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Should Poems be Paraphrased of Not?

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Abstract

Paraphrasing poems has been in question among literary theorists and ciritics. The New Critics are among the theorists who reject paraphrasing for many reasons, instead they prefer reading poems closely. This paper aims to present why the New Critics keep away from paraphrasing poems and choose to read the text closely, and show how close reading technique can be applied to poems. For this reason, the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" by one of the leading figures of the 20th century literature, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, has been chosen to be read closely and support the idea of the New Critics by means of the close reading of the mentioned poem.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Paraphrasing, in other words, expressing the meaning of something, using different words, especially to achieve greater clarity, has long been a matter of debate among literary theorists. While some theorists are in favour of paraphrasing poems, others are against to it and claim that poems should not be paraphrased. The New Critics are among theorists who reject paraphrasing poems and prefer close reading technique instead of paraphrasing. The aim of this paper is to show that, as the New Critics assert, poems should not be paraphrased. Because they are too complicated to be paraphrased and we cannot be sure about what is going on in the poet's mind and how he thinks. In this article, it is presented how a poem could be analyzed through a close reading, instead of paraphrasing. The poem "Sailing to Byzantium" by one of the leading figures of the 20th century literature, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, has been chosen to be studied. Paraphrasing has been avoided as much as possible. Alternatively, the poem has been analyzed through the close reading method of the New Critics, by presenting examples of harmony, contradictions, complexities, paradoxes, possibilities and ambiguity in it.

First of all, poems are too complicated to be paraphrased, and it is not possible for any reader to express a poem with his own words. The complicatedness and complexity of poems stem from the type of language used in poems and its characteristics. Since poems are literary works, literary language is used for writing them, and literary language is ambiguous, it does not have a fixed meaning. On the other hand, if poems had been written in scientific language, the lines would have conveyed single meaning which everyone would understand the same thing. In

their theory of literature, the New Critics Rene Wellek and Austin Warren compare literary language with scientific language. They state that, scientific language is denotative; it has no ambiguity, what it says is the same with what it means. As to literary language, it has plenty of ambiguities, so it is "connotative". In addition, literary language has an expressive function and therefore, what it means may be totally opposite of or different from what it says. It aims to influence the reader, by changing, persuading or impressing him (2-3). It can be concluded that, if poems were not literary works and were written in scientific language, it could have been possible to paraphrase them. Because, the meaning would not have varied in scientific language. Nevertheless, poems are written in literary language, and literary language has characteristics of being ambiguous and subjective. It means that, there is no, one single way to express literary language and its meaning. Therefore, it would be a fallacy to dare to express the poet's feelings and words with your own words.

Secondly, the reader cannot be sure about what is going on in the poet's mind and how he thinks. For example, the poem may have pronouns, and the only person who knows ,who or what the pronouns stand for, is the poet. As to the reader, what the reader can only do is, make a guess about what the poet thinks in his mind. The New Critic Raman Selden reminds us what, an another leading New Critic and poet T. S. Eliot thinks of the poet's mind. , T.S. Eliot emphasizes that, the poet's mind resembles to a laboratory which is "impersonal". In this lab, many types of materials, which are historical, literary, experiential, cultural etc. gain new forms. Finally, the poem is formed. Selden also adds that, the reason why we consider some poets great are because they have a language which is impossible to be expressed one more time by the ordinary words of other people (25-26). Therefore, it is possible that the reader could misunderstand the poet and misinterpret his words. In conclusion, if the reader insists in paraphrasing the poem, this person could mislead the other people about the poem.

 Since the reader can never be sure about what is going on in the poets mind, paraphrase could result in the misinterpretation of the poem, or take the reader to a direction that the poet has never intended to mean.

2. DISCUSSION

If it is not possible to paraphrase a poem, how can the reader analyse a particular poem? According to the New Critics, the answer is, by a close reading of the text. At this stage, how can a poem be read closely without paraphrasing?

The reader can start reading a poem closely, firstly, by focusing on the language and the vocabulary choice of the poet. He can pay attention to the words, which the poet repeats and emphasizes. Secondly, it can be estimated, who the story-teller is possible to be. Thirdly, the reader can study on the pronouns. He can present the possibilities about who or what the pronouns refer to. Fourthly, it could be searched, if there are any words used as symbols. Comparisons could be found out. In addition, the reader can try to reveal if there any contradictory ideas in the poem. Moreover, ambiguous words or expressions could be presented. According to Selden and his New Critic colleague Peter Widdowson a text is read closely by placing emphasis on the text and the language how it speaks.. Moreover, connections between different parts of the text should be struggled to find out, how the text manages to have order and harmony should be observed. The irony, paradox, tension, ambivalence and ambiguity in the text should be searched, and then, how they disappear in the end should be explored. They also remind that, criticism of a text should be objective, scientific and disinterested, and such an evaluation is possible with a close and disinterested analysis of the text (11-13).

After having presented why the New Critics keep away from paraphrase, and the outline for an alternate method of analysis; close reading, the study continues with the application of the close reading to the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" by William Butler Yeats.

Sailing to Byzantium
That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

The title of the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" makes me wonder if the speaker is going to talk about a real journey he has had before, or take us to an imaginary journey; a journey of his thoughts and imagination. In this real or imaginative journey, the speaker refers to a country in the first stanza. "That country" could be any country. It could be the country that the speaker comes from, or it may be any country in which any of the readers live. What we know about this country is that, it is lively; because, the words young, birds, fish, trees, summer, etc. are possibly symbolizing the liveliness of that country. At first, as you read the first two lines of the poem, you may become impressed by the joy of life; "the young in one another's arms", "birds in the trees". On the other hand, as you go on reading the same stanza, you encounter many expressions that could be associated with death. For instance, "Those dying generations" and "die" are related to death. This is one remarkable point throughout the poem. It has many contrasting terms used together and you may become confused by the shift from one term to another opposing term. For example, young versus old, life versus death, born versus die and body versus soul. Moreover, in the last line of the first stanza, the word "monument" cannot be used in its real meaning, because monuments can be unageing, but they cannot have intellect since they are not living things. Therefore, by "monuments of unageing intellect", the poet is probably referring to the old.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

In the second stanza, an aged man is identified as "a paltry thing" and "a tattered coat". Moreover, "mortal dress" is possibly symbolizing the body of an old person. Those expressions could be used to convey allegorical meaning by the poet, because a paltry thing is something worthless, and a tattered coat is also usually old, torn and useless. Therefore, the poet could be referring to and complaining about the status of the old in society, since oldmen are sometimes not given importance and respected by the young. He may also have sailed to the Byzantium to

escape this fate. Moreover, there has been a personification in the third line. After having been identified with words like a paltry thing and a tattered coat, old people are described as "monuments of its own magnificence" in the sixth line. Therefore, it is not surprising the reader becomes confused with the ambiguity of the terms that the old are described. Because, the words defining the old, paltry and tattered are opposing to the word magnificent. Moreover, with the word "therefore", we can guess that, the speaker explains the reason why he left his country. Finally, the speaker arrives at a holy city of Byzantium. Which city is this? I think it is confusing. Perhaps, it is Constantinople, or perhaps it is Rome.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

As I have stated in the beginning, the speaker focuses on words related to art. In the first two stanzas, he referred to music and monuments. In the second line of the third stanza above, he refers to a different kind of work of art; mosaics. We can infer that, "the holy fire" is symbolizing heaven. Because, sages cannot be coming from hell. In the third line, by "perne in a gyre", the speaker may be making reference to circle of life. As he has stated in the first stanza as "the dying generations", he is probably trying to focus the reader's attention to the fact that, people and the other living things are born, but in the end, they all die and this circle goes on like this. Moreover, the speaker shifts from mortality to immortality in this stanza. In addition, he does not concentrate on the body any more, but focuses on the soul. What may be the connection between art and soul, or eternity? Perhaps, art symbolizes immortality and eternity, because, people die, but art works may last forever, and artists are remembered by their art works after they die.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

In the fourth and the last stanza, the art work mentioned is the hammered gold that Grecian goldsmiths make. We can infer that the speaker wants to transform into a statue of a golden bird. Because, "set upon a golden bough to sing" gives the reader the clue that, we have the symbol of "bird" again. Finally, with this transformation, the poet could be emphasizing the mortality of the physical body and the immortality and eternity of the soul and art.

Consequently, confused with the quick shifts from mortality to immortality, body to soul, life and death at first sight, the reader could easily come to an end with different ideas, and make

up many connections and inferences. I think this is possible by the richness of Yeats' expression of thoughts.

3. CONCLUSION

In the end, Yeats' poem may drag each reader to different feelings or thoughts, since it is an art work and it was written in literary language. Inferences and understanding of each of those readers could be different, and the poem could be interpreted in hundreds of ways. As readers of the poem, since none of us is Yeats, none of our thinking and so, self-interpretation could be the same as Yeats. Moreover, we cannot be sure about what the poet had in his mind during the time he was writing the poem. Therefore, we should not paraphrase it. As the New Critic Cleanth Brooks underlines, "Paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem"(197)". As he says, "If we allow ourselves to be mislead by it,we distort the relationship of the poem to its truth" (201). In this case, rather than paraphrasing, we should read the poem closely as the New Critics advise us, without destroying the artistic features in it, and the poet's feelings and thoughts.

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