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## The (De)Centre Cannot Hold...: A Deconstructionist Study of W.B.Yeats' *The Second Coming*

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### Abstract:

The term Deconstruction is primarily related to Jacques Derrida and to his earlier publications from the 1960s in which this term is frequently employed. The three books which were published in the following year- *Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*, established Derrida as a prominent Poststructuralist. It is significant to find that,

"all these books are on philosophical rather than literary topics, but Derrida's

method invariably brings to fore the highly detailed 'Deconstructive' works and again after borrowing these Deconstructive method have been used by critics in the reading of literary text". (Dubey. "W.B.YEATS' Poem 'When You Are Old and Gray...' A Deconstructionist Study", 3484)

In this paper we are going to apply the Derridean Deconstructionist features to show how the text of 'The Second Coming' has inherent ruptures which lead to warring forces between its meaning, or meanings. For Derrida every single word is a text and a signifier, which upon interpretation lead to multiple meanings which are interconnected within a web of other texts, or signifiers. And it is these interpretations or meanings which on encountering one another lead to an indecisive dead-lock called 'aporia' ; a stage where the meaning, or meanings for a particular signifier can never be determinate and fixed. This aporia, as Derrida calls it so, is attained because of an underlying process of 'Difference' which means 'to differ' and 'to defer' simultaneously. All this process shows how each signifier is different from other interrelated signifiers, and simultaneously same with them. Same in the sense that each and every signifier within an interrelation holds a 'trace' of its interrelated signifiers. By 'trace', we mean that a particular signifier holds within itself an 'impact' of other signifiers connected to it. What we can sum up is that all this is a game of flux within words, texts, or say signifiers. Derrida calls this game of flux "a play", and in this paper we will try to highlight the format of this game in W.B. Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming'.

**Keywords:** W.B.Yeats, deconstruction, 'the (de)centre cannot hold...'

## I

Deconstruction comes from Derrida and to know what Deconstruction is we have to study what he says about it. Lata dubey quotes Derrida in her work mentioned in the abstract of this paper, where Derrida says,

...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. 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". (Dubey, 3484)

So, to reveal the inconsistencies and inner contradictions Derrida employs a practice which is chiefly based on his strategy of analyzing and dismantling texts or parts of texts. Technically speaking we can say that the driving energy of Deconstruction is aporia. Aporia as a concept comes from logic and rhetoric. But, Derrida uses it everywhere, he does not spare Plato, Levi Strauss or Rousseau, to deconstruct their main concepts. Derrida makes prophetic statements about concepts like aporia. In *Of Grammatology* when Derrida says, 'there is nothing outside the text', he is pointing towards a 'doubting commentary'. This 'doubting commentary' is the force that takes us to find the preexisting gaps within a text or signifier. And, it is within this commentary wherein we put the reconstructive interpretation of a text aside and unintentionally go for a Deconstructive reading. Derrida talks about all this as,

"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)

But we must remember that it is not the practice of Deconstruction which annihilates the basic structure of a text, rather it is the text itself with its preexistent ruptures. Let us quote Barbara Johnson here, who says,

"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)

On the basis of the above mentioned concepts, definitions and quotes let us find out this aporetic knot within the text of 'The Second Coming' by W.B. Yeats.

## II

This paper offers a deconstructionist analysis of 'The Second Coming', which brings forth a bifurcation, rather a mismatch, between a symbol and the symbolized, and thereby a destabilization of meaning takes place. A destabilization which occurs due to aporia. The first thing that attracted me towards the inception of a deconstructionist study of 'The Second Coming' is this stanza from another Yeatsian poem 'The Phases of the Moon',

"All thought becomes an image and the soul  
Becomes a body : that body and that soul  
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,  
Too lonely for the traffic of the world :  
Body and soul cast out and cast away  
Beyond the visible world."

In this Yeatsian stanza the central aporia is the interaction between 'body/soul', because in between them the play of Derridean 'difference' is on. We are not able to distinguish them as binaries. Their meanings are in a flux and so are our interpretations of these. The flux therein the above lines, rather signifiers, does not let us settle down. It points towards the make-up of signifiers and towards their indeterminate meanings which is always open. We are not able to give a clearcut demarcation between a body and a soul. Don't we find the two in an intermingling process, a process which is a play of the 'previous traces' and the 'present supplements'. It means this ;it suggests that; can't it be so; bla, bla,bla.... An aporetic dead-lock. We there within a variety, confused and helpless to go for a singularity of meaning. 'Language speaks us', had listened this statement long back, and then Mohit Chauhan in a famous Indian film sings a solo-'*jo bhi main kehna chahon, barbaad kare alfaaz mere, alfaz mere...*'(what I want to convey is being destroyed by my own words). This song makes us to understand the inherent slipperiness of words, or texts, which leads to aporia.

The aporia of W.B. Yeats poem 'The Second Coming' begins right from its title, which reveals a contradiction. As deconstruction is based at verbal and logical level, the title of this poem foregrounds a 'signification-disaster' before a reader. The title holds a "symbolism that partly belongs to the common cultural stock, but suddenly becomes enigmatic or incomprehensible"(G.Hough. *The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats*, 64) Here we find this title being equally enigmatic. Second Coming is,

"an example of the layering of symbolism that is common in Yeats' poetry. The phrase 'second coming' suggests to most Americans and Europeans the Christian usage, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ referred to in the Christian bible. The coming of Christ

to earth is associated with a vindication of all of the just and godly people and the establishment of Kingdom of God on earth, to most people a positive and hopeful sign. However, the title is also an example of Blake's contraries, since the poem actually describes the antithesis of the coming of Christ to earth, the coming of the antithetical future era's 'rough beast'. The poem presents the coming of the beast dispassionately. However, in most people the changing of the gyres and the coming of the beast engender an emotion contrary to the positive outlook of the Christian version. The title at first reading inspires hope and positive feelings and then

dashes those expectations as the reader realizes that the coming of Christ is not what the poem prophesises" (N.H. Fletcher."Yeats, Eliot and Apocalyptic Poetry", 2008, 24)

Then we move to the first line of the poem, 'Turning and turning in the widening gyre', which refers to the opposing historical gyres of Yeats' philosophy. A gyre is a conical geometrical figure which he employs in his philosophy. He deals with the gyre system in his book *A Vision :an Explanation of Life*. The idea of gyres is that history moves in cycles which are antithetical to each other. So,"

"the gyres of the poem represent these alternating cycles of civilization. As one gyre came to an end, the violence and the chaos then present in the world heralded the coming of the new gyre that would have a focus antithetical to that of the old. Thus the coming gyre would mean the end of the current civilization."(N.H.Fletcher, 23)

Once again we find an aporetic situation because Yeats wishes and predicts an end to the present civilization so that a new one comes into being. But, ironically Yeats' gyres show that this new civilization will finally lead us to the same catastrophic situation which Yeats is fed up of at present. So, the following lines which talk about this present tormenting situation will hold true for the new civilization also,

"The falcon cannot hear the falconer,  
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned: (1.2-6)

The central symbol that leads to this aporetic situation is the 'Centre' which is unable to hold things together, and after whose failure Yeats predicts the birth of a 'rough beast'. We find that Yeats is nullifying the role played by the centre because it is the centre whose inaction has let the falcon

wander 'uncontrolled' and 'anarchy loosed upon the world'. This is a chaos brought by the (de)centre. And, after inhaling this chaotic air for too long Yeats predicts a mysterious second coming of a 'rough beast', a beast who will destroy the existing civilization. This destruction will bring chaotic anarchy once again? This symbolic beast will pave way for the birth of a new civilization, but remember that it is a cyclic process. So, in this new civilisation, sooner or later the centre is bound to fail again. Harper and Hood in *A Critical Edition of Yeats' A Vision* write,

"a civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this it is like some great person, some Niobe who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry will not touch our sympathy. The loss of control over thought comes towards the end ;first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation- the scream of Juno's peacock".(180)

The above quoted lines also hint towards the chaotic role of anarchy, of the 'rough beast' and of the (de)centre. In both the antithetical civilizations where do we find the 'centre' holding things together all the time? Do we sense a centripetal force operative throughout the phases of a particular civilization ?The 'uncontrolled falcon' and an disfunctional 'centre' bring anarchy to the world. And, where this 'rough beast' is taking us does not need further mention. Yeats further says, 'the best lack all conviction ,while the worst are full of passionate intensity'. It is,

"an example of synecdoche since the words 'best' and 'worst' refer to the best and worst people. However, the lack of a specific referent for exactly what kind of people infers the question ; Are those people orators, politicians, rulers, or possibly authors ? Again, the lack of specificity contributes to the tension already present in the poem". (N.H.Fletcher, 24-25)

How we are going to interpret the 'best' and the 'worst' is quite aporetic. And when this aporia mingles with the aporia of 'surely the second coming is at hand...', the peak value of aporia in 'The Second Coming' is attained. As we have already discussed the enigmatic connotation of the phrase 'second coming', now we will try to find out who is coming. Is it a creature located 'somewhere in the sands of the desert' ; who is this 'rough beast' with 'lion body' and 'head of a man'; is it indicative of the strength and power of an intelligent creature ; or it represents a contrary. Is this 'gaze blank and pitiless as the sun' and the 'moving of slow thighs' symbolic of a creature that belongs to Nietzsche's Dionysian era. We have multiple interpretations and again an indeterminate situation to go for a singular solution.

And, finally the closing lines of this poem bring goose bumps on our body. '...its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?', pokes us to think where is this Yeatsean Bethlehem. Is it the Biblical place. Is it the 'desert' from where the 'rough beast' will come. Is it a literal place or a labyrinth. With this 'The Second Coming' as a poem is over but this deconstructionist reading has left it open for ever. We will not be able to close or restrict its reading now.

**Conclusion:**

So on the whole, we find this poem has turned out to be a labyrinth for us. This is aporia, and this is where a deconstructionist study of a text takes us by showing the ruptures that exist within it. Mr. W.B. Yeats meant something special by 'The Second Coming', but Deconstruction will not let him convey that in a straight forward manner.

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