

Language and Difference: A Deconstructive Reading Of Niyi Osundare's "Poetry Is" and Abubakar Othman's "Wordsworth Lied"

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Abstract. The paper examines, using Deconstruction as an analytical framework, the desire by Niyi Osundare and Abubakar Othman to resolve the problematics in and around the composition and reading of poetry in particular and literature in general. The analysis of Osundare's "Poetry Is" and Othman's "Wordsworth Lied" demonstrates the ways in which language is not a transparent medium for the representation of truth, knowledge, beliefs since the reading of poetry must scrupulously and tenaciously tease out the point at which the texts differ from themselves. Indeed, language may be a medium through which humans express thoughts, feelings, ideas or forge an identity, but it cannot be reduced to a subjective apprehension. Arguably, the play of difference within language is what makes identity possible and at the same time, thwarts it infinitely. Therefore, the paper concludes with the argument that the two speakers in the selected poems are caught up in self-contradiction or auto-deconstruction, in that there are tensions between what they meant and what the texts say.

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1 Introduction

There is always already deconstruction, at work in works, especially in literary works. Derrida (1986). In the case of culture, person, nation, language, identity is a self-differentiating identity, an identity different from itself, having an opening or gap within itself. Derrida (1997). Niyi Osundare is one of the leading figures among Nigerian second generation poets that emerge immediately after the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 and 1970. The emergence of Osundare on the Nigerian literary scene marks a paradigm shift in the composition of poetry. For Osundare, poetry should serve as a transparent medium of human expression, feelings, thoughts through which individuals come to grasp the social, political, economic, and historical reality within their immediate society. To do this job satisfactorily, poets must employ poetic aesthetics that are not rooted "in Greco-Roman lore", but are indigenous to all readers irrespective of their social

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status. Arguably, Osundare's iconoclastic tendency could be seen as a revolutionary stance against Nigerian first generation poets such as Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo whose poetry collections are overwhelmed with "esoteric" dialect "entombed in Greco-Roman lore" (Anyokwu, 2015; Ekpenyong, 2014; Garuba, 2003).

Indeed, one of the poems in *Songs of the Marketplace* entitled "Poetry Is" serves as a viable poetic voice of what poetry should be for both African poets and readers. This poem, so to speak, calls into question the *retour aux* fixation of "Greco-Roman lore" or modernist aestheticization that informed the first generation writers. It is in this regard that Egya (2014) argues that Osundare, like Odia Ofeimun's "The Poet Lied", dismantles the long-established Euro-American poetic aesthetics in order to formulate a new poetic art that could serve "the plight of the peasant and the poor" (p. 16). Or, as Funso Aiyejina discursively argues: 'Ofeimun's concern with the oppressed, his anger at and impatience with opportunistic artists, public morality, cultural inadequacies, economic mismanagement [...] are qualities which he shares with Niyi Osundare" (cited in Egya, p. 17). This argument also finds expression in Osundare's most celebrated essay, "The Writer as Righter", where he derides Soyinka, Okigbo, Clark, and Echeruo because their political and poetic engagement is hinged on "a cacophony of mythmaking and impenetrable idiom" (cited in Egya, p. 32). However, the aspiration of this paper is to explore how this manifesto-poem or meta-poem is implicated in the deconstruction of what it sets out to banish; that is, how tropes undermine the central argument in the poem.

Another revolutionary figure in Nigerian literature is Abubakar Othman. Whereas Niyi Osundare is occupied with the question of poetic composition, Othman makes waves for a new trend in the criticism of African literature. The argument in the poem titled "Wordsworth Lied" is a case in point. Central to Othman's "Wordsworth Lied" is the proposition that criticism should go beyond the circle of the Romantic tradition of poetic composition and criticism. That is, readers should look beyond authorial sensibility towards a close reading which is not likely to illuminate the authorial feelings and response, to historical space that shapes his personality; the task of reader, so to speak, is to concentrate on the literary artefacts (*literariness*) of text. What reader comes to understand about the text is not metaphysically given but rather is progressively discovered through a critical scrutiny of what is at stake in the words on the page; in essence, the reader is concern with content and not form. In similar manner, Othman depicts the problematic inherent in writers' "attempts to reconcile their artistry to the sense of social commitment that confronts them in the literary tradition in which they find themselves" (Egya, pp. 50-51). Therefore, the central problematic of this paper is to demonstrate how the poem fails to vindicate its arguments within the premise of binary oppositions between authorial reading and intrinsic reading, between form and content.

The analytical framework for this paper is deconstruction with emphasis on Derrida's philosophical thought on reading and interpretation. Deconstruction's defense of textualism does not look forward to a discourse or language that can pin down the truth, reality of things. Deconstructionists, such as Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, and other deconstructionists, argue that language is figurative in nature; language operates on the basis of differentiation. Difference is what makes identity possible and at the same time thwarts it infinitely. Hence, language only offers, so to speak, opinion ("doxa") and not reality, truth or transcendental signified. Thus, inherent in human languages (spoken or written) is the plurality of an irreducible, indeterminant meaning. On this view, interpretation should itself be a kind of textual, rhetorical performance, much like the text it studies. That is, interpretation of text should be an unending dialogue between the text and the readers. To put it in the words of De Man (1971):

This dialogue between work and interpreter is endless...Understanding can be called complete only when it becomes aware of its own temporal predicament and realize that horizon within which the totalization can take place is time itself. The act of understanding is temporal act that has its own history, but this history forever eludes totalization (p. 32).

In this sense, both the writer and the reader should only wear the "mask of rhetoric" to offer a discourse that would not allow a desire for closure, or for anything which might exist beyond and outside of the text. This means that neither the author nor the reader, nor context is desirable but the text itself as a differential network of traces, so that both the text and interpretation can go on in their different ways as a moving or an unending chain of signifiers, an open-ended play of signification.

Derrida (1988) maintains that "no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation" (p. 136). For Derrida, the word "context" is another name for what he calls "a chain of possible substitutions" without a close or an end. Context can also be described as anything that cannot be apprehended directly, but only through a system of differences, a differential trace, and the interpretive experience. Deconstruction, therefore, posits that discourse should not be attributed or attached to origins to which interpretation could return to unfold meaning. In fact, Derrida (1982) has discursively argued that context is neither a name nor a concept but a moving chain of "non-synonymous substitutions" (pp. 7-12; see also Royle 2003, pp. 71-83). On this note, it is uncritical and misleading for Niyi Osundare and Abubakar Othman to pose the question of poetry and criticism in terms of what "is" without taking into consideration the differential network of traces. Therefore, the central problematic of this paper

is to explore how the play of figurative language undermines every attempt to totalize and to homogenize the identity of poetry. It is a reading which tries to find out how the selected texts are caught up in self (auto)-deconstruction.

2 The Problem of Definition

The title of the poem “Poetry is” and its repetition at the beginning of each stanza conveys the poetic speaker’s attempt to define what “poetry is” and what “poetry is” not. The speaker presents the major features that could be used as a yardstick for judging the overall standard of poetry as a genre of writing. In the first stanza, the speaker contends with and pillories the esotericism with which poetry has always been attributed to by Eurocentric poets. Such esoteric language, for the speaker, is not indigenous to the imaginative world of the reader; thereby “excluding” them from the intentionalism of the poem. He further maintains that poetry is a mere medium or device used to gain the attention and recognition of an alien audience. By implication, poetry is not an embodiment of allusion to Greek-Roman mythological representation of experience in the society. The exploration of the richness of the classical texts, for the speaker, is not a vital corrective tool for the prevalent issues that bewailed contemporary society. Poetry, which alludes to “Grecoroman lore”, tends to deliberately create an “esoteric whisper”, “excluding tongue”, “a clap trap”, “quiz”; all signifying a sense of ambiguity and exclusion. Poetry of such is personal and only gives an idea of meaning (*doxa*). Therefore, poetic composition that revolves around issues of “Grecoroman lore” is of *then* and *there*, rather than *here* and *now*. The speaker sees how deep Greek-Roman mythological representations and understanding of life and world had penetrated into the contemporary consciousness:

Poetry is

not the esoteric whisper

of an excluding tongue

not a clap trap

for a wondering audience

not a learned quiz

entombed in Grecoroman lore

Thus, the speaker accentuates, in stanza two, what he perceived to be an authentic poetry. Poetry is depicted as an essential figure of being and existence for the subaltern or local people, which serves as an inward exploration of human experience. The word “timbre”, in this stanza,

suggests the downtrodden in the society who have been isolated from the worldview of the so-called educated elite and, at the same time, pushed to the backwater side of the society. In essence, poetry forcefully moves the subaltern to action and forewarns the autocratic elite of the consequence of their action. On this basis, poetry serves as a medium of self-evaluation for the 'violent hierarchy between the elite and the peasants. For the speaker, poetry which attempts to explore human experience and predicament would interrogate with different groups of people both learned and unlearned, and with different social forces that shaped and undermined human life and experience. That is, any poem that explores social issues irrespective of gender, status, ethnicity, cultural origin receives lofty attention from the reader. The speaker employs imagery that is indigenous to local people whom he identifies with; such as "timbre" and "pluck."

The speaker further defines poetry as a representation of the masses' outcry. The masses are metaphorically referred to as "hawker". The expression "hawker's ditty" suggests the continuous complaints of the masses which have been fallen on the deaf ears of the elite. This gives an insight into the malicious attitude and insensitivity of the elite in their daily interaction with the masses. Poetry should draw the attention of the public ("the eloquence of the gong" and "the luminous ray") to the plight and disillusionment of the local people ("the lyric of the marketplace" and "the grass's morning dew"). The entire stanza three is structured around audio and visual imagery which are typical to the local setting: "hawker", "gong", "marketplace", "grass's morning dew".

The fourth stanza offers a revolutionary change of thought in the definition of poetry such that there is a paradigm shift in the poetic speaker's definitions of poetry. This qualitative leap of thought could be comprehended in the shift of definitions from social exploration to personal experience of the mind. On this basis, the speaker defines poetry as the outpouring of emotional feelings in tranquility. The tranquility of the mind is metaphorically described as "the soft wind" which appease to overflowing and sheer pleasure of emotional feeling, "musics to the dancing leaf". The personification, "dancing leaf", smacks of the unstable state of the speaker's mind. Thus, poetry has the power of reinforcement and intensification of feeling and excitement through the musical pattern and composition of rhythmical cadence. By implication, poetry is the liberation of the mind, a sheer pleasure of feelings, and a tender and relief song of the downtrodden.

what the sole tells the dusty path

what the bee hums to the alluring nectar

what rainfall croons the lowering eaves

Hence, in the speaker's view, poetry is not a philosophical discourse ("oracle's kernel") where "philosopher" took to philosophizing with a "stone"; that is, it is not a meta-discourse embellished with figurative language such as "esoteric whisper", "excluding tongue", "clap trap", "learned quiz", and "Greecoroman lore" and among other literary tropes. Thus, the speaker points out that philosophical or theoretical argument has no social and political implications; this implies that philosophy and theory have no useful essence and should be discarded. The speaker concludes on the note that the entire identity of poetry depends on the subjective apprehension of the reader. This means that it is the theoretical impulse of the individual reader that brings about the textual meaning of poetry. Therefore, the entire meaning of poetry is the outcome of an interaction between poetry and reader:

Poetry is

Man

Meaning to

Man

However, the question of the reductive simplifications in the meaning or the definition of poetry has been challenged by Deconstruction. The terseness of the poem's title suggests that poetry has a predetermined meaning. The repetition of the phrase, "Poetry is" – at the beginning of each stanza – brings to mind the attempt by the poetic speaker to pin down what poetry should be. The phrase is itself a deceptive one because it already connotes that poetry has been furnished with a final signified. That is, poetry as a unified practice of writing. A close reading of the poem clearly shows that the speaker is not strictly accentuating about what "Poetry is", or even what a particular poem could be but perhaps a description of a particular tradition of writing. It is a description because it seeks only to characterize, demonstrate, and represent what "Poetry is". It also attempts to explain what a kind or variety of "Poetry is".

Nietzsche has argued that all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated goes beyond the circle of definition or reappropriation; only that which has no history is definable. In essence, Nietzsche is of the opinion that poetry is a composition of language, figuration that cannot be frozen within a particular intellectual and ideological context. For

Nietzsche, poetry is not a stable tradition of writing, a finished product, a meta-language with a furnished meaning. On this premise, poetry is a composition of sign that is devoid of a definite meaning and always in a perpetual quest for its own meaning. The speaker attempts to define what "Poetry is" is a denial of writing as the *play* within language: the need to "search for the other of language" (Derrida 1986, p. 15), to bring to the fore or uncover what is "unreadable" in the text (De Man 2000), to locate the point in which the text (poem) "turned against itself in the temporal folds of error and irony" (Davis and Schleifer 1991, p. 167), to read where the texts "get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves" (Eagleton 1996: p. 134). The insistence on transparent reference in poetry is precisely an attempt to misread and set aside the way figurative language functions and performs in the entire structure and production of literary work.

Arguably, the speaker's depiction of the task of philosopher and the entire process of philosophizing with metaphorically tool ("stone") is an attempt to demonstrate the ultimate task of intelligentsias, such as the speaker itself, who are visionary for their society. It is the task of writers to philosophize with "stone" in order to liberate man from captivity. The "kernel" symbolizes the power that sleeps within man in the same way an image (a nut) sleeps within unhewn kernel. The speaker, like a philosopher, sees it as his task to educate ("gather timber", "pluck", "harbinger of action", "stir") man how to free himself from the "kernel" in which he is imprisoned by the superior being. The speaker, philosophizing with metaphorical objects like "stone" and "hammer", is synonymous to Nietzsche's task in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006). Nietzsche describes what he calls "philosophizing with a hammer" as a task to liberate man from the orthodox and theological notions of being and essence. This presumably means man is at the center of creation and does not need to seek for meaning of his being and existence from an alien Being, omniscience being (god or God): to simplify,

But I am always driven anew to human beings by my ardent will to create; thus the hammer is driven toward the stone. Oh you human beings, in the stone sleeps an image, the image of my images! A shame it must sleep in the hardest, ugliest stone! Now my hammer rages cruelly against its prison. Shards shower from the stone: what do I care? (TSZ, II: "Upon the Blessed Isles", p. 66).

However, Nietzsche notes that it requires fervent effort and determination on the side the "oracle" or, in the words of the speaker, "a sole philosopher" to liberate humanity from conventional beliefs and norms which have enslaved the critical thinking of man. Interestingly, while Nietzsche philosophizes with "hammer", the speaker, on the other hand, philosophizes

with the metaphor of “gather”, “pluck” “stir” to envision how poetry could be used to encourage people to stir up a revolutionary spirit in all their struggles to liberate the human thought from an epistemic understanding of human essence and existence. In addition, Soyinka (2018), the son of Ogun, sees himself as one, charged with the responsibility to liberate the oppressed from the shackles of minority “self-recycling geriatrics”, to set up a direction for a new generation:

[Ogun] has handed me his machete and given marching orders,
saying, Son of Ogun, take this machete and cut through the
brambles of lies, hypocrisy, double-talk and pontification and
insincere sententious. Cut off the tongue of liar so that your
people can know some peace (pp. 45-46).

For the speaker, poetry is conceived as a rhythmical composition which becomes meaningful only when “Greco-Roman lore” collapsed. The understanding of human plights and struggles from a foreign or Greek-Roman perspective is inadequate because, as he argues, such allusion tends to “exclude” certain group of people, and serves as “a clap trap/for a wondering audience”. Therefore, the speaker philosophizes with ordinary language as a medium to give voice to “the hawker’s ditty”. It may be pertinent and productive to maintain that literary texts, like poems, are writings that require rhetorical readings and contextual analysis. Culler (2000) rightly contends that “[o]ne striking signal of this is that philosophical texts have become literary in the classic sense that, like poems, they are not supposed to be paraphrased: to paraphrase is to miss what is essential” (p. 286). To typecast poetry is to slot it into a certain tradition of writing rather than to perceive it as a performative act. Despite the speaker’s claims to the contrary, the argument in the poem is still imbricated with the task of philosophizing with poetry. In fact, the speaker, Nietzsche (a Greco-Roman philosopher), and Soyinka (“nationalist-modernist”) are all men of the same skill.

The speaker of “Poetry Is” sets out to dismantle literary works which are written in condensed language (tropes) at the expense of ordinary language so as to demonstrate the total effect, potency and superiority of local imagery over the “Greco-Roman lore”. Thus, rather than the speaker to neutralize the hierarchical oppositions of figurative and literal poetic aesthetics—by undermining the notion that there can be the transcendental foundations for meaning—the speaker eventually demonstrates the superior virtues of ordinary language as the “center” which gives meaning and identity to poetry. This unwarranted presumption of language by the speaker needs to be confronted. The separation of figurative language (tropes) from ordinary or pedestrian language in the literary-critical composition and pedagogy is groundless, facile, and superfluous. This fact is so baffling that it leads Derrida (1976, p. 158) to argue that writers write within a system and logic over which they have no absolute control. White (1978: p. 98),

Fowler (1981) and Laird (1999) also vindicate this argument respectively. For them, there is no fictive domain in language and writing; or separation of “esoteric whisper”, “Greecoroman lore” and “the eloquence of the gong”, “the lyric of the marketplace” because both signifying images are linguistically homogeneous in style and trope. Thus, both figurative and ordinary languages are inseparable (whatever “meanings” are attributed to them) because they are both rhetorical and not representational. Also, De Man (1971) avers: “All language is, to some extent, involved in interpretation, though all language certainly does not achieve understanding” (31). Or as Nietzsche (1968) succinctly puts it that there is no such thing as “natural” or “ordinary” language as opposed to figurative or rhetorical language; that is, language is purely rhetorical or “clap trap” and does not reflect reality beyond and outside itself (p. 516).

The Greco-Roman culture and language, with which this practice is implicated, insists, despite the speaker’s argument, on using customary interpretive procedures. Arguably, the speaker first deciphers what poetry is or could be in the traditional way of the Greco-Roman poetic composition and discourse. To decipher poetry through the reading of Greecoroman lore is not, theoretically speaking, a way of rehearsing and preserving the cultural heritage inscribed in the lore. It is an analysis which attempts to investigate how the thoughts and ideas “entombed in Greecoroman lore” work and do not work, to demonstrate the play of contradictions, ambiguities, paradoxes, heterogeneity within the Greecoroman lore. So, the task of a deconstructive critic is to find out the deconstructive process at work in the differential play of meaning. While the speaker conceives poetry as originary to Greek heritage, Derrida (1997) strongly maintains that:

This heritage is the heritage of a model, not simply a model, but of a model that self-deconstructs, that deconstructs itself, so as to uproot, to become independent of its own grounds, so to speak, so that, today, philosophy is Greek and it is not Greek... So, we have to go back constantly to the Greek origin, not in order to cultivate the origin, or in order to protect the etymology, the etymon, the philological purity of the origin, but in order first of all to understand where we come from. Then we have to analyze the history and the historicity of the breaks which have produced our current world out of Greece, for instance, out of Christianity, out of this origin, and breaking or transforming this origin, at the same time. So there is this tension. (p. 10)

The attempt to establish the question of canon, between “Greecoroman lore” and indigenous artistry (the hawker’s ditty/ the eloquence of the gong/ the lyric of the marketplace/ the luminous ray/ on the grass’s morning dew) in poetic reading and writing, is regarded by Derrida

(1997, p. 11) as uncritical and superfluous within literary and philosophical practices. To put it slightly and technically, Derrida (1976) further puts pressure on the question of canon formation: “[Without] all the instruments of traditional criticism . . . critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading” (p. 158).

The implicit assumption that poetry is an autonomous activity of the critical efforts of “man”, presumably the author or the reader, needs to be taken up and refined. For the speaker, the implicit foreknowledge of a poetic text exists ontologically prior to the text itself. Since, for the speaker, meaning comes into existence as a result of “man’s” experience, it is unclear whether to seek the meaning of the text through the authorial psychological disposition or through the intentional structure of literary form or through the subjective apprehension of the reader. Reading, to be sure, is an irreducible process of scattered practices that goes beyond the circle of subjectivism or meta-reading. To read and evaluate a literary text is not to seek for a predetermined interpretive model of reading because reading itself is an infinite crafty play of meaning. In the same vein, Macherey (2006) argues that literary objects “have no prior existence but are thought into being” through critical practices (p. 5). This simply means that the object of interpretation is not given in advance of interpretation but is gradually discovered through a differential play of traces. In other words, interpretation is not to give the meaning of the object but the *addition*, the *differential*, the *supplementarity* within the object of study. The reading of literary work (for instance, poem) demands close attention to the working of its language. Therefore, a close reading of language enables the reader or critic to explore tenaciously the identity of the text through a rigorous scrutiny of paradoxes, tensions, discrepancies between *what* is said (content) and *how* (form) it is said in the poem.

3 Poetry and Relativism

Abubakar Othman’s “Wordsworth Lied” is a sequel to the preceding analysis of Niyi Osundare’s “Poetry is”, but it takes a different form and approach. Whereas Osundare, as discussed above, sets out to liberate poetry from the modernist tradition of poetic composition (allusions to Greek and Roman myths), Othman offers a critique of the Romantic conception of what poetry is and how it should be read. In fact, it might be argued that the title of the poem brings Othman close to the tone of cynicism inherent in Odia Ofeimun’s “The Poet Lied”. Egya (2014) maintains, by contrast, that the belligerent aspect of Othman towards Wordsworth’s conception of poetry implicitly suggests his revolutionary stance against the mythopoeia of first generation Nigerian writer (p. 59).

Central to the speaker’s tone of cynicism against “Wordsworth” (one of the leading theorists and writers of the Romanticism movement) is that experience cannot be achieved and sustained

by mere emotion. In the context of the poem, Wordsworth is not the flesh and blood writer of the Romanticism period (a historical self), but rather a symbolic representation or an eponym of the Romantic-Humanist tradition (a textual entity) for whom “All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that are “recollected/ In tranquility”:

Wordsworth lied

That poetry is emotion

recollected

In tranquility.

The Romantics positioned imagination and intuition at the center of their philosophical thinking and writing. That is, human being can only make sense of existence and contemporary world through an intimately connection with metaphysical natures as made know in their natural or immediate environment. For the Romantics, poetry or literature is imaginative form of writing that expresses and represents the creativeness of the author as made manifest through divine knowledge and inspiration. On this theory, literature is regarded as imaginative not to reduce it to the status of fictional entity, rather to attribute it to the creative and personal experience of the author; it is more of factual experience than an illusionary thought. In other words, poetry is regarded as a medium of personal experience, feelings, minds on social reality and theological truth. The Romantics attribute literary work as an imaginative work of art; literature is imaginative not merely because it is fictional or untrue, but it suggests some form of creativity and visionary (Eagleton 2008, p. 16).

One of the leading figures of this revolutionary leap of thought is William Wordsworth. In his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, he offers a new and critical direction for the composition and understanding of poetry (literature) and literary theory. There is a shift in focus and content from enlightened aristocratic men and women, king and queen to the downtrodden men and women in natural or rural setting. Thus, Wordsworth calls for an ordinary and everyday language that best expresses the thought and idea of peasants, rather than the complex and condensed poetic form of the eighteenth-century writing. On this note, Wordsworth maintains that “For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” The role of the poet in contemporary world, Wordsworth argues, is not to celebrate the scientific culture but to demonstrate “a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.”

To work in accordance to extraneous values or principles hinder the free flow of the poet's "powerful feeling" towards the content of his writing: in writing and thinking what is necessary is the poet's imagination and emotional feeling (intuition), not reason; reason poses a great treat on the emotional recollection of feelings when expressed with words on the page. The process of interpretive model, Wordsworth notes, should seek the authorial sensibility and emotional feeling inscribed in the text without making reference to any critical judgment outside the psychological disposition of the text: "I have one request to make of my reader, which is, that in judging these poems, he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others." To evaluate and grasp the overall meaning of a text is for the reader to establish a connection between the text and poet's personal experience as "recollected in tranquility".

On the contrary, the speaker pitches the whole concept of "emotion" into crisis. It is not the medium of expression, the speaker argues, that "matter[s]" in evaluating the emotion of the poem but rather the ultimate meaning derived from "words" on the page. Contrarily to Wordsworth's notion of "tranquility", the speaker likens the outpouring of emotion to "When words drop from my pen/ Like arrow from the quiver". Therefore, for the speaker, the ultimate identity of a poem lies not in the emotional effect recollected in the "words". Rather it seeks to locate and understand the condition under which the intentional structure of literary form of a poem can chart the ways of making meaning of "emotion". The speaker maintains that the identity of the writer is not fixed and recoverable in the text; only the intentionality incorporated in the words on the page is fixed and remained. By implication, the very moment the "I" writes, it enters into its "death". To "die" metaphorically means that no appreciation or criticism can ever return again to the hand that "wrote a poem". Put another way, the textual narrator (the writing "I"), to be distinguished from the flesh and blood author, is always and prior a dead man's name, a name of death. What returns to the textual "I" never returns to the historical "I". No authorial or reader subjective apprehension of the text can "reduce" the very identity of the text since "words" presume unity of meaning. The poem serves as a credo for deconstruction's tenets of presence and language; a poem being a performative act, illimitable in different contexts, is structurally readable beyond the death of the "I" that "wrote a poem". The speaker desires to "edit" (furnish it with unified meaning), but it is impossible to do so.

There is this desire on the part of the speaker to resolve the contradictions, tensions, paradoxes, ambiguities inherent in the endless chain of signifiers, which, paradoxically, differs reading and writing to irreducible interpretation. In this light, Spivak (1976) discursively points out, in "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology*: "The desire for unity and order compels the author and the reader to balance the equation that is the text's system. The deconstructive reader... [seeks] the moment in the text which harbors the unbalancing of the equation, the sleight of

hand at the limit of a text which cannot be dismissed simply as a contradiction” (p. xlix). The speaker is, to be sure, conscious of the figurative nature of language and the workings of the differential trace.

In the final stanza, the speaker defines “Poetry” as a spontaneous overflowing of emotion “like” a sudden “death” of an infant. This definition undermines and stands in sharp contrast to the slow and careful scrutiny of the sensibility and intent outside the organic unity of “words” on the page (“pain”). However, it could be argued that the speaker’s view is unsuccessful in its attempt to privilege textual meaning over authorial meaning. The speaker’s radical approach against the romantic assumption of poetry (or literature) as an autonomous entity of the mind is centered on the nature of the whole complex interrelationship between form and content. For the speaker, the “recollection” and “tranquility” of “pain” can never lead to the real meaning of the mental calisthenics, since the paradox between “pain” and “emotion” cannot be resolved by mere “recollection” and “tranquility”.

The speaker’s argument of the ontological existence of meaning (“pain”) prior to the poem goes some ways toward explaining the autonomy and unity of the poetic consciousness (“words”). The speaker argues for an intrinsic reading of poetry without inference and reference to the intentional meaning of the authorial intent. Poetry, he stresses, is not merely an imitation of “emotion recollected/ In tranquility” but ordering and unifying of emotion through a corresponding order of verbal structure (“words”) which in turn serves as a final inward direction to meaning. What difference does it make if emotion is “recollected/In tranquility” or “Like arrows from the quiver”? The speaker is short-sighted to realize that the poem could be read without the recollection of “pain” inscribed in the “words”; the *play* and critique of the warring forces of signification (language) in the poem automatically dismantle inheritance and *given* structure and form. (see Derrida 2019, p.23).

T.S. Elliot, in his influential essay entitled “Tradition and Individual Talent”, argues that “sensitive and honest criticism should be directed towards poetry and not the poet” (p. 76). That is in evaluating a literary text, the focus should be on language as the active determinant of meaning rather than passive since, as the Anglo-American New critics Wimsatt and Beardsley (1972) put it, “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of literary work” (p. 334). To seek for what the author means in his text, Wimsatt and Beardsley write, “would have nothing to do” with the phenomenological assessment of the text. This is not to say that the author of flesh and blood, whose name is inscribed on the cover page of the text, is restricted from engaging in the reading of his text, whatever might be the outcome of his reading is nothing but another *text* which stands in sharp opposition to what the text says and what other critics have said about the text; the meaning

derive from the author of a given text does not furnish it with “transcendental truth” but rather opens up infinitely a space of irresolvable contradictions between what the author meant to say and the alternative readings derived from the text. To put the point more technically in the words of Bennett and Royle (2004): “Just because it comes ‘from the horse’s mouth’ does not mean that the horse is telling the truth, or that the horse knows the truth, or indeed that what the horse has to say about the ‘words on the page’ is any more interesting or illuminating than what anyone else might have to say” (p. 21).

The speaker’s affirmations that: “It is the pain they [words] paint/ That creates the emotion for poetry” rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of words or signs. There is no word that can offer a final meaning or stop the movement of signification. For Derrida, language is completely unreliable, unstable, and uncertain. Words are not referential or representational but rather rhetorical. Paul de Man (1971) also argues that the sign will continue to act as a chain of signifiers without a definite signified. The sign is devoid of a definite meaning, not because it has to be a transparent indicator of plurality of meaning, but because the meaning itself is illimitable (p. 127). For Derrida, using the Saussurean’s linguistic system or principles based on difference, any given sign is a moving chain of differential traces since it always serves as a signifier for more signifiers. A deconstructive reading, in practice, does not seek to rehearse how the arguments for and against the thesis on “tranquility” or “pain” can heighten the overall meaning of a poem, but rather explores how the forward and sideways movement of language produces and infinitely twists, postponed meaning. The speaker’s formula defining poetry as “a recurrent emotion/That shatters tranquility/ Like the bewildering death/Of an innocent child” is only necessary if it allows discourse to remain at the textual surface without delving deeper for final “pain they paint” and “create” for poetry. The partial failure of the speaker is due to its insensitivity to the performative acts of “words” that can never come to a rest but continuing signifying *de infinitude*.

However, there are significant points which need to be explored. The speaker invites its readers to imaginatively recreate the “pain” or experience of other human beings. In this sense, poetry is a moral phenomenon that deepens and sharpens the reader’s emotion of human “pain” without actually having to “recollect it in tranquility.” It is “pain” by the virtue of its form that matter, rather than the “emotion” inscribed in the poem. George Eliot makes similar assertion when he argues that: “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures” (cited in Terry Eagleton 2013, p. 56). Both the speaker and Eliot are of the view that it is the effect poetry “paints” on the mind of the reader that should be the focus of reading and interpretation, one which gives access to the inner lives of others, rather than being held spellbound in the

“recollection of tranquility.” This argument is a beautiful and tremendous critical effort, but limited. The speaker is unable to acknowledge that not all literary works invite readers to term with moral phenomenon. Thus, “pain” is not at all the only medium of understanding “the emotion” in poetry. In this sense, the speaker’s argument is an attempt to make the reader to empathize with others. On the contrary, empathy hinders and blunts the sheer pleasure of reading in readers’ attempts to understand and pass judgment on the “pains” of others. Although, poetry may attempt to invite the reader to empathize with its subject matter; it is the task of critics to scrupulously critique the formal and thematic paradoxes, tensions, contradictions in the poem, and not to dance to the intent and intentionality of the poem.

4 Conclusion

The above analysis is an attempt to problematize the whole concept of identity in poetry and, by implication, in literary works. The aporetic aspects of the Niyi Osundare’s “Poetry Is” and Abubakar Othman’s “Wordsworth Lied” lie in their attempts to foist identity of what poetry is or could be. Their persuasive arguments of what “poetry is” and the whole empathetic effect of poetry are bent out of true by the workings of language. Put another way, the language of the poems garbles identity and turns contradictions on their head. This paper is not an abdication of pitfalls or illusion inherent in critical thoughts or refusal of intellectual efforts; rather, it is a demonstration of the impossibility of definite identity. On the whole, the paper concludes that every attempt by the speakers in the poems is a self-destructive one in which the murder becomes suicide. Whereas the poems invite readers to term with the genre of poetry and the sensitive appreciation to be devoted to it, this paper in turn illustrates the impossibility of reducing literary works (poetry, novel, drama) and criticism to a seamless whole.

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