

The Deconstructive Angel by MH Abrams

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ABSTRACT

MH Abrams was an American literary critic who revolutionized the study of the Romantic period in English literature through groundbreaking analysis. He belongs to the tradition of literary criticism which sees a work of literature in the light of its birth. His publication includes *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, *The Deconstructive Angel and Natural Supernaturalism*, this later book led indirectly to the writing of the essay *The Deconstructive Angel and Natural Supernaturalism*. *The Deconstructive Angel (Essay)* was originally presented at a session of the Modern Language Association in 1976. Wayne C. Booth and J. Hills Miller had participated in the debate on the theoretical and methodological implications of *Natural Supernaturalism*. This essay is both a lucid exposition of the deconstruction from the stand point of traditional humanist scholarship. Abrams central argument is that the deconstructionist relies on the communicative power of language which they theoretically deny. There in the essay a clash between two big theoretical traditions humanist and linguistic is shown.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Aporia, Impasse, Meaning, Metaphysics, Origin, Ecriture, Signifier, Signified, Trace etc.

INTRODUCTION

The Title of the essay 'The Deconstructive Angel' refers to the William Blake's poem "the Marriage of the Heaven and the Hell". The Angel tells Blake about the hell, but as soon the Angel disappears, Blake found himself on the bank of a beautiful river. Blake told Angel that he could see the hell because of the Angel's metaphysics. Abrams calls J.H. Miller, the angel of Deconstruction. Like the angel of Blake, Miller also plays a double game i.e. his behavior is contradictory. He behaves like a deconstructionist when interpreting a text. But he speaks differently when he is on the platform. At the outset of Essay, Abrams explains the origin of the essay. JH Miller wrote a review of the book *Natural Supernaturalism* which contains historical procedures. This occasion offers to explore the crucial issue raised by Miller in his challenging review. Abrams had agreed with Wayne Booth that the pluralism which is bringing together of diverse points of view on a subjects with diverse results is necessary to the understanding of literary and cultural history. Only pluralism can help to achieve deep knowledge because of its involvement with diverse points of view. Abrams believes that Miller's principles of deconstructive interpretations go beyond the limits of pluralism making literary and cultural history impossible. Abrams says that Miller's principles of procedure of traditional inquiries in the human sciences. And according to Miller, Abrams has put the premises and procedures at stake or in danger.

Essay also deals with the Abrams view on Language. Miller had stated that "a literary or philosophical text for Abrams, has a single unequivocal meaning corresponding to the various entities it represents in a more or less straight forward mirroring. Abrams wonders about it how he gave Miller this impression that his theory of language is mimetic in nature. Abrams view on language is very pragmatic and functional. Miller central argument is not simply that Abrams has wrong interpretation but that Abrams can never be right in his interpretation. According to Miller, Nietzsche's opinion is that reading is brevet the objective identifying of a sense but importation of meaning into it. Abrams has opposed the view of deconstructionists.

Abrams has given the linguistics premise of Jacques Derrida who subordinates all inquiries into an initial inquiry into language. Derrida has shifts his enquiry from language to Ecriture, written or printed text and he conceives a text in an extraordinary limited fashion. Derrida's initial method is to challenge the traditional views on language. He gives priority to writing over speech. According to him written text consist of black marks which are separated by the blanks, spaces and margins. Abrams says that Derrida invites us to move from the close logocentric model to his own graphocentric model where the sole presence is marks on blanks. Graphocentric model removes every norm, control or indicator and set a limit to what we can mean or what can be understood to mean. Derrida's notion of sign gives meaning to the random marking on page/text. Signs have dual aspects as signifier and signified. These signs are marks with meanings. Sign's difference suggested by Saussure is available to Derrida. Different sets in motion in the incessant play of signification that goes on within the seeming immobility of marks on the printed pages. Derrida uses the term trace to show what is distinctive in the signification. It is elusive aspect of the text. Derrida's conclusion is no sign or chains of sign can have a determinate meaning. The origin and the ground of Derrida's conclusions are the premises of graphocentric model which invites us to abandon our ordinary realm of experience in speaking, hearing reading and understanding language.

As we move further we find in the Essay that Abrams has provided us with the linguistic premises used by J H Miller. Miller has setup a distinction between two classes of structuralists critics as we "canny" and "uncanny" critics. Miller himself is a uncanny critic. In his interpretation there is an indeterminable free play of meanings. Miller accepts Derrida's view that text is nothing but "innocent black marks on page". Miller has suggested a number of ways of maximizing the number of possible meaning. Abrams makes a brief note of two of the strategies – one is Miller uses the term 'interpretation' and 'meaning' in an extremely capacious way, so as to conflate linguistic utterances or writings with metaphysical representations of theory or the facts about the physical world. Miller's second strategy is concerned with the Trace, like Derrida, Miller excludes any control or limitation of signification to the use of a word or phrase. Any word in a text can signify "any and all the diverse things they have signified". For Miller "all reading is misreading" and any reading can be shown to be misreading on evidence drawn from the text itself. But in misreading a text, the interpreter is merely repeating what the text itself has done before him. Abrams says that the deconstructive critics act of interpretation has a beginning and the end that it begins as an intentional, goal oriented quest and this quest is to end in an impasse. This is what Miller calls the uncanny moment – the critic thinking to deconstruct the text finds that he has simply participated in the ceaseless play of the text as a self deconstructive artifact. The deconstructive seeks to find the a logical elements in the text. The uncanny moment in interpretation is a sudden 'mise en abyme' which is a vertigo of a underlying nothingness.

Miller says that each deconstructive reading done on any literary or philosophical text reaches the same moment of 'aporia'. The reader reaches the same impasse again and again. He tries to unravel the web that keeps him plunging into the blank abyss, but finds that he can do so only by an act of writing which spins a further web of lines.

Therefore MH Abrams who wants to finds out a method to respond to the abysml vision of the textual world, but Abrams feels the response of William Blake to the Angel in the Marriage of Heaven and Hell is adequate. The angel has revealed to Blake a ghastly vision of hell as an infinite abyss. But as the angel departs Blake found himself sitting on a pleasant bank of river by moon light and when the angel asked him about his escapement Blake replied "all that we saw was owing to angle's metaphysics. Similarly J.H.Miller is Angel of Deconstruction, who is not serious about the deconstruction. He does not entirely and consistently commit himself to the consequence of his premises. Abrams is strongly underlining the inseparability of signifier and the signified.

There is no linguistic or any other law that will prevent a deconstructive critic from using graphocentric procedures. If he uses, he will be able to translate text into abyss or impasse. But the general reader who refuses deconstructive techniques will be able to understand the text very well. It is interesting to note both Miller and Abrams continuous to disagree with each other. None of them find other's reasons apt and changes own premises and aims. They try to make out what the other means by what he says. Abrams, yet, is hopeful in finding some mutual understanding.

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