

**A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF ROBERT
BROWNING’S POEMS, “PORPHYRIA’S LOVER,”
“THE LABORATORY,” AND “ONE WAY OF
LOVE”**

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Abstract

The approach to binary oppositions has long been evaluated in terms of the superiority or the inferiority of one of the concepts. In this respect, binary oppositions such as man/woman, reason/emotion, white/black, presence/absence, speech/writing, human/animal, culture/nature and the West/the East and dichotomous thinking have played a pivotal role in our perception of the world for a long time. However, deconstruction challenges this dichotomous approach, as it draws close attention to the controversial nature of such a dualistic outlook by highlighting the need to analyze numerous potential interpretations. A deconstructive reading can therefore reveal potential alternative explicit and implicit meanings in the literal and connotative sense. This study will, in this regard, present a brief insight into deconstruction, a school of literary criticism, and then render a detailed deconstructive reading of Robert Browning’s poems, “Porphyria’s Lover”, “The Laboratory,” and “One Way of Love.” This deconstructive reading will be conducted through specific references from these three selected poems and the relevant secondary sources in order to demonstrate how Browning challenges the traditionally established structure of such binaries. The ultimate aim will then be to illustrate the possibility of alternative multiple interpretations and to manifest the need for the formation of a non-binary future.

Keywords: Robert Browning, “Porphyria’s Lover,” “The Laboratory,” “One Way of Love,” deconstruction

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INTRODUCTION

Binary oppositions such as man/woman, reason/emotion, white/black, presence/absence, speech/writing and the West/the East and dichotomous thinking have played a pivotal role in our perception of the world for a long time. The first term, that is the transcendental signified, is privileged over the other, which causes the second term to be suppressed and oppressed by the first one. This system, which is based on dualities, has a center or an origin. In a similar vein, language, which is mostly patriarchal, also reflects the binary thinking. Deconstruction, however, challenges these binaries and the binary approach to the world. This study will, in this regard, present a brief insight into deconstruction and then render a deconstructive reading of the poems, "Porphyria's Lover", "The Laboratory," and "One Way of Love" by Robert Browning (1812-1189) through specific references from the poems and the relevant secondary sources in order to demonstrate how Browning challenges the traditionally established structure of such binaries, which will ultimately manifest the need for a non-binary future.

Deconstruction does not support the view that the first term in the binary opposition should be privileged over the second one; on the contrary, it argues that the second one is as important as the first one. It does not adopt "the concept of centered structure" (Derrida, 1985: 84). Therefore, it desires to erase the hierarchical order in the binaries so that there can be equality in the binary pairs, which can also make a non-hierarchical future possible. In relation to deconstruction, Tyson states that deconstruction has two purposes: to reveal the text's undecidability and the complex operations of the ideologies of which the text is created (2006: 259). As can be seen, it attaches importance to the operating ideologies and the existence of undecidability in the text since there can be various multiple interpretations. The text has its own ideology and due to ambiguity, different readings can be presented, which reflects the undecidability of the text.

Deconstruction argues that language is unstable, unfixed and slippery. Hence, it is not possible to reach an absolute meaning. It does not refer to concepts or things in the world, but only to the play of the signifiers of which language itself consists (Tyson, 2006: 252). The words differ from each other thereby leading always to the other signifiers. Therefore, meaning is always deferred, which is related to *différance*. Derrida explains *différance* as "the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences" (1982: 11). Apart from language being a slippery ground, the texts also undermine their own logic, on which Balkin comments as follows: "[B]ecause deconstruction seemed to show that all texts undermined their own logic and had multiple meanings that conflicted with each other, deconstruction could be used for the purpose of "trashing"—that is, showing that particular legal doctrines or legal arguments were fundamentally incoherent" (2010: 364). Texts in this respect deconstruct themselves and render various, multiple meanings that might be conflicting with each other.

Although it may seem that the first term is privileged in the binary at some points, it can be seen on a close reading that certain texts give equal importance to the second one. In this regard, it is possible to apply deconstructive reading and analysis to Browning's poems, "Porphyria's Lover", "The Laboratory" and "One Way of Love" in order to illustrate such multiple meanings. To start with, Browning who is a poet interested in "character portraiture when dealing with a figure" presents an unusual dramatic speaker in "Porphyria's Lover" (Bergman, 1980: 779). "Porphyria's Lover" as a dramatic monologue is about a couple, namely the speaker and his beloved, Porphyria who visits him in a stormy weather. Although she shows him fondness, he does not seem to be influenced by it. When she begins to talk about the obstacles she has overcome, he sees the burning passion in

her eyes. Accordingly, he says, "Porphyria worshipped me" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Line 33). Since the dramatic speaker does not want that moment to slip away, he wraps her hair around her neck and strangles her. After she dies, she becomes his toy as he plays with her dead body. The poem ends with the speaker's sentence: "...yet God has not said a word!" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Line 60).

The dramatic speaker tries to justify his act of killing Porphyria. He proposes the argument that she also wished to die: "So glad it has its utmost will, That all it scorned once is fled, And I, its love, am gained instead" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Lines 53-55). However, the moment the judging process starts, his identity as the murderer is revealed. He draws on language in order to conceal his secret, but the gaps in his speech give him way because the language he makes use of is unstable and unable to produce absolute meaning. Through this representation, it is possible to observe the reflection of the speaker's mind as expressed from his point of view. The dramatic speaker kills his beloved in order to catch the moment and to eternalize her; however, it does not become possible. He kills her and acts as if nothing has happened. Hawlin states that he is "not simply 'mad' in the sense of 'other', 'unknowable', 'satanic', [but he is] actually different from ourselves" (2002: 73).

The speaker is resembled to an artist by some critics. Accordingly, Hawlin points out that his wish to catch the moment and the beauty of the beloved is an "artist-like instinct," and he has a split, fragmented personality divided between "aesthetic perfection and sadistic desire" (2002: 74). On the one hand, he does not want her to wither, whereas on the other hand, he becomes responsible for her death, thereby accelerating her withering process. Although he "attempts to immortalize an otherwise fleeting beautiful instant," he turns into a murderer (Roberts, 1996: 38). Some interpretations of the poem focus on the dramatic monologue and the dramatic speaker by commenting on the experience of the speaker. However, it is also possible to apply deconstructive approach to the poem by revealing certain binary pairs in the poem and how the text actually deconstructs and challenges itself, which will be realized in the following part of this study.

The poem presents certain binary oppositions such as reliability/unreliability, clarity/ambiguity, life/death, exterior/interior, certainty/uncertainty, and God/man. The poem does not fully prioritize the first or the second term in the binary. The first terms are represented as privileged at times, whereas the second terms are privileged at other times in the poem. However, it is not easy to discern the gaps and subtleties because it requires close reading and meticulousness so that one can realize how the binary oppositions operate in the poem and what ideological implications they communicate.

In the poem, it is seen that these binary oppositions are deconstructed by the text itself. The dramatic speaker narrates what takes place from his perspective; therefore, the reader is provided and guided only with his gaze, which creates doubt and skepticism about his account. His narration creates the first binary opposition, that is exterior/interior. When the beloved is about to enter the cottage, it is raining and there is a strong wind. It is evident that "Porphyria knows her way through the storm to the cottage" (Jacobs, 1952: 8). The wind even vexes the lake, but the atmosphere changes with the arrival of Porphyria. As soon as she arrives, the reader is taken to the inside of the cottage, which is warm. Inside, her actions are described in detail: "Which done, she rose, and from her form, Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl, And laid her soiled gloves by, untied" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Lines 10-12). The stark contrast, binarism between the exterior and the

interior is strongly felt through the narration of the dramatic speaker who is obsessive and unreliable.

The speaker is not sure whether she certainly belongs to him or not. This doubt creates the binary opposition, certainty /uncertainty. He tells how much she loves him. She is represented as sexually hungry and most probably desires something with him, but he does not seem to be interested in that. He is in a kind of crisis, which causes him to question whether she completely belongs to him or not. In this respect, he says: "Murmuring how she loved me---she, Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour, To set its struggling passion" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Lines 21-23). In these lines, she is presented as belonging to him; however, through certain words, it is strongly implicated that he is actually not sure about its certainty:

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud, at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
[...]
That moment she was mine, mine, fair
Perfectly pure and good (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Lines 31-33; 35-37).

His words such as "at last," "surprise," and "mine" demonstrate that he feels doubtful about her love and how much she belongs to him. Here, it is possible that she might not love him as he narrates since the reader does not see Porphyria's perspective and this poses an obstacle to learn whether what he narrates is correct or not. As can be seen, the text deconstructs itself through the binaries that it has constructed.

Furthermore, his account creates a binary opposition between life and death in the poem. Although life as the transcendental signified seems to be the privileged one at some points in the poem, it turns out that death is represented as something peaceful not painful or sad. Porphyria as a lively, passionate girl has passion for him. She turns even the cold cottage into something warm. She accosts him, probably in order to have a sexual experience, but it does not yield positive results. However, she does not give up. She is perfectly good and pure in his opinion. After a while, however, he strangles her to death. The reader sees that death is not presented as something sad and violent, which results from the language and discourse of the speaker: "No pain felt she; I am quite sure she felt no pain" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Lines 41-2). It is highly possible that she must have felt pain during his strangling her, but it is not possible to learn about it from the way it is depicted since the girl's perspective is not given in the poem. This reduces the reliability of the speaker's account. Although he has killed her, he is not sad or repentant for what he has done. Death in this regard does not disturb him: "And all night long we have not stirred" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Line 59). Thus, the text deconstructs itself so that the first term is not privileged over the second one, thereby erasing the hierarchical order in the binary.

In addition, the fact that the speaker is not reliable in his account creates the binary opposition, namely reliability/unreliability. Hence, it is possible to state that the dramatic speaker does not give an objective narration. His narration poses ambiguity since it is not clear as to the correctness and reliability of the information he communicates. He probably has a psychological problem, which reduces his reliability. His account of what has happened and how it has happened demonstrates that it is a partial narration of the real event. The speaker tells that the place gets warm with the arrival of Porphyria. Language

might not reflect the reality since it is unstable and unfixed. Thus, what the reader reads in the speaker's account might be distorted.

It is therefore possible to argue that his account objectifies Porphyria as an object of sexual pleasure. In this case, she desires to have sexual experience; however, he is reluctant: "She put my arm about her waist, And made her smooth white shoulder bare" (Browning, "Porphyria's Lover," 1979: Lines 16-17). She is presented as an Eve-like figure, as she tries to tempt him in a way. Although what he tells might be true, there is another possibility that he makes up the story. Porphyria might be shy and introvert without the desire to have sexual intercourse with him. She might not make her shoulder bare. Moreover, he might be day dreaming, which turns his account into a mere illusion. He also states that she murmurs how she loves him, but how can the reader trust in such a one-sided speaker since he does not recount Porphyria's perspective and give voice to her?

The speaker kills Porphyria and his account in this respect decreases his reliability. Shortly before he is about to strangle her to death, he points out that she loves him and belongs to him. However, after a while, he kills her. According to his narration, she does not stop smiling even after she has died. Yet, it is also probable that she does not smile in the aftermath of her death. Her blue eyes laugh and her cheeks blush, which are his remarks, but his reliability is highly open to debate.

These questions can make the reader judge his reliability since his account creates multiplicity of interpretations, which in a way defers reaching the absolute truth. Deconstruction asserts that language as a slippery ground does not convey the absolute reality. Thus, his discourse is not reliable as his way of narrating is fragmented and unreliable. Although he has "constructed one of the neatest narratives on record," it is not reliable (Sutton, 1969: 285). His identity is most probably split and unstable because he is not consistent psychologically. All of these aspects cause the text to deconstruct itself so that the first term in the binary is not privileged over the second one.

Browning's other poem, "The Laboratory" can be also deconstructed as the second poem to be analyzed. There are two characters in the poem, namely the woman and an old man preparing the poison for her. The speaker is female. She interacts with the old man. In the poem, the speaker imagines that her husband or lover is with another woman; therefore, she wants to poison that woman with the help of that old man. The poem starts in the middle of the action when the speaker is in the laboratory observing how the old man prepares the poison. While observing him, she thinks about the man and the woman. Once the poison is ready, she is not satisfied with it since its color is "too grim" and "not soft like the phials, enticing and dim" (Browning, "The Laboratory," 1979: Lines 25-6). She wants the woman to suffer and him to remember her suffering: "He is sure to remember her dying face" (Browning, "The Laboratory," 1979: Line 40). The poem ends with the speaker asking the old man to kiss her for what he has prepared.

The dramatic speaker has the feeling of hatred in her character. This hatred is toward the husband or lover and his mistress. She has sadistic desires and prepares for her victory day. She is aware of what they do and where they are. Moreover, she utters that it is better to watch the old man than dancing at the King's place. She is filled with the feeling of hatred and the desire to poison the woman so much that her eyes do not see anything else. However, this brings the reliability of the speaker into question since the reader is presented only with the female perspective.

The binary opposition, reliability/unreliability comes to the fore in deconstructing this text. The female speaker narrates her experience, but her account might not be based on the absolute truth. She says:

He is with her; and they know I know
Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow
While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
Empty church, to pray God in, for them! — I am here (Browning, "The Laboratory," 1979: Lines 5-8).

She tells that her lover (or husband) and his friend (or mistress) are aware of the fact that the speaker knows about their relationship. Although she claims that she knows what they do and where they are, it is also possible to question her account. She might have paranoia. While the lover and the beloved are together, (the speaker is of the opinion that) they believe that the speaker is crying and her tears flow. They suppose that she goes to the church in order to pray; however, this may not be the reality since the reader is not given their perspective and voice. She states that she is in the laboratory to take her revenge and to punish the woman. This partial and subjective narration can be open to various interpretations.

The female speaker is filled with the desire to poison the woman who is with the speaker's lover or husband. It is possible to argue here that she is very much under the influence of patriarchy because she does not want to poison the man, but chooses the woman: "And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!" (Browning, "The Laboratory," 1979: Line 22). By killing the woman, the speaker will have satisfaction and believes that the lover or the husband will remember the death of the woman: "He is sure to remember her dying face!" (Browning, "The Laboratory," 1979: Line 40). However, how can he be sure to remember her dying face? She is self-confident, but this does not increase her reliability; on the contrary, it decreases her reliability as a speaker.

In the end, she asks the old man to kiss her on the lip, which is a kind of a gift for her. This is not to be expected from a lover traditionally, yet the speaker who is not consistent psychologically wants to poison the woman through the poison, which the old man has prepared. There is, however, another possibility: what she tells is a total illusion and might not exist in reality. How can one trust in such a speaker? How can the reader be sure that the lover is going to remember the woman's dying face? How can they know that the speaker knows what they are doing? All these questions open the poem to question and different interpretations can be put forward, which exemplifies how the text deconstructs itself. Unreliability is therefore as valid as reliability in the poem.

The last poem to be analyzed within the scope of this study is Browning's poem "One Way of Love." In this poem, which is about love, several binary oppositions such as life/death and permanence/ transience are deconstructed. First of all, the title is not clear since it does not touch on the other ways of love. Thus, there is a gap in the title that the reader needs to fill in. Why does he not talk about the other ways of love? In the poem, the speaker talks about his love and beloved. He binds the rose in sheaves and strips the leaves rose by rose. He spreads over those roses to the place where Pauline, the beloved is going to pass and she might make him sing. In the last stanza, the speaker stresses that he has learned to love, but she will probably not return his passion. Although he might not get her love and passion, he tells that those who win heaven are blessed. Taking the plot of the poem into account, one can come to the conclusion that his love is unreturned. However,

it is also possible to argue that the text deconstructs itself through questioning these binary oppositions since the first and the second concepts are equally important in the poem.

Life is accepted as the superior one over death in the binary opposition, but the speaker challenges this approach. The speaker is filled with the joy of life up to a certain point in the poem. He is engaged with the flowers, especially the roses. He strives to suit the fingers to the lute. Furthermore, he even supposes that Pauline bids her sing. As can be seen, he has a passion and struggles for his desire; however, the joy of life leaves its place to the joy of heaven in the end, which in a way glorifies death: "She will not give me heaven? 'Tis well! Lose who may—I still can say, Those who win heaven, blessed are they!" (Browning, "One Way of Love," 1979: Lines 16-18). Thus, the speaker rejoices in the idea of death probably with the hope of winning heaven.

The speaker is not hopeless about transience since permanence might come with heaven and death. In the first part, he seems to enjoy life and emphasis is placed on transience since life is ephemeral. However, in the second part, he is not afraid of death because it does not bring sadness or pain if heaven is won. It is probable that he associates death or heaven with permanence, whereas life is associated with transience. There can be, however, another interpretation of this part. Death can be associated with non-existence, whereas life can be associated with permanence. Hence, it is seen that the poem deconstructs itself, and the concepts in the binary are not privileged over each other.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, deconstruction does not adopt logocentrism or phonocentrism because this binary thinking privileges the first concept, namely transcendental signified, over the second one; on the contrary, it challenges binarism in order to show that the second concept is as important as the first one, which this study has discussed through a deconstructive reading of Robert Browning's poems, "Porphyria's Lover," "The Laboratory," and "One Way of Love." It has been illustrated that certain binaries such as reliability/unreliability, permanence/transience, exterior/interior, life/death, clarity/ambiguity, and certainty/uncertainty are influential in these poems. This analysis has demonstrated that they can be deconstructed or the texts deconstruct these binary oppositions so that both of the concepts in the binaries can gain equal value in a non-hierarchical sense. In short, through the analysis of these selected poems, this deconstructive reading has resisted dichotomies and the binary approach in an attempt to reveal the possibility of alternative multiple interpretations and the potential for the formation of a non-binary future.

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