

# The Postmodern Turn: Irony and Parody in 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning'

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## Abstract

'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' by the contemporary American poet Adrienne Rich incorporates some ironies in its structure and at the same time parodies the 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet John Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'. These instances of irony and parody in Rich's poem point to its postmodern nature – its subjectivity, self-consciousness, historicity and self-critical distance – and thereby dehistoricize and deconstruct Donne's poem and its conventions. But before turning to the discussion of the nature and function of the irony and parody inherent in Rich's poem, it is necessary to engage with the nature of these two tropes so that the discussion receives an adequate theoretical foundation.

Parody and irony are the two rhetorical devices/modes of representation that fit postmodernism most because the 'postmodern indecidability' of texts can be left open and ungrounded in 'an unstated meaning' (Wheale, 1995, p. 44-45). Parody, whose meaning in classical Greek is 'to sing beside' (Wheale, 1995, p. 44), mocks and burlesques a previous work in such a way that the new representation evinces in itself the absurdities/incoherences/incompleteness etc. of the other/the different and of the previous/the deferred. The differences between the parodic and the parodied are manipulated in the parody by an explicit/implicit reference to the differences between them, which are being deferred singly or collectively, synchronically or diachronically. The differences of modes of existence and representation between the two, that is the postmodern/the parodic and its other/the parodied, are demonstrated at the

expense of the parodied through *différance*, i.e. difference and deferral (Derrida, 1988, p. 385-406.). This demonstration can be accomplished with a self-consciousness that can critique the postmodern text itself in its relation with the historic, which is to be dehistoricized. Thus a postmodern text can view itself as the different and as the deferred one too. Thus through a *différance*, a deferral of the difference(s), which are both the constituents and the constituted, i.e. the elements and the composite, the postmodern work is a parody of the other, often in a self-parody.

Like parody, irony too functions through *différance*. Irony, as its original Greek meaning 'dissimulation, pretended ignorance' (Wheale, 1995, p. 45) suggests, works with differences, simulation(s) of the other, pretensions, not the original, and the 'pretended ignorance' indicates self-consciousness that works in ironies. The discrepancies or the differences that irony signifies, like those of parody, have identicalness in the differences and it helps them to be repeated as the different. In an irony one meaning is stated with the knowledge of the deferred meaning, the two meanings being different from each other but to have the difference they have some similarity in constitution too.

The scope and strength of *différance* corroborate the pertinence of irony and parody for postmodern signification because both self-consciously alert the reader/the addressee of the *differences* between and the deferral of meanings, continuously creating a fertile ground of proliferation and variegation of meanings. *Différance* in irony and parody thus produces the polysemic signification of postmodernism. Embodying the concept of *différance*, employing ironies and executing parodies, Rich's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' evidences the nature of postmodern signification, where ironies and parodies often coexist and collaborate, giving significance to each other, assisting each other to signify emphatically, differently. When Rich's poem, with its ironies, parodies Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', which is devoid of ironies, it evinces both the plurivalence and the inherent inconsistent/unfixed nature of postmodern signification. The fundamental deconstructive dichotomy of postmodernism, which considers itself as the other of the deconstructed other, different from the different, engenders this *différance*, or rather is engendered through this, and creates irony and parody as techniques of signification. As the subtlest tools of deconstruction, irony and parody satisfy the postmodern concern of deconstruction and deconstructivity, as is evident in the Rich poem's deconstruction.

Pointing to the differences and manifesting them one after the other, that

is giving one meaning after the other (e.g. by establishing one and then destabilizing that), parody and irony also defer meanings. This corresponds to the Derridean concept of *différance*. Through multiple, not always binary, play of meanings they designate the play of traces, of the intertexts, and naturally, of the past. They speak of a subject that is, like them, multinodal and multicathected, that is to say, they represent a signification that is polysemous and pluralivalent.

Irony and parody indicate a consciousness, of the author/producer/receiver, that they are exposing some inconsistencies, some differences, some contradictions. And as they do not categorically privilege one over the other, but maintain an aleatoric compromise, always pointing to this very action that they are executing, they can be considered as self-conscious. With self-consciousness, Rich's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' ironizes, parodies and criticizes as well, and with this consciousness it demonstrates that it is aware of its possibilities and its limitations. The poem's consciousness is basically the subject's, which acknowledges the presence and performance of the Other's consciousness, and it is aware of the meanings it produces, especially the meaning that different significations are possible without any sustainable totality or constricting centrality. A consciousness that parodies and ironizes itself, that speaks of pluralism and eclecticism and that shows that this performance of speaking/inscribing is an integral part of the consciousness can be regarded very much as a postmodern one. And a consciousness that interrogates itself on these points and exposes the strategies (i.e. irony and parody) that it applies in doing so and incarnates itself in the process of that very action does in fact deconstruct itself and attest that this self-deconstructibility is not only possible but also inevitable.

Adrienne Rich's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' can be understood on the surface to be a poem where a speaker, whose gender identity is absent/absented, enunciates his/her passion/desire/love and complaints about the cold indifference of the partner and a consequent illness, expresses a desire for estrangement from and enlightenment of the other on matters of love/reciprocation and consequences of failures. Rich's poem is remarkably eloquent more of the problems of enunciation of a relationship than of the relationship itself, and is interspersed with the strategies and objectives of such a communication and the subsequent results thereof whereas Donne's poem is unambiguously straightforward in the expression of a love relationship that verges more on self-assertion than on complications or failures.

The cognition of the self-consciousness in Rich's poem, the conscious

look and reflection of the various selves and complex phenomena, the conscious application of the tools of irony making and the conscious appraisal of the ironies made about the consciousness, do not look innocent and imbecile, unthought-of and unplanned, accidentally occurring there and precariously left behind. This rather appears to be a systematic intellectual reflection of relationship/signification, a systemic overhauling, 'To do something very common, in my own way' (Rich, 1995, p. 400), as the poem's addresser utters. Such a performance seems to be common or very common, but it is neither insipid nor commonplace; moreover, it is communal and collective and at the same time individual and particular also, poised in self-exploration and poignant in ironies. All these ironies demonstrate the nature of the postmodern relationship and at the same time the futility of seeing the Rich poem as an exploration of human relationship only; rather, it validates the poem as a theoretic exercise in the problematics of signification and deconstruction which ground human relationship in postmodernity.

A valediction forbids mourning if it is for the well-being of at least the partner from whom the departure/separation is being sought and effected and to whom it is being addressed. But if the separation, in Rich's poem, is meant to be permanent ('When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever') and if the charges of the causes of separation are directly and indirectly heaped on the partner ('Your frozen lips'), what sort of a well-being can be predicted after such a communication of predictions, insinuations and implications? Or, after all these allegations and suspicions, is it anticipated that the analysis of the total experience of relationship meant for the partner's acquisition of the knowledge ('I want you to see this before I leave') of the past, present and future states of such a union will bring about a change not for the worse but for the better, even though in the absence, or absenting, of the Other, which is, however, not possible till the trope of the tropes, 'destiny', as Lacan metaphorically calls it (Lacan, 1977, p. 97), intervenes? Is only showing the truths or giving the knowledge important? Or does such an insinuation involve a shade of revenge also by showing the truths and giving the knowledge by means of subtle and deliberate ironies, decipherment of which will only show the ultimate truth that all this trouble has been glorified and implored to be taken only to make it known that the separation from the (m)Other, the original object of desire, the lost signified, the menstruating/castrated subject desiring to fill the void of the absent phallus, is perpetual? That is, if separation is perpetual, why should there be love, and regret for loss of love? why should there be revenge or the desire to impart knowledge or take revenge through enlightenment or separation? When all the contradictions

coincide and cohabit, it becomes the ultimate irony that a valedictory address is being articulated but a message of suspicion, insinuation, allegation and vengeance is intimated.

If and when such a revenge of separation or enlightenment becomes effected in Rich's 'A Valediction', need mourning for the departed be still forbidden, or can mourning over the revenge be still forbidden? If s/he had known that the drug would delay the therapy, why had s/he taken it? Or if s/he had no knowledge of what would happen in case s/he had taken that drug, how can s/he know a truth and show it to the Other? If s/he wants the cure of the 'wounds', why is s/he leaving and why is s/he talking of not coming back? All these internal inconsistencies, logical and temporal incoherences, deconstruct the idea of an undivided subjectivity or coherent identity of a modern man and establish in its stead a postmodern identity. This postmodern deconstruction of identity is not only necessitated by the infinite possibilities and instances of signification, but the inconsistencies, or rather the ironic consistencies that also demand such a deconstructive signification. Thus the deconstructed, postmodern identity of a being becomes analogous to the postmodern deconstructive signification, where identity is constantly changing, shifting through space and time, aligning and adjusting itself with numerous individual and social factors, which are themselves evolving all the while, taking on new forms and new meanings.

If this is suggested in Rich's poem to be a farewell forbidding lamentation, how can s/he say that grief will be restrained? With the *ironic* inscription in the poster? Or with the 'unglossed' images/metaphors when they will be decoded and deciphered? 'I want you to see this' is what is said but 'notations' are left 'empty' as they are, and images 'unglossed', for 'you' to decode, though inadequately and ceaselessly. If 'mourning' is a natural consequence of departure, there will be such an experience, an experience of signification through deconstruction, after the experience of departure, that departure will not be able to engender grief or lamentation. A valediction is for that person for whom affection is there and, all the more, from him/her who has been, and at that particular time is, supposed to demonstrate reciprocal affection. That is why desires ('wants') can run wild/hot, and production of signifiers and satisfaction of desires are desired neither to be prohibited nor inhibited ('frozen'), and then language ('grammar') of love-making/leave-taking in conversation/copulation cannot reverse ('turn'). After/while the departure of the hated/beloved takes place since I leave them 'unglossed' and since I cannot (neither able nor ready to) communicate ('I could

say', and 'I could not say'), if decipherment and decoding of signs/metaphors are not worth doing for a meaningful relationship, what is? If I am verbally ironic, meaning the opposite of what I say, then learn what I could say and what I could not, and also that what I could say I could/would not. I see, and I say, but I do not want you to say; you see and/or hear what I say and see, but *you* can/would/do not say anything in the sayonara since *your* lips are 'frozen', which criticized/interpreted *me/my* valediction/poem without succeeding to see and tell ('locate') the source, the origin, of love or of criticism. So even I enumerate 'a [not *the*] last attempt' with a casually pronounced profound formula, I would leave the notations 'empty' as I found them with you. Still, I see and I say only because *you* will see, though not say; *your* seeing/saying is possible when I withdraw from *you* as it was not possible when I remained with *you* who is the Other/the reader. So though the 'criticism' failed to see the origin, it may succeed to see that, as I have supplied the clues, from the end.

All these ironies deconstruct the idea of valediction as it is and as it has been in the two 'valadiction' poems of Donne, 'A Valadiction: Forbidding Mourning' and 'A Valadiction: Of Weeping'. 'Donne's 'A Valadiction: Forbidding Mourning' carries in the title a colon, (:), after 'valadiction', indicating a pause, a separation between the two parts of the title that are divided and linked by the colon only to emphasize the sense that this poem is a valediction, the nature of which is that it forbids 'mourning' (lament, dirge, requiem or feeling/expression of sorrow, pain or distress) since, though that is a natural consequence, that will be meaningless for there is the desire and hope of reunion. Rich's title, on the other hand, implies continuity in the signification of the title in a fluent and fluid sense, indicating at the same time the function of the valediction that it 'forbids' mourning. As the use of colon in the title of Donne's poem indicates essentially the type and nature of the valediction, its absence in Rich's title and, even more, presence of the present participle, (-ing), basically point to the continuous function of this valediction. Donne's poem, as is manifest in the title, conveys its message explicitly that 'mourning' is 'forbidden' in/for this type of valediction while Rich's poem is an explicit irony, delivering in the body of the poem the ambivalent opposite of the title. A poem that gives out a notion of unfixed periods and natures of alienation and, consequently, continuous scope of signification is cogent enough to ironically (mis-)direct the readers with a title which literally means something different and which is, and here is deliberately made to be, redolent of that poem of Donne's for them to be awakened to other truths.

The phrasing of Rich's title incorporates another inherent irony inasmuch as a farewell cannot ensure that 'forbidding' of such a 'mourning' will be heeded to; 'mourning' can be 'forbidden', but it cannot be forestalled, i.e. anticipated and prevented at the same time. A valediction anticipates mourning, but that which is anticipated is not present at the present moment and therefore cannot be checked at the same instant, and when it will come, there will be no scope of anticipation for a thing already present, and, therefore, it will not remain a valediction any longer. While Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' and 'A Valediction: Of Weeping' demonstrate a consciousness that is aware of the consequent physical distance between the two partners due to the departure but is mute on mental distance/separation, Rich's poem does not have any desire to exhibit any such inseparable desire/connection between the two partners and, furthermore, talks about an impending irreconcilable separation. These poems by Donne employ, like Cartesian *cogitoes*, conceits, not to generate multiple layers of meanings and that too through ironies, but to direct the readers to the central theme of the imperishability of love, the 'center' like that of the compass of 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'. The wit of the poet that produces the conceits and the wit for the readers that is a result of the conceits point to a modern consciousness, not to a postmodern one, at least partly because this wit does not critique itself. Rich's 'Valediction' is self-consciously self-effacing in appearance and self-scrutinizing in spirit, a critique of the Cartesian *cogito* and its clearness and distinctness. It is not a 'forbidding' of mourning but a foreboding of it; thus this valediction is a forbidding one and the title ironic. Yet the title of the poem/address, phrased by the poet/speaker/performer, means what it means, forbids what it wants to forbid for an one-to-one signification is not required since there is no need for it as the experience, in all its senses, is re-experienced artistically. Donne's valediction poems are valedictions in love, but Rich's is primarily a valediction of valediction, neither of love nor in love, a valediction of any determinacy and finality, and hence a cogent valediction, a valediction *per se*.

Despite their spatio-temporal existence, texts 'incarnate the Derridean network of traces in their own self-reflexive textuality' (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 81) because of their ironical self-consciousness from the positions of producer/receiver of the historicity in the textuality, and are thus capable of defying their historicity and contextuality *per se*. The postmodern text maintains with the deconstructed text a historic connection that is parodic, not to historicize itself or the other text, but to dehistoricize the other with a deconstructive parody or a parodic deconstruction, and in that very process it dehistoricizes itself too so far as it establishes detachment from a temporal, causal and sublimatory sense of historicity/historicity. In this dehistoricizing parody, the new

text is not unconscious of what it is effectuating, but rather is conscious of its representation and the receiver of the representation who may ironically receive the parodic representationality. Hutcheon (1988) declares, 'In the light of the structuralist focus on *langue* and on the arbitrary but stable relationship between signifier and signified, postmodernism might be called the "revenge of parole" (or at least of the relationship between the subject, as generator of parole, and the act or process of generation)' (p. 82). Rich's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' validates, partially with the parodying of Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', the same idea that in spite of being engendered within and by the system, which is constituted by temporality, the Rich poem, as the 'other' of Donne's poem and with a construction of an ironic subject and ironic other, exposes and questions that very structure of the system and its temporality, which generates such paroles, including poems, and their meanings also. And Rich's poem maintains, ironically, that this revenge is not a paramount event in history, but rather 'something very common'.

The conventions of lover-beloved in the male-female binary system have also been parodied in this poem through an establishment of a link with the past, that of Donne's Valediction poems. That link has been established thematically and formalistically. First, let us note the thematic parodization. Though a metaphysical union in both philosophical and critical-historical senses is being sung in the poem, Donne poem's rootedness in the historic sense of the prevalent cultural conceptions like virtues/'profanation' and the newly expanding sciences of cosmology and mathematics, ground it in a particular cultural time-frame where the concept of gender identity was unproblematic and heterosexual. But in Rich's poem, because of the postmodern culture in which the poem is grounded, the concept of a gendered identity rooted in anatomical sex and a dominant culture is ignored, and, in fact, parodied. 'Your frozen lips' – but who is this *you*, the usual female that has been traditionally sung as the only repository of desire's manifestation or the male that desires the lips? And who is this I, the male lover or the female lover? A lesbian love or a homosexual one? In Donne's poem the body was negated, being 'Inter-assured of the mind' (Alison *et al.*, 1983, p. 212), and thereby desire was denied its due weight. In Rich's poem desire is not denied its customary importance, rather it is glorified through parody, its satisfaction can be deferred, if compelled to repress it, in endless 'repetitions', in endless metaphors and ironies.

Formalistically, the use of a colon can be very important in parodying, and thus deconstructing a text like Donne's poem. Donne's use of colon in the title and its abuse, or rather multiple use, in Rich's poem indicate the historic connection and the dehistoricized deconstruction of that connection. Rich



dropped the colon deliberately in the title of her poem 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning'. This is a phenomenon that plays with the reader's consciousness, often eluding his/her attention to the fact that the colon has been dropped in the title, and used in the body of the poem instead. The colon, in the light of what Derrida asserts about a trace, is 'not a presence but is rather a simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself' and is established through 'effacement' which establishes 'the trace in a change of place and makes it disappear in its appearing' (Derrida, 1988, p. 403). Rich used the colon five times in her poem to indicate ('I want you to see this before I leave:'), to demonstrate (the poster in the bus that said:'), to define (A last attempt: the language is a dialect called metaphor'), to enumerate ('These images go un glossed: hair glacier, flashlight!') and to articulate ('I could say: those mountains have a meaning'). This polyvalent use of the colon not only parodies Donne's use of categorical definition and definitive categorization of 'valediction' and its nature, it also expounds the polysemous nature of one single trace like a punctuation mark.

The ironies in 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' enunciate the postmodern concepts of subjectivity and consciousness, and their link with history. This poem at the same time dehistoricizes its relationship with its predecessor, the Donne poem, through a parodic re-presentation of human relation and communication. The past has been self-critically presented and through this the present has been modified. The application of the irony and parody, two of the best tropes of postmodernism, has effectuated this re-inscription of the Donne poem.

## Appendix

### A Valediction Forbidding Mourning

Adrienne Rich

My swirling wants. Your frozen lips.  
The grammar turned and attacked me.  
Themes, written under duress.  
Emptiness of the notations.

They gave me a drug that slowed the healing of wounds.

I want you to see this before I leave:  
the experience of repetition as death

the failure of criticism to locate the pain  
the poster in the bust that said:  
*my healing is under control.*

A red plant in a cemetery of plastic wreaths.

A last attempt: the language is a dialect called metaphor.  
These images go unglossed: hair, glacier, flashlight.  
When I think of a landscape I am thinking of a time.  
When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever.  
I could say: those mountains have a meaning  
but further than that I could not say.

To do something very common, in my own way.

### A Valediction Forbidding Mourning John Donne

As virtuous men pass mildly' away,  
And whisper to their souls to go,  
Whilst some of their sad friends do say  
The breath goes now, and some say, No;

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,  
'Twere profanation of our joys  
To tell the laity of our love.  
Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,  
Men reckon what it did and meant;  
But trepidation of the spheres,  
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love  
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit  
Absence, because it doth remove  
Those things which elemented it.

But we by' a love so much refined  
That our selves know not what it is,  
Inter-assuréd of the mind,

Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two;  
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the center sit,  
Yet when the other far doth roam,  
It leans and hearkens after it,  
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must  
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;  
Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
And makes me end where I begun.

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