

**ON THE EASY DIFFICULTIES OF COMMENTING
ON AN ENGLISH POEM WHEN ONE DOES NOT KNOW
WHICH IMPLIED READER TO BE**

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Language is something strange, so strange that when we want to define it we have to use language to do so, lacking in this way any possible ironic perspective. We are living a time which has been defined by many as “Postmodernism”, meaning with such a term that at least our period must have something in common with the cultural situation existing at the beginning of the 20th century. And, in fact, when we stop to think about it, it seems quite clear that the epistemological quest in which, let us say, Eliot or Pound became involved, has not been solved yet. Elsewhere I have defined Modernism as a mythic period and we do not need to be very perceptive to assume that Postmodernism, if it exists in literature, is also quite a mythic movement: fantasy is one of the clearest symptoms of the revival of myth in our times. Fantasy is constantly indicating the reader that reality is not so “real” as we would like it to be. How can we be so sure that the collection of impressions we receive via our perceptual system is really what exists “out there”? This type of question was precisely (?) the one in vogue by the beginning of the century and a young student of philosophy named T.S.Eliot had to cope with the ideas of Walter Pater, William James or Henri Bergson to finally write his PhD dissertation entitled *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (later published by Faber and Faber). In this academic work we may find some paragraphs which evidence Eliot’s difficulties to solve the epistemological doubt:

No symbol, I maintain, is ever a mere symbol, but is continuous with that which it symbolizes. Without words, no objects. The object, purely experienced and not denominated, is not yet an object ...we have no objects without language¹.

This argument, even if taken out of its proper context, looks quite nominalistic. If we add to Eliot's "we have no objects without language" the belief that language is something originated in the individual's mind and, consequently, something personal and subjective, we shall understand why by the end of the 20th century the modernist epistemological doubt has not yet been solved and the reason for the continual recurrence of problems of reality and perception which we find in contemporary authors such as John Fowles (*The Magus*), Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49*) or Gabriel García Márquez (*El otoño del Patriarca*).

Subjectivity and the epistemological doubt also reaches us in the field of literary theory when we come to investigate into the figure of the "implied reader"², that entity which supposedly should be capable of grasping the ultimate meaning the real author (by means of his/her implicit representative in the text) tried to convey while writing the literary work. If we take a (post-)modernist stance it becomes necessary to question ourselves about the possibility of ever finding the primordial meaning the author (perhaps already dead) put into the work. We have to deal with historicist problems as well. How can I ever be sure of becoming the "perfect reader" the author wanted me to be? How can I locate myself in, let us say, the 17th century to read *Paradise Lost* in the appropriate historical context? We have to conclude that things are not so easy for the critical reader when we introduce the concept of "implied reader". Can it ever be objective? Are there any readings more accurate than others? If so, from which viewpoint (the reader's, the writer's, the historical context's) are they more accurate?

The audience (or readers?) by this time may be questioning themselves about what has all this got to do with bilingualism. Precisely, what can we say about bilingualism? What does it mean? Two languages? One only message expressed in two different languages? Only one message read by two different (implicit?) readers? Quite often we have to end up talking or writing about different possible *interpretations* of the same text, because we cannot even be sure of what a *text* is: there are as many definitions as you like...I am perhaps exaggerating. But what follows is precisely a mental exercise on interpretation. My stance will be first the one of a teacher interested in explaining to his students the *meaning* and *technical devises* of the 16th century sonnet "Divers doth use", by Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder (1503-42), and to do so I will rely on literary and historical concepts, together with a reading activity which owes a great deal to the Spanish school of stylistics as represented by Damaso Alonso, F. Lázaro Carreter and Ricardo Senabre. Later on, however, I will attempt a second reading based on more contemporary attitudes generated by recent deconstructive and feminist theories of interpretation. First of all, let us consider the poem:

Divers doth use

Divers doth use, as I have heard and know,
When that to change their ladies do begin,
To mourne and wail, and never for to lin,
Hoping thereby to pease their painful woe.
And some there be that when it chanceth so 5
That women change and hate where love hath been,
They call them false and think with words to win
The hearts of them which otherwhere doth grow.
But as for me, though that by chance indeed
Change hath outworn the favor that I had, 10
I will not wail, lament, nor yet be sad,
Nor call her false that falsely did me feed,
But let it pass, and think it is of kind
That often change doth please a woman's mind.

Now we can start our first reading of the poem, the historic and stylistic one.

To do so, it is obvious that the first thing worth commenting is the fact that the text subject of our study is a sonnet. In effect, it has fourteen lines and follows a precise rhyming structure: *abba abba cddc ee*. If we consult any of the abundant literary histories of England³, we shall probably discover that Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder is considered to be one of the first poets who introduced the Italian sonnet in the English letters and that he was at pains to adapt this poetic structure so new to his fellow citizens (meaning mainly the educated people living in Court). He ended up using the above mentioned rhyming pattern in most of his sonnets, a pattern which clearly stands in middle of the way towards the creation of the multiply rhymed English sonnet best represented by many of Shakespeare's. In the handbook on literary history the reader will also discover that Wyatt learned about this poetic form in Italy and that he was very much influenced by the so called "idealized love" represented in Petrarch's poems and the "courtly love" school so much in vogue in Italy and France among the half-medieval half-renaissance sonneteers of France and Italy from the 13th century. We, the readers in the classroom, could therefore *expect* this sonnet to be underpinned by such conventions and to encounter the typical lady who kills the rejected lover (lyrical subject in the poem) only by means of her glance or the lyrical subject who, despite his having been rejected, insists on paying worship to this idealized lady whose clear medieval model (and counterpart) is the Virgin Mary. But perhaps our historical and stylistic reading of the poem is

going to modify those views supported by the current manuals of English literary history.

On a second moment we can try to answer any possible doubts the students may have as pertaining the meaning of some words too complex or archaic to be understood without the help of the dictionary, such as “to lin”(= “to cease”, line 3) or “kind”(= “nature”, line 13), etc. Then, we shall consider how interesting it is the fact that the punctuation of the poem seems to coincide with the different parts in which the sonnet is divided according to its rhyming structure: in effect, there is a stop at the end of the first quatrain (“woe.”), another one at the end of the second quatrain (“grow.”) and, although there is not a stop between the third quatrain and the final rhyming couplet there is, however, a comma and the following couplet is introduced by the adversative “But”, circumstances which apparently tend to strengthen our belief in separate semantic units in the different formal parts in which this sonnet is divided.

Soon, when dealing with line 1, we notice that the subject of the first sentence (“Divers doth use...to mourne and wail...”) is quite indeterminate: we do not know who those “Divers” are. Once we have mentally “ordered” the syntax after having resolved the classical (renaissance) hyperbaton, we realize that “Divers” are the ones who mourne and wail when their ladies begin to change (line 2). But, obviously, there are some other elements worth of our attention in this first quatrain: the lyrical subject, “I”, appears in the middle of the first line to mark in the text, from the very beginning, the differences between “Divers” (plural and indeterminate) and himself (singular and determinate). “I” is the subject with verbs of perception: he has heard and *even* knows, implying in this way that he is dealing now with something external of which he has direct, perceptual knowledge.

The reason for the behaviour of “Divers”, whoever they are, is explained on line 2 but it should be noticed that in the temporal clause introduced by “when” the idea of movement appears twice: first with “begin”, which clearly presupposes the starting point of a new situation and then with “change”, which stresses the idea of the ladies’s new love stance. “Ladies” is the semantic subject of the infinitive and, following the norm, it could be implied that “Divers” refers to male persons and that we are dealing here, on this first quatrain, with the response some male lovers give when their ladies reject them. The history of literature “tells” us that this situation became a topic in the courtly love tradition. And the topical answer on the part of the rejected is precisely the one we find in those lovers who have been labelled as “Divers”: they “mourne”, “wail” and never cease to do so (“never for to lin”, line 3). Let us notice how the poet decided to present it in a gradatory way: mourning is not enough; the lovers are so desperate that they “wail”, and they have not stopped

doing so ever since, till we come to the present time when the lyrical subject speaks. Their expectations are quite simple: they hope to “pease their painful woe” (line 4). Once again, it is worth mentioning here the stress on the quality of the woe (=rejection): it is “painful”, which appears to be redundant, or can we think of any non-painful woe? It should be kept in mind that the ones who feel the rejection in such emphatic terms are precisely “Divers” and not the leading voice, “I”.

The second quatrain opens in a similar way: “And some there be”. Once again the subject, now introduced by the impersonal “there be”, is going to be indeterminate. A new classical hyperbaton makes the literary history reader think, once again, that this sonnet is not devoid of the rhetorical figures most often used in the English Renaissance. One more time it could be thought that the hyperbaton probably operates on the reader to increase his/her level of expectation to know what is going on. But what is going on in this second quatrain does not differ much from what had already been presented earlier in the poem: the starting point is again the ladies’s rejection of their lovers (“some”) and what follows is the lovers’s reaction; which in this case is to call their ladies *false*. It has now become a matter of insulting, a kind of answer certainly harder than the previous activities of mourning and wailing represented. However, thanks to our handbook on the history of literature we also know that the rejected lover who accuses the lady of being false means nothing but a fairly common pose in the courtly love tradition. The position of the “I”, the poem’s voice, seems to be rather ironic by now: when acting in this way, he would say, the rejected lovers think “with words to win the hearts of them which elsewhere doth grow” (lines 7-8). The “I” clearly states that the ladies’s “hearts” are already located elsewhere and words are not enough to bring them back. By now, the reader interested in literary history will have noticed that, although Wyatt used the sonnet structure and some classical and renaissance images and rhetorical devices, his lyrical-narrator (sic), the “I”, is clearly making fun of some conventional attitudes of the courtly love tradition.

Before entering into the analysis of the third quatrain, it should also be noticed that on line 6 the term “change” appears again in reference to this activity of the lady, her rejection of the lover, which provokes the writing of so many poems in the courtly love tradition and which, so far, has also established itself as one of the recurrent elements in this poem by Wyatt. On line 5 the women’s rejection of their lovers is also considered to be something which happens by chance (“it chanceth so”). But comments on this will follow later on.

The third quatrain opens with the adversative “But”, the first element which indicates that we are dealing with something new which, somehow, is opposed to some elements which have already been presented in the poem. In other words, the

beginning of line 9 indicates the “turn” of the sonnet⁴ and, in effect, it shall be noticed, first of all, that in this quatrain the voice “I” is going to tell us about himself for the first time (“as for me”, line 9). There has been, by that means, an advancement from the plural and indeterminate “Divers” and “some” of the first and second quatrain, which represented conventional courtly love attitudes, into the singular and determinate “I” of the lyrical and narratorial voice. Also with the help of our handbook on literary history, we could think that the beginning of line 9 or “turn” of this sonnet represents the moment in which a counterstatement follows the statement which has been presented so far.

In fact, we read in this third quatrain about the attitude of the “I” when dealing himself with the case of being rejected by the lady. Once again, it is to be noticed the insistent use of “chance” and “change” when the leading voice refers to the behaviour of women: they *change* their lovers by *chance*, for no apparent reason. But the lyrical-narrator (or narratorial lyrical subject, as you prefer) does not assume any of the roles chosen by the other types of lovers: he will “not wail, lament, nor yet be sad” (line 11; notice the now inverted gradation) as “Divers” did. He will not call the lady “false” either, as “some” did in the second quatrain. On the contrary, his position is made quite clear in the conclusive rhyming couplet (lines 13-14) which is a section, once again, introduced by “But”: he will ignore his having been rejected. In other words, apparently he will not follow the conventions of the courtly lovers.

But (and here comes my *turn*) this is not simply a poem in which the narratorial lyrical subject refuses to follow the conventional courtly love attitudes represented by the rejected lover who complains or calls the lady such and such names.

If you remember, I have insisted on the extended use of “change” and “chance” being referred to the ladies’s behaviours. In the rhyming couplet, after affirming that he will ignore his being rejected, the lyrical subject argues that it is only normal for a woman’s *mind* to be *pleased* by the idea of *change*. It is worth noticing the subtle way he has used to deteriorate our previous image of the lady. By the poem’s end she has become only a *woman* and already on line 12 the lyrical subject had even fallen into an internal contradiction of terms when affirming that he would not “call her *false* that *falsely* did me feed”. Besides the use of the classical and old alliteration and chiasm, it is quite clear that the lyrical subject is calling her explicitly “false” (“falsely”).

The contemporary reader may recur to a more radical way of analysis and find out what the lyrical subject’s “real” stance is. In order to do so, we can start by finding out all the possible dualities by means of which the lyrical subject’s

language (that is to say, his cosmovision) has selected and organized the roles of all the people who appear in the poem. This is what we would find:

- 1- Divers/some Ladies
- 2- Divers/some I
- 3- I Lady

The first duality resolves clearly in favor of the ladies: they are the ones who reject and the male lovers are the ones who “suffer”.

The second duality resolves clearly in favor of the lyrical subject: “Divers/some” are the ones who complain and act in quite conventional (courtly love) ways. He, the “I”, is the one (from our historical viewpoint) who refuses to behave in such conventional ways. It could be expected here a literary improvement on the part of the author of such an “innovative” lyrical subject. However, we still find in the poem worn out classical or old techniques such as the hyperbaton or the alliteration and we cannot forget that the poem itself is structured as a sonnet.

The third duality, the “I” vs. the lady, is also resolved clearly in favor of the lyrical subject. And no wonder it happens so; he has been insisting on the changeable character of women from the second line till the very end of the poem.

In Wyatt’s sonnet, therefore, and thanks to the lyrical subject’s new cosmovision, the female beloved is not based on the ideal model of the Virgin any longer. Woman has now become a foolish being, and foolish are also the conventional courtly lovers. In this new cosmovision the “I” of the lyrical subject opposes all the other people and ends up manifesting, ironically, his supremacy above everybody. With him, part of a literary tradition is despised (and critics of literary history should be happy about that) but the role conferred to women is not precisely a very fair one: women end up being inferior, silly things; and, in this way, they share roles similar to the ones conferred to them in later poems by many other famous writers: John Donne, Andrew Marvell, John Milton...

Let us come back to our lyrical subject: he is telling us that he is great. But, isn’t he a despicable proudish being? Is not Wyatt’s poem a clear expression of radical egotism? Perhaps it is so. From my *turn* I have offered you a reading of the cosmovision implied in (one of) the message(s) of the sonnet. But, when doing so, I have also been offering you my own cosmovision implied in the language of my lecture. Perhaps I was also ironic or pretentious or you did not understand what I thought you were supposed to understand...

In brief, I think that, better than bilinguism, we may always talk about plurilinguism because, fortunately to us, language is a mess.

So it goes (does it?).

NOTES

1 Quoted by Louis Menand in his book *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and his Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; p. 52. For a further discussion on Eliot's epistemological stance see Part I, Chapter 2: "Problems about objects".

2 On the concepts of "implied reader" and "implied author" see: Wayne C. Booth *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961; Chapter 6, "Types of narration". Gerard Genette *Narrative Discourse*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980 (1972); Chapter 5, "Voice". Walter Gibson "Authors, speakers, readers, and mock-readers" in Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980. See also Mieke Bal *Narratology*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1985; pp. 119-20.

3 For instance, Albert C. Baugh, ed. *A Literary History of England*, vol. II. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967. Or David Daiches *A Critical History of English Literature*, vol. I. London: Secker and Warburg, 1969. On the criticism of poetry, see also Charles Barber *Poetry in English: An Introduction*. London: Macmillan, 1983.

4 On the concept of "turn" and the structure of this poetic form see the classic study by John Fuller *The Sonnet* ("The Critical Idiom"), London: Methuen, 1972.