

# Repetition and death in Shelley's 'Epipsychidion': a post-structuralist reading

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## Summary

In response to the criticism frequently levelled against contemporary literary theory, that it disregards and devalues the literary text, this article attempts to show how post-structuralism can feasibly be employed, vis-a-vis Shelley's 'Epipsychidion', as a strategy of reading literary texts without detracting from their enjoyment.

The article first examines a few key concepts and their ramifications that together constitute the theoretical field in terms of which a post-structuralist reading can be engaged in. While the concepts examined – difference, displacement, desire, and figuration – are common to most post-structuralist writers, the importance given to, as well as the particular use of, a given concept naturally varies considerably.

Having staked out the theoretical field in a necessarily cursory manner, the article offers a reading of 'Epipsychidion' that attempts to illustrate the poem's preoccupation with its own discursive mode. The reading attempts to show that although the poem endeavours to transcend its status as language and in so doing escape the limitations imposed on it, this endeavour must inevitably fail.

## Opsomming

Kontemporêre literêre teorie word dikwels gekritiseer omdat dit die teks sou ignoreer en nie na waarde skat nie. In 'n reaksie hierteen probeer hierdie artikel om aan te toon hoe post-strukturalisme – met spesifieke verwysing na Shelley se 'Epipsychidion' – gebruik sou kon word as 'n strategie vir die lees van literêre tekste en wel met behoud van die genot wat dergelike tekste veronderstel is om te ontlok.

Daar word eerstens gekyk na 'n paar sleutelkonsepte en hulle vertakkinge wat die teoretiese apparaat uitmaak in terme waarvan 'n post-strukturalistiese lesing van 'n literêre teks sou kon plaasvind. Alhoewel die konsepte wat ondersoek word – verskil, verplasing, begeerte en figurasië – algemeen gebruik word deur die meeste post-strukturaliste, bestaan daar verskil van mening oor die belangrikheid en/of die spesifieke gebruik van bepaalde konsepte. Na 'n onvermydelik kursoriese omskrywing van die teoretiese veld word 'Epipsychidion' op so 'n manier gelees dat die beheptheid van die gedig met sy eie skryfwyse uitgelig word. Daar word aangetoon dat, alhoewel die gedig probeer ontsnap aan die beperkinge wat deur sy taalmodus aan hom opgelê word, hierdie strewe noodwendig moet misluk.

The term post-structuralism refers to the diverse body of theory that has followed in the wake of structuralism, but that nevertheless coheres broadly around the notion of the indeterminacy of the text. The term includes Deconstruction (Jacques Derrida), Psychoanalytic theory (Jacques Lacan), and theories of discourse and/or rhetoric developed by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Paul de Man.<sup>1</sup>

Post-structuralism shatters two of the fundamental premises that underpin the theory and practice of traditionalist criticism,<sup>2</sup> those of the unity of the sign and the unity of the human subject. In their place post-structuralism posits the concepts of difference and displacement.

What is taken over from structuralism is the discovery of the differential or fractured sign, indicating that the link between signifier and signified is arbitrary and forced rather than natural. The implications of this postulate are elaborated by post-structuralists who argue that, this being the case, word and concept do not coincide to form a closed circle of signification. Consequently meaning is said to be deferred within the network of the textual field rather than present as a stable, accessible, self-identical entity. In the idiom of post-structuralism, the text yields an indeterminate play of meaning – a conception that constitutes a radical departure from the structuralist retention of a meaning that is imminent.

Similarly the notion of a unified, self-identical subject is replaced by the notion of a fragmented and displaced self. The locus of selfhood is said to reside in the interstice of interacting forces, such as conscious and unconscious, sanity and madness, internal and external, subject and object. As in the case of the sign, the self is regarded as differentially structured rather than ontologically determined. Jacques Lacan maintains that to believe in the self as a fixed and unified phenomenon is to fall victim to the spectral ego, first conceived during infancy as the result of a false identification with the mirror-image of the self.<sup>3</sup>

The self solicits identity, fulfilment, integration, in much the same way as the text solicits, but fails to achieve, the completion, the wholeness of meaning. In both cases the dynamic is that of desire: the yearning for a primordially lost object that if gained would confer unity on what is revealed to be fissured. From the point of view of post-structuralism, therefore, the self is a linguistic construct. Like language it follows the fundamental laws of metaphor and metonymy (in this context metaphor denotes the play of similarity and difference, while metonymy denotes displacement). The self, to adapt Lacan's phrase, is structured like a language.<sup>4</sup>

Two implications of the post-structuralist perspective require brief consideration. The one concerns the materiality of the text and the other its figurative status.

Because traditionalist criticism regards the signifier as a transparent medium through which the transcendental signified may be apprehended directly, the concern of traditionalist criticism is primarily with what a word means. By contrast post-structuralism regards the signifier as opaque and as a result gives prominence to the signifier over the signified. In this way attention is drawn to the material component of the signification. Of interest then to post-structuralism is the etymology of a word, including historical mutations, as well as a word's relationship with other verbal elements in the textual field. From this perspective the discursive system in which the material signifier is lodged is of overriding importance. The post-structuralist reader is particularly interested in the assumptions hidden in a given material system. Nothing is taken for granted. He enters the density of materiality, pursuing chimerical signifying relations without recourse to the certainty of a metaphysical absolute and the comfort of a fixed conceptual realm. He does not look through an ostensibly transparent text at a reality beyond. His reality is the text and all its rhetorical devices, syntactical constraints, sleights of hand,

aberrations, doubts, lacunae, and figures. The post-structuralist reader follows the innumerable contours of the text, questioning the text's autonomy and relating its discourse to language in general.

Of pivotal importance is the observation that, by virtue of its differential structure, language cannot represent a reality beyond it. The vertical relationship traditionally assumed to exist between a material signifier and a transcendental signified is severed and replaced by a horizontal relationship between signifiers. Signification is said to arise solely owing to the differences between words. Accordingly language is doomed to refer back to itself in a perpetual narcissistic gesture of selfconsciousness. It is reflexive and irrevocably figurative. In the case, for instance, of metaphor, language conceals difference under a simulacrum of similarity and announces itself as truth. Similarly a whole theology, ideology, or cosmology is based on governing figures that attempt to hide their figurative status under a guise of presence, of re-presentation, of being, of the thing-in-itself, of essence.<sup>5</sup>

The text's claim on truth is an act of violence as the text seeks thereby to supplant all other claims on truth. Of interest is how this act of violence is perpetrated. What are the mechanisms of power latent in the text? The post-structuralist reader acknowledges and respects the resourcefulness of the text and examines all the means the text employs in an attempt to transcend its textual nature and transgress its limits.

A useful point of departure in the attempt to locate the vagaries of a text's discourse is to identify and examine its contradictions. Shelley's poem 'Epipsychidion' is composed as an elaborate confession of love to Emily. In this poem there is a glaring discrepancy in the fact that it declares itself, by its title, to be a discourse on the soul and yet proceeds to invoke an intensely erotic vision of total, and fatal, intercourse.

Woe is me!  
 The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
 Into the height of Love's rare Universe,  
 Are chains of lead around its flight of fire –  
 I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (587-591)

The soul is on a 'flight of fire' in its attempt to 'pierce' the 'rare Universe' of love. With the words 'I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire' the speaker achieves a climax in death. The poem has ended.

Immediately before this passage the speaker avers to the imminence of absolute union with Emily.

We shall become the same, we shall be one  
 Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?  
 One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,  
 Till like two meteors of expanding flame,  
 Those spheres instinct with it become the same,  
 Touch, mingle, are transfigured: ever still  
 Burning, yet ever inconsumable . . . (573-579)

The speaker is consumed in so far as his final words are followed by the white silence of the page. Both the speaker and Emily cease to exist beyond the poem. They are annihilated by the terminal mark, the dot on the page, which relegates them to non-being. Yet both are inconsumable as long as the text remains and there is someone who reads it. As a result their existence is a function of repetition and, as Freud pointed out, repetition is orientated towards death.

The union of the speaker and Emily – and thus of the numerous oppositions they embody, such as soul and body, word and action – is only a potential union. The actual union is enveloped in impregnable death. If they are transfigured in a higher synthesis that overcomes dualism, as the speaker urges one in the above extract to believe they are, this transfiguration is of the same order as the transfiguration of the living organism into a corpse. Conflict is resolved in the serenity of the dead man's features.

Who, one may ask, is this Emily that she can inspire such an intense erotomania, such a morbid passion?

See where she stands! A mortal shape indued  
 With love and life and light and deity,  
 And motion which may change but cannot die;  
 An image of some bright Eternity;  
 A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour  
 Leaving the third sphere pilotless; a tender  
 Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love  
 Under whose motions life's dull billows move;  
 A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning;  
 A Vision like incarnate April, warning,  
 With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy  
 Into his summer grave.  
 Ah, woe is me!  
 What have I dared, where am I lifted? how  
 Shall I descend, and perish not? (112-125)

The speaker's endeavour to merge with Emily is closely paralleled by his endeavour to bring about an identification between his language and its efficacious meaning. For purposes of economy the two oppositions – speaker and Emily, language and meaning – can be collapsed into the more inclusive opposition of self and other.

In his attempt to unite with Emily, who is said to be 'Youth's vision . . . made perfect' (42), the speaker's sole recourse is language. His success is measurable only against the success of his language in bringing about this consummatory act. As a first step towards their ecstatic union, Emily must be situated within a linguistic system. In this respect the terms used to characterize Emily are significant. Her presence is established with categorical certainty: look, there she stands. But what is she? She is a mortal shape, an image, a shadow, a reflection, a metaphor, and finally a vision. In other words, what the speaker would have the reader believe is that Emily is present in as much as she is mortal shape, but also absent in as much as she is a mere image, a shadow, a hallucination. Not surprisingly this paradox

conforms to the paradox of language itself in so far as both involve the play of presence and absence.

Of all the terms used to characterize Emily, pre-eminent is that of metaphor. The other terms can be regarded as attributes of metaphor in that metaphor has shape, is an image, has the qualities of shadow and reflection, and communicates a vision. Emily is metaphor. The poem therefore reveals an incisive awareness of its own status as language. In addition, or perhaps above all, the poem evinces an awareness of its status as literature. For the poem is informed by a tradition that embraces Solomon's comely beloved, his fairest among women, and Dante's Beatrice. Here is Shelley's song of yearning for the supernal female, the inaccessible other.

There was a Being whom my spirit oft  
 Met in its visioned wanderings, far aloft,  
 In the clear golden prime of my youth's dawn,  
 Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn,  
 Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves  
 Of divine sleep, and on the air-like waves  
 Of wonder-level dream, whose tremulous floor  
 Paved her light steps; – on an imagined shore,  
 Under the gray beak of some promontory  
 She met me, robed in such exceeding glory,  
 That I beheld her not. In solitudes  
 Her voice came to me through the whispering woods,  
 And from the fountains, and the odours deep  
 Of flowers, which, like lips murmuring in their sleep  
 Of the sweet kisses which had lulled them there,  
 Breathed but of her to the enamoured air;  
 And from the breezes whether low or loud,  
 And from the rain of every passing cloud,  
 And from the singing of the summer-birds,  
 And from all sounds, all silence. In the words  
 Of antique verse and high romance, – in form  
 Sound, colour – in whatever checks that Storm  
 Which with the shattered present chokes the past;  
 And in that best philosophy, whose taste  
 Makes this cold common hell, our life, a doom  
 As glorious as a fiery martyrdom;  
 Her spirit was the harmony of truth. (190–216)

The being encountered in 'visioned wanderings' is both perceived and not perceived: 'She met me, robed in such exceeding glory. That I beheld her not'. Seen and unseen, she is also heard and unheard: she speaks from 'all sounds, all silence'. Because language operates according to a system of irreducible logic, it cannot sustain the task entrusted to it of conjuring up the presence of something that is absent and radically alterior. The contradiction splits open the text and reveals an abyss of self-doubt, an aporia.

If language were capable of capturing essence, a single statement would suffice to establish that essence. In addition a book of books, a summa summatum, could then conceivably be produced that would embrace all there

is to know of human existence. That there is no such statement nor text points to the poverty of language, its inherent impotency. Language is already a repetition, a substitution, a re-presentation, a mark of erasure and absence. As Foucault asserts in his inimitable style:

Before the imminence of death, language rushes forth, but it also starts again, tells of itself, discovers the story of the story and the possibility that this interpretation may never end. Headed towards death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits. (1977: 54)

The speaker in 'Epipsychidion' admits freely that the task of communicating the essence of Emily lies beyond his powers.

I measure  
The world of fancies, seeking one like thee,  
And find – alas! mine own infirmity. (69-71)

Given that Emily is metaphor, what the speaker pursues is a metaphor of metaphor, an image of an image in an infinite play of reflection and counter-reflection that gives no evidence of an origin or source.

The speaker attributes his inability to capture and be captivated totally by his beloved to weakness, infirmity, lack of strength. So he makes a renewed attempt, starting yet another narrative sequence. When this fails to deliver the desired result, a further narrative sequence is started. This pattern is repeated until the sequences are silenced by death. Clearly there is no real beginning nor end to the narratives. They are arbitrary discursive elaborations that defer meaning endlessly.

In this poem one is confronted with the polymorphous multiplicity of the other. One is faced with the numerous faces assumed by the self in the other. The poem makes clear that there is no monistic truth in respect of human emotions and understanding. Although the speaker refers to 'the harmony of truth' embodied by the being whom he met in 'the caves/ of divine sleep', the terms 'truth' and 'being' ought to be read in conjunction with passages that undermine their seemingly monistic character.

Love is like understanding, that grows bright,  
Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,  
Imagination! which from earth and sky,  
And from the depths of human fantasy,  
As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills  
The universe with glorious beams, and kills  
Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow  
Of its reverberated lighting. Narrow  
The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,  
The life that wears, the spirit that creates  
One object, and one form, and builds thereby  
A sepulchre for its eternity. (162-173)

To appreciate fully the polyvalency of 'Epipsychidion', its many strengths, one would have to examine the manifold styles deployed by Shelley, ranging from giddy lyricism to measured explanation, from the rhapsody of love to the sobriety of contemplation. Such an examination would include a close analysis of the various rhetorical devices used, as well as the dominant imagery and shifting tones and moods of the poem. In certain respects this procedure is similar to that undertaken by traditionalist criticism. Its object, however, is radically different. As the above analysis has attempted to illustrate, such a procedure involves an examination of the text's dialogue with itself and its own limits rather than with a transcendental reality of stable meanings beyond it.

By way of conclusion a few observations on the status of the critical work in relation to that of the imaginative work, as practised by traditionalist criticism and post-structuralism respectively, might prove helpful.

Traditionalist criticism gives privileged status to the imaginative work and relegates to itself the function of mediator. What it mediates is a unified meaning in which all contradictions, incongruities, and conundrums are resolved by the ingenuity of the critic. But despite the fact that the critical text is said to be secondary, it manifestly plays a primary role in the determination and extrapolation of meaning.

Post-structuralism, on the other hand, does not claim a privileged status for any text. In so far as language is metaphorical, rhetorical, or figurative, it is caught up in the substitution of one verbal unit for another. The critical text cannot speak about the imaginative text; it can only speak in the place of it. Texts supplant one another rather than elucidate or illuminate one another.

Naturally the same logic applies to the present article. It represents neither an exposition of post-structuralism nor does it offer an explanation of Shelley's 'Epipsychidion'. The reading is trapped in its own textual operations. It is ensnared in the figures it has generated, which speak loudly about themselves but beyond that are silent.

## Notes

1. A succinct introduction to post-structuralist theory, and one on which I have based many of my observations in this article, is Robert Young's 'Post-structuralism: an Introduction' (1981). This introductory essay examines the relationship between structuralism and post-structuralism and discusses the overall concern of post-structuralism in the light of its major practitioners.  
In this article I have drawn on the pronouncements of many post-structuralist thinkers and used their conceptual frameworks in an eclectic and highly opportunistic fashion. For the reader in search of a more detailed exposition of the individual positions of these thinkers I would recommend *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism* (Harari, 1979) and *Untying the Text: a Post-structuralist Reader* (Young, 1981).
2. As employed by Young (1981), the phrase traditionalist criticism refers to all criticism that is founded on a conception of language that regards meaning as imminent or present. This would include Formalism, New Criticism, hermeneutic

criticism and structuralism, as well as certain forms of psychoanalytic criticism and Marxist criticism.

3. Lacan uses the concept of Self and Other to effect a displacement of the Self in the Other: 'The Other is . . . the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks to him who hears, that which is said by the one being already the reply, the other deciding to hear it whether the one has or has not spoken' (1977: 141).

See also the following paraphrase of Lacan's views: 'Whereas the ego, first glimpsed at the mirror stage, is the reified product of the successive imaginary identifications and is cherished as the stable or would-be stable seat of personal "identity", the subject is no thing at all and can be grasped only as a set of tensions, or mutations, or dialectical upheavals within a continuous, intentional, future-directed process' (Bowie, 1979: 131).

4. This is an allusion to Lacan's well-known claim that the unconscious is structured like a language.
5. It is of course Derrida who most thoroughly embarks on a critique of western metaphysics by exposing the metaphorical basis of its claims on absolute truth. Nowhere is this done more convincingly than in 'White mythology: metaphor in the text of philosophy' (1974).

In this regard important also is de Man's examination of the epistemological implications of the figurative nature of language in 'The epistemology of metaphor' (1978).

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