

## **“La proximité de cet homme”: a case of Victorian deconstruction?**

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*Abstract.* I observe that the aim and method of a Victorian text within Shakespeare criticism overlaps significantly with deconstruction.

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In one of his letters on the English nation, Voltaire describes the poetical genius of the English so far:

Hitherto the poetical genius of the English resembles a tufted tree planted by the hand of Nature, that throws out a thousand branches at random, and spreads unequally, but with great vigour. It dies if you attempt to force its nature, and to lop and dress it in the same manner as the trees of the Garden of Marli. (1733: letter XVIII)

In this letter, he also translates from Shakespeare and it is presumably Shakespeare especially that he has in mind. The natural fecundity of Shakespeare versus the orderliness of classical authors!

This is some background information. Let us move forward to Victorian times. Early on in a course of lectures, published in 1863, we are provided with a justification for focusing on minor characters within the works of the English playwright:

When I first proposed to myself the undertaking of a Course of Lectures upon the Genius of Shakespeare, my first feeling was, that I could scarcely hope to

originate any new theory upon the principal characters in his dramas; for they have been subjected to and have passed the ordeal of the most acute critical intellects of the most civilised nations of the world during more than a century past; and therefore for a while I suspended my intention. But then it occurred to me that the secondary movements, the “subordinate characters” in his plots, have, to a considerable extent, been neglected,—the satellites of the several systems have been merged in the rays of their presiding and controlling suns. Of these “subordinate characters” it became my “hint to speak,” according to my homely wit; and I hoped to show passages of beauty that have been either too superficially, even thoughtlessly read, mayhap altogether overlooked, and some delicate points of character that have been undeservedly neglected. (Clarke 1863:

3)

Prior to his lectures I imagine someone asking this Shakespeare critic, named Charles Cowden Clarke, “What are you talking about minor characters for? Aren’t these two the main characters of that play?” for example Anthony and Cleopatra. At this point perhaps the critic is unsure what to say. He is interested in this material, but has no answer to this forceful question. Then he decides to open his lectures with the following explanation: there is some overlooked beauty elsewhere in the play. His argument, which we can call “the neglected beauty argument,” is this:

- (1) *If much has been said about the main characters and there is some overlooked beauty involving only minor ones, then we are justified in attending to that instead of the main characters.*

- (2) *Much has been said about the main characters and there is some overlooked beauty involving only minor ones.*

*Therefore:*

- (3) *We are justified in attending to that instead of the main characters.*

The conclusion follows from the premises and I shall suppose the premises are not objectionable.

But the critic goes on to say something which reveals a much grander ambition:

I did not, therefore, take up this subject because the principal points in the plays have been treated to repletion, but to make manifest that the secondary ones are rich in nature and dramatic effect; and, in consequence, upon addressing myself to my task, I was constantly impressed with one feature in Shakespeare's intellectual organisation, and that is the pervading harmony of his inferior characters with the great and single end he had in view towards the developing and maturing of his plan. (1863: 3-4)

This suggests a quite different argument for focusing beyond the main characters, which we can call "the structural argument." The argument is as follows.

- (1) *If understanding the structures is of value but to achieve it one must carefully attend to material involving only minor characters, then it is of value to carefully attend to this material.*
- (2) *Understanding the structures is of value but to achieve it one must carefully attend to material involving only minor characters.*

*Therefore:*

- (3) *It is of value to carefully attend to material involving only minor characters.*

Beyond this structural argument, the passage also suggests the aim of overturning the contrast between the orderly classical genius and the disorderly English genius, by developing a more exact understanding of the structures of English plays, by means of attending to these neglected passages. That is why I say that a much grander ambition is revealed. An exact understanding will apparently demonstrate that the contrast is misleading. For this critic, there is some difference, but it is a difference within the well-structured, rather than between the well-structured and the disorderly.

There is a close resemblance here to the deconstructive literary-philosophical criticism which became more and more dominant in the 1970s. In terms of method, there is an emphasis on attending to textual evidence that others overlook. And the pervading spirit is one of science in general, rather than one which depends on an opposition between the study of natural scientific objects and the study of the arts. One can imagine the same points being made in a language like “Is there a rigorous and scientific concept of...” (Derrida 1977) In terms of the result, or aimed for result, it is supposed to be a justified rejection of a dualistic representation. But there are differences as well. When the deconstructivist claims to be deconstructing a dualism, it is usually something (seemingly) less local than the classical genius versus the English genius, such as the literal and the metaphorical, or philosophy versus rhetoric (see Morris 2000). Also our Victorian critic is trying to reveal a coherent structure, whereas deconstructivists regard impressions of coherence with suspicion at best (Battaglia 1990: 4). Nevertheless, I wonder whether there is enough in common for us to say that we are dealing with deconstruction *avant la lettre*. But to accept this would not fit well with the textbook portrait of literary criticism based on civilized intuition replaced by more scientific theories in the 1960s

(Eagleton 2008: xii); and even richer histories of an earlier age leave only a faint sense of how to incorporate such a claim (Blamires 1991). In an earlier paper, the first quotation above led me to wonder whether there are cases of Victorian deconstruction; but actually one does not have to look far for a plausible candidate – it is merely a matter of reading on.

## References

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