therefore not feminine, or 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 or random, rather than a straightforward and clear-cut, relationship. The function of deconstruction is to unravel the inconsistencies of language most outstandingly by highlighting the contradictions embedded in a text. In doing so, 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 de-construction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by careful teasing out of warring forces of signification

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

within the text itself"[3]. 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. 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".[4] 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.

Deconstruction has so much to do with the New Criticism school. Like the New Criticism school, 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 a given text. Andrew Marvell is one of the Metaphysical poets who flourished in the first half of the seventeenth century. Published posthumously, "The Definition of Love" is a metaphysical love poem that appeared in a collection of poems entitled *Miscellaneous Poems* (1681):

My Love is of a birth as rare
As 'tis, for object, strange and high;
It was begotten by Despair
Upon Impossibility.

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3  Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 5.
4 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 86.

Magnanimous Despair alone
Could show me so divine a thing,
Where feeble Hope could ne'er have flown
But vainly flapped its tinsel wing.

And yet I quickly might arrive
Where my extended soul is fixed;
But Fate does iron wedges drive,
And always crowds itself betwixt.

For Fate with jealous eye does see
Two perfect loves, nor lets them close;
Their union would her ruin be,
And her tyrannic power depose.

And therefore her decrees of steel
Us as the distant poles have placed
(Though Love's whole world on us doth wheel),
Not by themselves to be embraced,

Unless the giddy heaven fall,
And earth some new convulsion tear,
And, us to join, the world should all
Be cramped into a planisphere.

As lines, so loves oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet;
But ours, so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.

Therefore the love which us doth bind,
But Fate so enviously debars,
Is the conjunction of the mind,
And opposition of the stars.

This poetic text is riven by linguistic contradictions and indeterminacies. The first stanza, for instance, presents the speaker's logic, or probably illogic, when he compares his love to "a rare birth" and an "object strange and high". This love is paradoxically "begotten by Despair" and based "Upon Impossibility". Attempting to define love, the poem reveals love's nature and limitations through this very definition. Like the Metaphysical poets and particularly John Donne, Marvell uses the language of mathematics and cosmology to achieve his purpose, which is the effort of defining an abstract concept such as love. Discussing the title of Marvell's poem, Rosalie Colie argues that

> "this definition of love is in fact a definition of not-love. A poem called a "definition" may be expected to be intellectual, or intellectually constructed; this poem is surely that .… [I]n this poem Marvell has turned a recognized genre on its head, by the simple means of reconsidering and reinterpreting its title. "[5]

Colie seems to pinpoint one of the complexities of Marvell's text by referring to the title which calls attention to its opposite or non-definition. Colie's idea that the text is calling for a reinterpretation of its title suggests the referential aspect of language and the reader's focus on the linguistic aspects of the poem. Paradoxically, the attempt of defining love becomes an attempt of defining the limitations of love through the poet's intellectualism and complex plan. Marvell does not simply inform the reader what love is but actually reconsiders its boundaries. Distinguished by its "rare birth", the speaker's love is different from any love the reader may expect or think of. Through this, Marvell *defers* the meaning of this different love to the end of the poem. By "defer" I mean that Marvell puts off or postpones the definition of love to the final stanza, where the speaker concludes that "Fate" envies the love that binds lovers together, and the only solution for them to be together is through the union of their minds. Thus, Marvell's definition of love is "the conjunction of the mind" and "the opposition of the stars". Paradoxically, the speaker concludes that minds can unite but bodies cannot.

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5 Rosalie Littell Colie, *My Echoing Song: Andrew Marvell's Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 44.

Another type of contradiction can be found in the second stanza where Marvell uses an oxymoron—a combination of two contradictory words "Magnanimous Despair", which again leads the reader to think of a paradox: how can despair "show him so divine a thing" when hope could not? This question denotes the metaphysical wit that was commonly used by poets in the seventeenth century. The cause of the poet's despair remains unknown. Does the poet feel despair because the lady he loves does not return his love? Or is it because she has a noble origin, as suggested by the use of "magnanimous", a word that means high-minded, generous, and noble. "Despair" seems to be the price the lover pays in a relationship of this sort. The speaker defines "Hope" as feeble (i.e. weak), like an angel that "flapped its tinsel wing". So the second stanza deconstructs itself by revealing that Marvell notes the presence of his emotion but it is in vain.

The third and fourth stanzas present the idea of "Fate" as the antithesis of "love". The speaker is unable to "arrive/ Where my extended soul is fixed". In other words, the speaker imagines his soul extending itself from his body and fixing itself in the lover. In the fourth stanza, the speaker appears to provide a conditional case in which love can be attained if "Fate" were not jealous. Fate, that is, will not allow the lovers to reach the perfection of love, and thus it will not permit them to unite. In addition, fate will come between the speaker and his beloved. The speaker seems to present his love from the platonic perspective where the ideal love cannot be achieved with fate standing in its way. Within the logic of the poem, the concept of "Fate" becomes the opposite of that of "love". This opposition, moreover, is reinforced by Marvell's use of poetic language. His use of literal and figural language draws a line between the literal meaning of love and the figural meaning of "fate" which he presents through the use of personification and hyperbole. "Fate" is personified as a jealous woman ready to disturb the state of harmony the two lovers feel towards each other.

The fifth and sixth stanzas present yet another paradox. The speaker suggests that he and his beloved are at opposite magnetic poles, and they become the centre whereby "Love's whole world" rotates. These poles can never touch or meet, for that will cause destruction or collapse.

Again, Marvell draws a line between literal and figurative meanings through the use of paradox, where the two lovers are imagined as earth with two opposite poles that can never meet.

The poet looks at love, in the seventh stanza, in terms of a geometrical image where the lovers' "perfect loves" run as parallel lines and so they will never actually meet. In Marvell's poetic vision, for the lovers to unite, heaven must go through a kind of upheaval that will make earth flat. Therefore, the lovers are destined to remain in parallel lines which will never intersect. They will extend infinitely but never cross. The speaker suggests, on the other hand, that imperfect loves that are imagined as oblique lines lack the spiritual love which he shares with his beloved. Implying that he and his beloved share a mental communication or interaction, the two lovers can only unite mentally and spiritually. Compared to stars that are similar, the lovers are paradoxically positioned at opposite ends. The text, then, deconstructs itself by implicitly referring to the idea that the lovers are both similar and different. It deconstructs itself, in addition, through the use of figurative and literal meanings. As Karla Araya points out, "[a]ny form of figurative language—metaphors, personifications, paradoxes, similes, …works deconstructively to re-create meaning"[6] The use of figures of speech help to enrich the poetic text with two levels of meanings. Since deconstruction is interested in the linguistic differences between literal and figurative meanings, the reader's attempt to deconstruct the text is seen also as an attempt to re-create meaning.

Thus, Marvell's poem can be read as a network of oppositions which reinforce textual meaning. According to Lynn Enterline, most of Marvell's poems can be seen as endeavors to draw a link between differences and similarities, between the inner world and the outer world. This link "is brought into conjunction with linguistic differences—the differences, and correspondences, between signifier and signified or

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6 See Karla Araya, "Deconstruction and Figurative Language: An Analysis of the Way Language Works", vol. 17, no. 1 *Revista Comunicacion* (July 2008), 37.

between literal and figural meaning."[7] The two loves are perfect but their love is irreconcilable. The similarities and differences are manifest in the imagery which the poet uses at the end of the poem where the image of conjunction suggests proximity and harmony, while the image of the "opposition of the stars" reveals that their love can never be fully realized.

William Wordsworth's "After-thought" (1820) presents another type of linguistic and structural oddities. The speaker addresses a river named Duddon which reminds him of his childhood memories:

I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,
As being past away.—Vain sympathies!
For, backward, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
I see what was, and is, and will abide;
Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;
The Form remains, the Function never dies;
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,
We Men, who in our morn of youth defied
The elements, must vanish;—be it so!
Enough, if something from our hands have power
To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,
Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent dower,
We feel that we are greater than we know.

To understand this poetic text, the reader must construct and deconstruct meaning out of the oppositions between past and present, permanence and transience, youth and old age. Paradoxically, the speaker indicates that he thought the river has passed away but discovered that the river is in fact everlasting. Using the river as a contrast between permanence and transience, the speaker indicates that the memory of the river is that it has passed away, but the true Duddon is eternal in his memory. So there are two levels of meaning involved here. What the text says literally is links

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7 See Lynn Enterline, *The Tears of Narcissus: Melancholia and Masculinity in Early Modern Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 152.

with what is meant metaphorically. The text, then, constructs binaries. In his seminal study of the semiotic register of the poem, Besbes notes that "the poet is contrasting two worlds: the world of essence (feelings, ideas and thoughts) to the world of physical entities (observable phenomena)", and that "the speaker is biased towards one of the two worlds"[8]. This bias is manifest in the speaker's use of Form and Function in the sixth line. The actual river is similar to Plato's idea of form which is superior to content. According to Plato, all beds, for example, are derived from form.

In the seventh line, moreover, the poet constructs a contrast through the use of the word "while". The speaker contrasts between men and art which is referred to in the expression "something from our hands". This artistic object could refer to a hand-made object, a poem, a painting or other creative works. The speaker argues that art will survive and serve the moral purpose of the younger generations, and in that sense the artist shares the eternity of the Christian afterlife. So the speaker suggests that men's art will survive them. The whole poem, in fact, can testify to Wordsworth's survival in the minds of generations. The text, then, deconstructs itself by presenting some binaries such as permanence and transience, form and content, function and existence, manhood and childhood. It appears to deconstruct the second items in these groups in favour of the first ones. Yet, arguably, poetic meaning is constructed out of this tension between the above-mentioned binaries. According to Kathleen Wheeler, "poetic writing is arguably the most advanced form of a self-deconstructing text."[9] A poem, that is, is like a text deconstructing itself. This happens because language is essentially figurative and creates a difference between what it says and what it means.

In "A Thought Went Up My Mind Today", Emily Dickinson tries to write down an experience of something abstract that the whole experience appears to be a kind of *déjà vu*:

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8 See Khaled Besbes, *Rehabilitating Literary Theory: A Practical Guide for the Critical and Semiotic Analysis of Poetry and Drama* (Boca Raton: BrownWalker Press, 2011), 167.

9 Kathleen Wheeler, *Explaining Deconstruction* (Chennai: Macmillan India Press, 1997), 49.

A thought went up my mind today
That I have had before,
But did not finish, – some way back,
I could not fix the year,

Nor where it went, nor why it came
The second time to me,
Nor definitely what it was,
Have I the art to say.

But somewhere in my soul, I know
I've met the thing before;
It just reminded me--'t was all--
And came my way no more.

In the first and second stanzas, the speaker acknowledges the presence of thought but finds that its origin and meaning are indeterminate. The speaker presents the idea that an unfinished thought crossed her mind before but could not know where and when. She adds that she could not figure out the cause of that thought and its nature, and doubts the very presence of the thought itself. The poem refers to the difficulty of expressing thoughts in words.

The thought that was presented in the first and second stanzas is defined by its reappearance in the last stanza. This is a *deferring* of the meaning from a Derridian perspective. The return of the idea, that is, marks the very existence of the idea itself. The word "Thing" in the last stanza, which describes the indeterminacy of the "Thing" that was mentioned in the first two stanzas, becomes actually a "no-Thing" in this case. In other words, the word "Thing" becomes a definition of this indeterminate and unfixed thought. Yet the speaker's inability to define a thought could be a thought in itself. Deferring the meaning till the last stanza, the text deconstructs itself by presenting a thought that appears to be a non-thought. There is a difference, however, between the word "thought" and "Thing". "Thought" is something abstract whereas "Thing" is concrete. Yet the question that poses itself is the following: How can a thought become a material object? Though the link between them remains unclear, the poem attempts to define the abstract through

the concrete, an issue that refers to a common linguistic difficulty encountered by many writers. After all, the speaker finds it obligatory to define the thought by calling it a "Thing" to affirm its existence.

In conclusion, we have examined three poems – Andrew Marvell's "The Definition of Love", William Wordsworth's "After-thought", and Emily Dickinson's "A Thought Went Up My Mind Today" – from a deconstructive point of view. This deconstructive reading requires examining individual phrases and structures, the words' connotations and denotations, in order to have a wider perspective on these poems. By deconstructing a text, the reader learns to read beyond the text's literal meaning to reveal new meanings. We have also seen that these poetic texts exhibit a set of tensions and oppositions. The difference between literal and figural meanings, for instance, helps the reader to construct and deconstruct textual meaning and thus come to a better understanding of the texts in question. However, due to the difficulty of placing deconstruction within a clear and definite framework, it is impossible to formulate a rule to be followed by researchers and students alike in their application of deconstruction. Rather, the application of deconstruction as a theory depends entirely on the nature of the chosen texts.

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