Deconstructive Reading

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This paper examines four poems by four different poets dealing with more or less the same subject. The subject is an invitation by a young man addressed to a young woman to come and live in his world. The situation is familiar enough, and it is fraught with possibilities, both poetic and moral. The poetic possibilities have to do with whether or not it is possible to write a good poem about an immoral theme, whether a good theme elevates the poem to its own level of goodness regardless of the artistry of the poet, and whether it is possible, to begin with, to separate the artistry from the morality of the poem. The moral possibilities have to do with whether the invitation is innocent or wicked, whether both the inviter and the invited are aware of the moral complexities of the situation or not, and whether the reader has to take sides in order to appreciate the poems.

The first poem is Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," which seems to have started the series of these interconnected poems. Marlowe's poem is frequently studied as a perfect example of pastoral poetry in which the classical myth of the golden age is perfectly illustrated. The world depicted is a world of perpetual sunshine. There is no danger of any kind, and every human need is supplied in plenty. The inhabitants of this world are shepherds and shepherdesses who are engaged mostly in dancing and singing madrigals. If they need to eat, there is plenty of vegetables and fruits; if they need to drink, then there is the pure water from unpolluted streams and the fresh uncontaminated milk from the ewes. As for clothing, they weave their garments from the wool that they pull from their sheep, and we do not exactly know where they spend their nights: perhaps in huts made from trees, but we do know that the bed on which the shepherdess will sleep will be made of roses.

Clearly, this is a world that is far removed from ours. It is sanctioned by the myth of the golden age, which is either accepted wholeheartedly or rejected as contrary to our experience of the real world. Our task as readers may be reduced to admiring the attractiveness of a world in which there are no human worries, no problems of any kind, or we may feel that more is involved than a simple invitation of a simple young woman by a simple young man to enjoy simple life in a simple world. We may feel that things are not as simple as that. Is that feeling justified? I always think of children's response to fairy tales. They enjoy the fairy tales and do not need any more complex stories up to a certain age, four or five let's say, but after that they start asking questions. Alternatively, I think of liars telling lies. They may be believed more than once, but some people start to see through their stories and ask questions, and if the liars are good ones, they invent plausible explanations. But why should people start doubting the narrator of a story? It is because certain details in the liar's story do not seem to hang together or because some parts of the story seem to have been neglected. One may also think of the requirement in some courts of law that the witness shall tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. In Marlowe's poem, the Passionate Shepherd tells his version of the story, and, if we have gone beyond the stage of simply listening to fairy tales, we must at least see at once that only his side of the story is heard. It is a one-sided dialogue in which the Shepherdess is not even given the chance to respond. How do we arrive at the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Like the prosecutor in the court of law, we have to ask questions, and if we are good prosecutors we may arrive at some of the truth, if not the whole of it. At least we may be able to show that the version given cannot be taken at face value. Let us start interrogating the Shepherd. (Incidentally, it is important to remember that we are going to interrogate a character in the poem, not the poet.)

Is the picture of the world he is depicting a realistic representation of the world or one that deliberately neglects to mention details that are likely to elicit a different response to the invitation? Where does the Shepherdess herself live? Is the Shepherd's world necessarily better than hers? In what capacity is she going to live with him: as lover or as wife? Is his invitation a proposal of marriage? Is he sincere? Answers to questions such as these inevitably subvert the one-sided vision of the world presented by the Shepherd. When questions like these are asked, the Shepherd will have to defend his position if he is not to be accused of

attempting to commit a crime: seducing a woman by false promises of happiness or what he calls "pleasures." What can he say in defense of his position? He can point out that nowhere in his invitation does he mention carnal pleasure: he only mentions the pleasures of nature, those that valleys, hills, fields, woods, and mountains can yield. He can say that he is only offering the kinds of pleasures that his world can yield without forcing the lady to accept the offer. He can say that his world is a world of innocence, and that feelings of guilt belong only to our world, not his. But again we can point out to him that relationships between shepherds and shepherdesses cannot end with the enjoyment of the beautiful scenery, singing madrigals, and drinking pure water from purling springs or rivers. Although vegetarianism is a respectable doctrine, most human beings do not live on vegetables and fruits alone. Some animal flesh is needed. In other words killing some sheep or birds is inevitable. Once such a thing is admitted, knives and blood will enter into the picture. Besides, the shepherds have not been granted immortality, and we must assume that regardless of how long they live, they must eventually die. Death brings in sorrow, and sorrow is not accounted for in the Shepherd's depiction of his world. His world may be absolutely clean and unpolluted, but sheep droppings must be everywhere. If there are no diseases, death must be caused by some other means. The shepherds may not fight, may not fall from cliffs, may not be killed by wild animals, but they must die of something.

These and other questions (and there are many others that can be asked) are all legitimate questions in reading a poem like Marlowe's. They are deconstructive questions that allow a better, well-informed response to the poem. Deconstructive questions suggest a more closely-engaged reader who cannot accept the text's statements as final. Such a reader wants to see whether the argument presented to him is consistent, takes counter-arguments into consideration, and does not falsify by oversimplifying.

Sir Walter Raleigh was such a reader. His poem entitled "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" is presented as a rebuttal of Marlowe's. It stresses those aspects of the world that the Shepherd in Marlowe's poem has chosen not to dwell on. The first stanza illustrates his method well:

> If all the world and love were young,
> And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
> These pretty pleasures might me move

To live with thee and be thy love.

Two points are stressed here: (1) the world is no longer young, and (2) shepherds do not always tell the truth. The first point refers to the fact that ours is an imperfect world. If the frame of reference is a Christian one, then the idea is that this is a fallen world in which man is a sinful creature and so the claim of complete innocence can no longer be entertained. If the frame of reference is a Classical one, then the idea is that the Golden Age is no longer with us because ours is the Iron Age, which is the Classical counterpart of the Christian idea of a fallen world. In either case the pretense that the world the Shepherd is depicting is the world of perfect innocence is taken to be a ploy to entrap the Shepherdess. The second point refers to the possibility that the Shepherd may be lying. As has been suggested above, good liars tell plausible stories, but good listeners can see through the lies if they ask good questions--if, that is, they deconstruct the narrator's world and question his logic and tacit assumptions. Since these two points are presented as facts of this world, the counter-argument can proceed by highlighting other facts that are equally irrefutable about this world:

Time drives the flocks from field to fold
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold,
And Philomel becometh dumb;
The rest complains of cares to come.

We may have observed that the only reference to time in Marlowe's poem is to the month of May. In May, we are told, the shepherds will "dance and sing" for the Shepherdess's delight "each May morning." May there is assumed to be almost a year long. Time is arrested. It is going to be perpetual spring. But Raleigh's poem points out that this is false. Time cannot be arrested. Springtime does not last forever. "Time drives the flocks from field to fold," and if summer comes, can winter be far behind?

The other point in the stanza we have just quoted refers to Philomel becoming dumb. The reference is, of course, to the classical story of the sister who was raped by Tereus, and whose tongue was cut in order that she may not tell about the outrage. The story illustrates what a shepherd can do to a shepherdess. It is an example of human lust leading to cruelty and tears and blood. These are facts of this world, the nymph is saying, and the delights that the Shepherd is offering may be no more

than baits to entrap her.

But the interesting thing about Raleigh's poem is that it presents a deconstructive reading of Marlowe's that can itself be subjected to deconstruction. To begin with, the poem tacitly accepts the myth of the Golden Age and assumes that ours is the latest stage in an irreversible process of degeneration. This attitude is contrary to the experience of many that the world is not degenerating but undergoing constant progress from primitivism to civilization. The idea that the world is no longer young is also questionable. It rests on a previously-held belief that the world was created about 4000 years before the birth of Christ and that it would last for only 6000. Since Raleigh was writing towards the end of the sixteenth century A. D., the world had no more than 400 years to go. Such thinking is contrary to the facts of science. But even the idea that "Time drives the flocks from field to fold" intended to mean that the cycle of life ends with death is only half the truth, for time also drives the flocks from fold to field, meaning that the end of a cycle is the beginning of another. Half-truths are inadmissible as evidence. We need the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

C. Day Lewis's poem starts off with Marlowe's opening lines, but the speaker's whole attitude is different from that of Marlowe's Shepherd or Raleigh's Nymph. The speaker seems only to be quoting Marlowe's lines as representing a world that has totally vanished. He is quoting them with a sense of bitter irony. He is saying to his sweetheart something like this: it was possible in the past for a lover like me to invite his sweetheart to live in his world where he could offer her pleasures derived from what was available in plenty to him, but it is no longer possible for me to invite you to such a world. My world is that of an industrialized country. I am now unemployed. The only times I can get you something is when I get some chance employment. The unpolluted rivers of the vanished world are now "sour canals," and instead of the milk and honey of the Passionate Shepherd's world, hunger here will "cheat death of all but bones." The carefree existence of Marlowe's world has been replaced by another:

> Care on thy maiden brow shall put
> A wreath of wrinkles, and thy foot
> Be shod with pain: not silken dress
> But toil shall tire thy loveliness.

This is the world depicted by the lover in C. Day Lewis's poem. And so when he ends by saying,

> If these delights thy mind may move,
> Then live with me and be my love

we can see that he is not really inviting her; on the contrary, he seems to be asking her to leave him, to give up the romantic idea of living with him because he has nothing to offer except hunger and poverty. Like Raleigh's Nymph, the speaker in Lewis's poem also rejects the Passionate Shepherd's world as not belonging to ours, but he does not labor his point as much as the Nymph does. The Nymph's reply is basically abstract and argumentative; the Laborer's version of pastoral is concrete and ironic. The Nymph is motivated by philosophico-moral considerations, and her tone is that of a person intellectually superior to the Shepherd, whereas the Laborer is motivated by a mixture of compassion, self-pity, and despair. He wants his sweetheart to leave him because he can see no prospects of happiness in this world. There is a sense of wry humor in what he says, but there is no humor of any kind in the Nymph's reply.

Humor, mixed with irony, is probably the key to the fourth poem in the series, Donne's poem "The Bait." This poem was contemporary with Marlowe's and Raleigh's, but I have postponed considering it until the end because it combines the awareness of the moral issues involved in the invitation and the irony that we have seen in C. Day Lewis's poem. Donne, too, begins with Marlowe's opening lines, but immediately after that presents a different world altogether. In the first stanza, the speaker invites the sweetheart to enjoy fishing with him near some "crystal brooks," using "silken lines, with silver hooks." But soon the idea is developed so that the sweetheart becomes herself the bait that can catch fish:

> There will the river whispering run,
> Warmed by thy eyes more than the sun.
> And there th' enamored fish will stay,
> Begging themselves they may betray.
>
> When thou wilt swim in that live bath,
> Each fish, which every channel hath,
> Will amorously to thee swim,
> Gladder to catch thee, than thou him.

And so the idea is suggested that this woman is herself the bait. Not only can she catch fish by simply swimming in the river, but she can catch men like the speaker.

But this is not the whole story. We must seek the rest of the story by our usual method of questioning--by deconstruction. The poem ends with the speaker admitting his lack of wisdom because he has allowed himself to be caught by this bait. He has deliberately swallowed the bait. In religious terms, he knew what he was doing. He sinned knowingly. If that is the case, then his invitation at the beginning of the poem is only an ironic echo of Marlowe's poem; the Shepherd who was probably laying a bait for the Shepherdess was in actuality swallowing his own bait. Worse than this, the woman who has been something like a bait for the speaker to swallow is said to be her "own bait." The phrase can be taken in two senses: (1) she is herself a bait and does not really need "silken lines" and "silver hooks"; (2) she is herself her own bait in the sense that she ends by swallowing herself. She is caught by her own nature. The moral implications of this are that sin does not only destroy others, it is also self-destructive.

The difference between Donne's poem and Raleigh's is that Raleigh's Nymph is protected by her sense of self-righteousness and thinks herself immune to the temptations of the Shepherd. She has no sense of humor. She thinks she is far wiser than the Shepherd and he has no chance of deceiving her. In Donne's poem, the speaker knows that he is subject to human folly. He makes fun of his own weakness and thereby disarms criticism. His sense of humor is greater than that of the Laborer in C. Day Lewis's poem. There is no bitterness in his tone but a candid admission that he is merely human. The speaker in Lewis's poem is not concerned with the moral issues involved but with the economico-political ones. We must assume that he is not married to the sweetheart. We must also assume that he is not suggesting that she leave him out of moral considerations. He is simply saying that he does not have the means of making her happy.

The moral side of the story can perhaps be summarized as follows: in Marlowe's poem the issue is brushed aside as irrelevant. The emphasis is on the experience of pleasure. In Lewis's poem the moral issue is not raised either. The emphasis is on the precariousness of employment and on the satisfaction of basic human needs, such as "bed and board." But

the moral issue is central in both Raleigh's and Donne's poems. Raleigh's poem stresses the fallen state of man, the deceptiveness of scheming shepherds, the transience of youth, and the inevitability of death. Donne's poem stresses human folly and the ease with which man succumbs to temptation.

Deconstructively, however, we can say in defense of Marlowe's Shepherd that the moral issue does not arise in paradise. In a paradisal setting all pleasures are permitted. We do not have prohibitions there. If that is the case, then the Nymph's strictures are uncalled for. In defense of Lewis's poem we can say that the tendency to think of morality only in terms of male-female relationships is reductive. The prevalence of poverty in society is probably a greater evil than individual transgressions. It is probably safe to say that it is immoral for a few to have millions and for millions to have nothing. And in defense of Raleigh's poem we can refute our own criticism of his vision of the world by saying that civilization may mean progress in harnessing the forces of nature, but it does not necessarily mean progress in harnessing the forces of evil.

I started by pointing out that the four poems under discussion are fraught with possibilities, both poetic and moral. The problem with the term "poetic" is that it is a vague term of approval that is frequently understood to refer to beautiful things as we encounter them in the world. From this perspective "Melodious birds," "beds of roses," "crystal brooks," and "silken lines" are poetic whereas "bed and board," "wrinkles," and "sour canals" are not. This conception of poeticality is naive and excludes 90% of human experience. Poeticality must be linked with functionality. If an image is needed in a poem, then it is the right image, regardless of whether or not it is beautiful in life. The right image is a poetically beautiful image. In the poems we are dealing with, Marlowe needs images from nature to depict a beautiful world to which the Shepherd can invite his Shepherdess, and so the images are all taken from nature: valleys, groves, hills, fields, woods, mountains, etc. These images are poetic not because they are beautiful in themselves but because they help to create the kind of world the poem needs to create. In C. Day Lewis's poem the setting is different. It is an urban setting in an industrialized country, and so the images are taken from that setting, with natural references to "bed and board," "the docks," and the "sour canals." These images are poetic because they are the right ones for the poem.

However, poetry does not consist only of images depicting the world around us, rural or urban. It also, perhaps mainly, consists of human beings reacting to the world around them--and to other people with whom they have relationships. Whenever people are around, human complications are bound to appear. People love, hate, kill, help, neglect, protect, and cheat each other. And in all of this the characters presented in poems, plays, and novels must be presented convincingly. Convincing characterization does not reduce human beings into automatons who have no will of their own. This is why the greatest characters are also the most complex, the ones about whom we differ most. I think that one may safely say that in terms of complexity Marlowe's Shepherd is the simplest and that Lewis's is the most complex. This is why it seems to me that Marlowe's Shepherd is the easiest target to criticize. We can say that he is too simple, too one-dimensional to stand analysis--or deconstruction. It is less easy to question Donne's speaker than Raleigh's, and I am not quite sure how we can attack Lewis's Laborer--except perhaps by saying that he seems to indulge too much in self-pity and that he does not trust enough in the power of love.

The poems finally illustrate the idea that morality cannot be reduced to one mode of behavior, the mode we traditionally associate with sexuality. Morality and politics are inseparable. Aristotle actually considered ethics to be a branch of politics. And although Marlowe's poem deals with a vision of the world that puts the Golden Age far back in history or far away from urban centers, where human conflict appears at its clearest, most utopian thinkers place this Golden Age far ahead in time, and any attempts to realize it, whether real or imagined, are really political in nature.

In conclusion, I would say that deconstructive reading is a means on the part of the active reader of eliciting from the poem all that it can yield, and that poems do yield a great deal if we look beyond the immediate text in search of the subtexts, the intertexts, and all the other texts that the reader can bring to bear on the printed text in front of him or her.