

Collapsing the Borderline: A Deep Semantic Study of Rilke's "Elegy II"

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Abstract

Several kinds of works and expectations are often assigned to literary texts; each representing a certain approach and view(s) of the nature of the verbal structure. One of these underlying views is that which perceives literature as capturing ostensive facts of the human world, in order to fulfill 'specified' utilitarian assignments. These ostensive facts of the human world are something which the literary text hides behind it and which the reader necessarily needs to find out so as to give the text an appropriate reading. This paper attempts to re-question literature on this ground, to find out if indeed its visions are reliable: if its words could be rightfully held to be factual, and trusted as referring to the material world of man. What kind of facts does literature present? This paper attempts to provide answers to this question. To accomplish this, the paper hereby, examines, as its primary text, Rilke's "Elegy II", and builds its arguments based on Paul Ricoeur's Deep Semantics.

Key Words: Collapsing, borderline, deep semantics, elegy, Verbal structure, literature, ostensive facts.

1. Introduction

Aristotle was the one who, perhaps, first grouped all the phenomenon commonly categorised as art as being held together by the function he called 'imitation.' But these phenomena are also differentiated, one from the other, by the "the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation" (Part 1). Literature, which he calls poetry, is the art form which mode of being is "language alone," the implication being that it is inconceivable, to think of literature except as language. Hence "[e]very literary form is the site of encounter with language; every literary work is an encounter with language" (Akwanya 11). What is obvious, here, in the use of the determiner 'every', twice in the above one sentence quotation, is a deliberate effort to establish an indelible mark of literature: the impossibility of any existent under the name literature, outside language. But the duality of 'the site of encounter with language' and the encounter proper locate it proper in discourse. It is in discourse that one perceives something of the nature of 'site', as far as the word goes. It is also in discourse that the possibility of real encounter with language appears, in that it is here that what Saussure calls 'langue' is realised as 'parole', raising the question of meaning and problematising understanding. For as Benveniste has observed, "the 'sign' (phonological and lexical) is the unit of language (langue), the 'sentence' is the basic unit of discourse" (Ricoeur 133). Meaning for a sign may be abstract, but it is within reach (by the use of the dictionary, for instance), and has relative stability. But once the sign is actualised in real usage (discourse) where sentence is the basic unit, or even within a phrase, the relative stability is upset and meaning is rendered almost indeterminate. Henceforth, each of the signs is to carry only the meaning assigned to it by the other elements with which it functions in the sentence. It is also at the level of sentence that the metaphorisation becomes actuality, even if we are to understand metaphor simply in the terms of Aristotle as transference of name. This explains why metaphor is largely tied to the context of its usage.

But discourse could also be oral, carrying within itself, the fact that the object is ostensive, and can be easily located, as the speeches of the interlocutors appear to be pointing at it, the interlocutors themselves being identifiable by the personal pronouns 'I', 'You', etc (Akwanya, *Semantics* 256). Ricoeur, therefore, further delineates literature as text, with the implication that it is "discourse fixed by writing . . . [that] which could be said . . . but which is written because it is not said" (145-6). What remains to be said, in differentiating the literary text from other discourses that share the property of language with it, is that the literary text is a work, with three features:

First, a work is a sequence longer than the sentence; it raises a new problem of understanding, relative to the finite and close totality which constitutes the work as such. Second, the work is submitted to a form of codification which applies to the composition itself, and which transforms discourse into a story, a poem, an essay, etc. . . . Finally, a work is given a unique configuration which likens it to an individual and which may be called its style. (136)

While one needs to note here that the form of the essay demands a different mode of reading, considering that its clause structure is often expository, lacking in the dialectics of literature, the transformation of discourse into story or poem and their consequent feature of finite and close totality as their indispensable constitution throws up a question of how they could be read. Ricoeur's recommendation for this is what he calls Deep Semantics.

2. Deep Semantics

Deep Semantics is a mode of reading which proceeds on two different but complementary poles of ‘explanation’ and ‘interpretation.’ Explanation and interpretation could be understood as the ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ of the text. To explain a work of art is to account for the work as a coherent whole; it is, according to Beardsley, to ask “what a work is . . . the verbal design, or discourse as an intelligible string of words”; it is, according to Ricouer, “to remain in the suspense of the text, treating it as a worldless and authorless object” ((Ricouer, *Rule of Metaphor* 106-7, 152). To explain, the reader assumes, apriori, that the text speaks, and so asks “what the text says” (Akwanya, *Semantics* 254), or makes out what it says (255). The second plane, interpretation, is the apprehension of what Ricouer calls the second order signification of the text which arises at the point of suspension of the first order signification of language (langue). It is a plane at which the reader accounts for the reference of the text, not in terms of authorial intention, but in terms of the world(s) suggested by the text. In interpretation, the reader lifts “the suspense and fulfill the text in speech, restoring it to living communication”, yet remaining in its “closure” (*Hermeneutics* 152-3). And because the reader remains within the closure of the text, he finds that the text intercepts “all the relations to a world that can be pointed out and to subjectivities that can be pointed out and subjectivities that can converse” (153). Therefore, interpretation sees the literary text as making a reference. It is, nevertheless, not an ostensive reference which could be found anywhere in the material world, but that which is constructed within it, as a ‘site of encounter with language,’ a possible new world that is not behind the text as the author’s intention but before it as the world of the text.

3. The Sense of “Elegy II:” What Does The Text Say?

Deep Semantics is strongly rooted in metaphor, for the power of metaphor in transference of meaning, and hence, innovation. Concerning metaphor, Ricouer has taught that “[t]he decisive feature is the semantic innovation, thanks to which a new pertinence, a new congruence, is established in such a way that the utterance ‘makes sense’ as a whole” (“Metaphorical Process” 146). In no other literary form is this matter made more obvious than in poetry. The metaphorical process in poetry collapses barriers of signifying functions of signs, permitting the emergence of new functions that ordinarily would be impossible, particularly in a descriptive discourse. This, perhaps, is why it was seen in rhetoric as a deviant form.

The opening utterance of Rilke’s “Elegy II”, “Every Angel is terror”, presents itself as this deviance, drawing attention to itself as language away from ordinary sign-signifying function. This is not just because of the all-inclusiveness of the determiner ‘every’, but because of its purport when juxtaposed with the subject it qualifies, ‘Angel’, and the predicative attribute of terror that the utterance inscribes on the subject. But the terror of ‘every Angel’ connects to the second line where the persona perceives the angel as “deadly birds of air.” This is the inauguration of a predominant motif of ‘flight’ that is immanent in the poem. In line 7, we read that one of the Angels, “the Archangel,” is “the dangerous one, from behind the stars” and it only needs to “take a single step down and towards us” (line 8). That its movement towards “us” is downward supposes that it is situated at a height above ‘us’, but that it is to come towards ‘us’ in just a single step presupposes that it is a thing to be feared. This mixture of flight and terror is already established in literary tradition as could be seen in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*.

In the play *Doctor Faustus*, we see that what the Angels, both the good one and the evil one desire is Faustus’ soul; it is the clear object of their struggle over Faustus. The Good Angel first presents the matter thus:

GOOD ANGEL. “O, Faustus, lay that damned book aside, and gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul, and heap God’s heavy wrath upon thy head! Read, read the Scriptures:—that is blasphemy.”

What bothers Faustus at the moment, nevertheless, is not much of where his soul goes, but how to gain certain knowledge for the material time. This includes the power for necromancy and that which enables him to taste ‘flight’ like the Angels, flying to wherever he wants as if in ‘a single step’. Since Mephistophilis is ready to offer him this, by the power of Lucifer, Faustus is ready to give his soul to Lucifer. Hear him:

FAUSTUS. Had I as many souls as there be stars, I’d give them all for Mephistophilis. By him I’ll be great emperor of the world, And make a bridge through the moving air, to pass the ocean with a band of men; I’ll join the hills that bind the Afric shore, and make that country continent to Spain, and both contributory to my crown: the Emperor shall not live but by my leave, nor any potentate of Germany.

At the expiration of his years according to the terms of the agreement with Lucifer, the Angels did not ‘lead’ Faustus away, but ‘freighted’ him, creating before him a picture of horror. But he is freighted away not because he gave his soul to Lucifer and not the good Angel. For the cardinal issue is that whoever he gives his soul limits his freedom, somehow. Hence the persona of “Elegy II” perceives all Angels as “deadly birds of soul,” and therefore, terror. The appearance of the Angel raises “our” perspiration, and as it moves towards “us”, “our own heart, /beating on high would beat us down (line 8-9).

To trace the representation of Angels as terror back into the medieval literature is to establish that the literary text does not only interconnect within itself as individuality, but connects back to others in the tradition, by

which means it makes claim of kinship with them as objects of the same kind. In line with this T. S. Eliot has taught us that

[i]t involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (n.p)

But there was also the “the days of Tobias, / when one of the most radiant of you stood at the simple threshold, / disguised somewhat for the journey and already no longer awesome / (Like a youth, to the youth looking out curiously)” (line 3-6). One notes, in spite of the nostalgia expressed by the persona, that the radiance of the Angel in “the days of Tobias,” its standing “at the simple threshold,” and its readiness “for the journey” is possible because the Angel is “disguised somewhat” and “already no longer awesome.” One may then ask, if it needs to be disguised for it to move along with man, is it not because it carries terror on itself as an inscription? But the nostalgia itself serves to further the text as a lament, which is already introduced in line 2, with the exclamation word “ah.” This lament is a lament of one who is carrying knowledge, hence launching the text on the path of tragedy and the kind, similar to Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, which we shall return to later. But for now, let us pursue further, the immanent cohesive motif of flight.

The persona laments that all that are supposedly good and which ought to guarantee his happiness are all appearances and are thus ungraspable. Paradoxically he perceives the Angels as

Early successes, Creation’s favourite ones,
mountain - chains, ridges reddened by dawns
of all origin – pollen of flowering godhead,
junctions of light, corridors, stairs, thrones,
spaces of being, shields of bliss, tempests
of storm-filled, delighted feeling . . . (line 10-15)

But just as early successes carries as one of its meanings, *not enduring*, all the features are to “suddenly” freeze into “solitary / mirrors: gathering their own out-streamed beauty back into their faces again (line 15-16). Their beauty is gathered back into their faces which now become solitary mirror. The metaphor of the mirror here heightens the virtual reality of these features. For whatever is seen in the mirror is only a reflection, and has escaped a grasp. Yet it is not just the Angels that are ungraspable.

For we, when we feel, evaporate: oh, we
breathe ourselves out and away: from ember to ember,
yielding us fainter fragrance. . . . they cannot hold us,
we vanish inside and around them. And those who are beautiful,
oh, who holds them back? Appearance, endlessly, stands up,
in their face, and goes by. Like dew from the morning grass,
what is ours rises from us, like the heat
from a dish that is warmed. . . . vanishing wave of the heart - :
oh, we are that” (line 17-27).

This “evaporation”, “breathing ourselves out and away”, “yielding to fainter fragrance”, vanishing wave of the heart” like “dew from the morning grass” and “heat from a dish that is warmed” constitute the knowledge that weighs the persona down. It is, as in tragedy, the knowledge that is destructive. While the persona carries on in his anguished tone, the lovers do not seem to know that even love is transient. Hence,

you touch so blissfully because the caress withholds,
because the place you cover so tenderly
does not disappear: because beneath it you feel
pure duration. So that you promise eternity
almost, from the embrace. And yet, when you’ve endured
the first terrible glances, and the yearning at windows,
and the first walk together, just once, through the garden:
Lovers, are you the same? When you raise yourselves
one to another’s mouth, and hang there – sip against sip:
O, how strangely the drinker then escapes from their action.” (line 55-64)

The lovers appear to enjoy themselves in their love affair, judging that the part which they tenderly caress and cover remains intact, and gives them an enduring feeling. They are simply satisfied in their embrace and kisses, without sharing the despair of the persona, who sees the love affair as a facade like every other thing, including their very existence. The feeling of satisfaction that the lovers get by being together is what the persona

metaphorically compares with the light sensation that he receives when his hands rub against each other, or when he uses his hands to cover his face. With this, then, he arrives at the conclusion that no one “dares exist only for that” (line 45-48). While the lovers see love as something worthwhile, the persona perceives it as something that is not only ephemeral but is being endured. This is certainly a tragic mind, perceiving everything as trouble and being weighed down by that very knowledge. Although slightly different in realization, this tragedy of the carrier of knowledge is same in Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*. In the latter, Murya is the sufferer, who despairs as much, due to the loss of a husband and a son to the river, as due to her knowledge that the remaining son would also go the same way. As Bartley refuses to heed her counsel, she foreshadows the outcome in the following way.

MAURYA: It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drown'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave? (n.pag)

Here, she is almost like a divine figure, speaking what will certainly happen in the future, yet her divinity has no control over it. For though it will appear as if Bartley’s flagrant refusal to listen to her is simply a matter of youthful exuberance, manifested as disobedience, the issue is that his going to the same sea that has become an object of terror to Murya, and supposedly the entire family, is called forth by a necessity: the tragic necessity. Neither of the children, both the girls and Bartley himself understands this as Murya, and this is why the tragedy is hers, not even that of those who are drowned. She it is, the one who carries the “the sense of ancient evil, of ‘the blight man was born for’ . . . the permanence and the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life” (Sewall 6).

The persona of Rilke’s “Elegy II” is lonely, not so much as due to the fleetingness of virtually all things, but due to his knowledge of it as a fact, a knowledge which he alone carries. No amount of his explanation will bring the lovers to this knowledge, not even his direct questioning of the lovers as to whether they have not noticed any downward changes in their love affair. This loneliness connects him to tragic heroes in the tradition. Hence Seawall teaches us that

[t]he *Book of Job*, especially the Poet’s treatment of the suffering and searching Job, is behind Shakespeare and Milton, Melville, Doestoevski, and Kafka. Its mark is on all tragedy of alienation, from Marlowe’s *Faustus* to Camus’ *Stranger*, in which there is a sense of separation from a once known, normative, and loved deity or cosmic order or principle of conduct. (44)

As has been hinted before, the “sense of separation from a once known, normative, and loved deity or cosmic order or principle of conduct” is captured in the nostalgia of the “days of Tobias” when the Angels did not operate from a height higher than the speaker, but stood at the threshold, disguised, with the intention to assist man in his journey. The change that has occurred since then is, perhaps, what is captured in their description as “early successes.” At present, it seems like all things are in conspiracy against the persona. This he laments thus:

everything hides us. Look, trees exist; houses,
we live in, still stand. Only we
pass everything by, like an exchange of air.
And all is at one, in keeping us secret, half out of
shame perhaps, half out of inexpressible hope.” (line 37-42)

This passage of man from earth to somewhere beyond, while certain things remain, as if unaffected and, therefore, unaware, receives a different handling in Camus’ *The Stranger*, where M. Mersault accepts it with equanimity, reminding himself that it is common knowledge that

‘... life isn’t worth living, anyhow.’ And, on a wide view, I could see that it makes little difference whether one dies at the age of thirty or threescore and ten—since, in either case, other men and women will continue living, the world will go on as before. Also, whether I died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably. (70-71)

The persona of “Elegy II”, on the other hand, is simply not accepting his situation. He is neither satisfied in life nor in death. Indeed his search is for a better life in the temporal world, not a passage to the great beyond. This is the import of lines 73-75, where we read: “If only we too could discover a pure, contained / human place, a strip of fruitful land of our own, / between river and stone!”

4. The Reference of the Text: Lifting The Suspense to Fulfill the Text

Having seen the patterns of sense making within the text, what remains is to attempt a lifting of “the suspense”, so as to “fulfill the text” (*Hermeneutics* 152); “[t]o raise the question of the referential value of poetic language, [which] is to try to show how symbolic systems reorganize ‘the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world’” (“Metaphorical Process” 152); “to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* towards the orient of the text” (*Hermeneutics* 162). To interpret a poem or account for its reference is necessarily to return to metaphor, for Ricouer has taught that the matter of reference is the matter of “the power of metaphor to project and reveal a new world” (*Rule of Metaphor* 108). The poem “Elegy II” projects this new world as a world where the Angel which is a divine form is brought at the same level with mortal man, under the

same cosmic power that is apprehended in the poem as *transience*, with all the features akin to temporality, and even mortality. The persona betrays his amazement at this in asking the Angels “what are you” (line 9). Hardly has the persona observed their beautiful features than everything turns into a solitary mirror, ungraspable, not available for the journey, as in the days of Tobias. The persona is also vanishing, and the Angels cannot hold him back, nor even themselves (line 20-21), for all has become mere “[a]pppearance, [that] endlessly, stands up, / in their face, and goes by. Like dew from the morning grass, / what is ours rises from us, like the heat, / from a dish that is warmed” (line 23-25). Here in these two principal metaphors of morning dew and a dish that is warmed crystallises the central motif of flight, and *un-enduring*, which applies no less to the Angels as to man: breaking down the borders of our understanding of the phenomena ‘angels’ and ‘man’ and creating a new reality – a new world where the angels and man are perceived as same. It is now easy to see the connection between the Angels as early successes and man as dew from the morning grass. Hence one can ask, is the dew from morning grass not an early success that turns into a solitary mirror and becomes an appearance, as soon as the sun rises? Even though it is a kind of water, does it have the power to nourish man and keep him from vanishing? Is this not “the sense of ancient evil, of ‘the blight man was born for,’ of the permanence and mystery of human suffering that is basic to the tragic sense of life?” But the poem projects a world, where the blight is not only for man, but also for Angels, all being subject to death. Yet we know that in religious discourses of the world, where angels belong, they are known as spirits, and therefore immortal. So we conclude in agreement with Ricoeur, that There are probably no words so incompatible that some poet could not build a bridge between them; the power to create new contextual meanings seems to be truly limitless. Attributions that appear to be ‘non-sensical’ can make sense in some unexpected context.

No speaker ever completely exhausts the connotative possibilities of his words. (111)

This is the power of poetic metaphor, the innovative capacity to create new convergence of meanings, where every primary signalling function is suspended for the emergence of a second order of meaning that is novel; it is the power of literature to create a new startling world with an infinite capacity to ‘enlighten’ the reader.

CONCLUSION

From the issues raised in this paper, we believe that the emergence of a literary text raises a new reality different from its pre-textual material. Its language often sounds discordant and hardly refers to the material world of man as it is, for which reason it makes no claim of truthfulness and thus demands that the reader takes it on its own terms, simply as a coherent whole. Its meaning, if one is to find any, belongs solely to it and is to be sought within it and not elsewhere behind it: it emerges whole and has no need of authentication.

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