

'LITERATURE AND THE UNDECIDABLE'

The question of the undecidable (thesis) is closely associated with the 'epistemological break' of knowledge (Thompson cited in Akwanya, 1997:66) which occurred in the nineteenth century. The end of the nineteenth century inaugurated a critical period in the development of Western science. Part of this phenomenal change is that Western science expanded considerable energy on the problem of perception of the physical world. According to Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,

the paradigm that has governed physical and biological sciences for the past three centuries, within which research is defined as a disinterested quest for objective knowledge is now question: research in parts of philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and even art history, all converge to suggest that the traditional paradigm is somehow askew. The notion of an objective truth to which science brings us ever closer, is giving way to that of a shared communal description of phenomena commanding only provisional assent: we have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth (1962:121).

The notion of an objective truth to which science brings us ever closer is uncertain. As Albert Aurier puts it:

After having proclaimed the omnipotence of scientific observation and deduction ... and after asserting that for its lenses and scalpels there did not exist a single mystery ... man is still walking about in the midst of the same enigmas, in the same formidable unknown. ... A great many scientists and scholars today have come to a halt, discouraged. They realize that this experimental science, of which they were so proud, is a thousand times less certain than the most bizarre theogony, the maddest metaphysical reverie, the least acceptable poet's dream, and they have a presentiment that this haughty science which they proudly call positive may perhaps be only a science of what is relative, of appearances, of shadows (quoted in Cristopher Nash, 1987:39).

This passage in spite of its apparently explicit references to uncertainty and relativity was published in April 1892, and it was written in support of the symbolist movement in painting. Its argument is that

from the standpoint of the philosophy of science, mathematics and language, of art, or history and of literature itself, realism can no longer work as it was once believed to do. Part of the reason is the general shift in scientific paradigm especially with the publication of General Theory of Relativity (1916) by Einstein and Heisenberg's 'The Uncertainty Principle' (1927).

In 1927, the physicist Werner Heisenberg presented a paper on the undecidable principles. In his thesis, he argues that it is necessary for the first time to recognize that the physical world differed from the ideal world conceived in terms of everyday experience. He writes;

The resolution of the paradox of atomic physics, can be accompanied only by further renunciation of old and cherished ideas. Most important of these is the idea that natural phenomena obey exact laws – the principle of causality. In fact, our ordinary description of nature, and the idea of exact laws, rests on the assumption that it is possible to observe the phenomena without appreciably influencing them. Such traditional ideas of both causality and of objective observation were defective. The law of causality, because of its very nature, can only be defined for isolated systems, and in atomic physics even approximately isolated systems cannot be observed. Totalistic perspective could not hold. There exists a body of exact mathematical laws, but these cannot be interpreted as expressing simple relationships between objects existing in space and time. ... it is not possible to decide, other than arbitrarily, what objects are to be considered as part of the observed system and what as part of the observer's apparatus (Heisenberg, 1930:1052-4, See also Awe & Ojunola, 1984:155).

Heisenberg's undecidable principle implies that there is always an uncertainty involved in any attempt to measure the position and momentum of the electron simultaneously. Thus it is not possible to increase the accuracy of the position and momentum simultaneously without limit. The more accurately the position is specified the more uncertain becomes the momentum. In other words, particle and wave properties cannot be exactly specified simultaneously.

Similarly, in 1931, the Mathematician and Logician, Kurt Godel published a paper "On Formally Undecidable Propositions Of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems". This is known as Godel's Undecidability Theorem. He argues that in a formal system in which decidability of all questions is required, there will be contradictory

statements. This is known as the Incompleteness Theorem. Godel shows that there are problems that cannot be solved by any set of rules or procedures; instead for these problems one must always extend the set of axioms. The addition of an axiom scheme to account for the undecidable elements necessarily gives rise to the same problem. New undecidable elements arise. The process of completion can never be completed. The implications of Godel's theorem is quite radical for the study of science and literature. Jacob Bronowski summarises Godel's theory as follows:

The first theorem says that any logical system which is not excessively simple... can express true assertions which nevertheless cannot be deduced from its axioms. And the second theorem says that the axioms in such a system, with or without additional truths, cannot be shown in advance to be free from hidden contradictions. In short, a logical system which has any richness can never be complete, yet cannot be guaranteed to be consistent. ... An axiomatic system cannot be made to generate a description of the world which matches it fully, point to point: either at some points there will be holes which cannot be filled in by deduction, or at other points two opposite deductions will turn up. And when a contradiction does turn up, the system becomes capable of proving anything and no longer distinguishes true from false (1971: 121-23).

From the stand point of Heisenberg's and Godel's evidence, our powers of empirical perception and of pure logical conception are incapable by any rational means at any one time of ever making total sense of or even observing all the facts that make up the truth. This is a reaction against structuralist claims to scientific objectivity and universalism.

Apart from the field of science and mathematics, the undecidable thesis is there in anthropology. Levi-Strauss in his work *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969) made two notable distinctions between nature and culture: that which is universal and spontaneous is natural, while that which depends upon a system of norms regulating society is cultural. Somewhere along his inquiry, Levi-Strauss encounters what he called 'the scandal' (the undecidable), something which does not reduce to the nature/culture opposition he has established. This scandal, as he calls it, simultaneously seems to require the predicates of nature and culture. However, this scandal which is incest prohibition is both natural and cultural. Writing on this issue in *Writing and Difference*, Jaques Derrida argues forth:

For from the moment when the incest prohibition can no longer be conceived within the nature/culture opposition, it can no longer be said to be a scandalous fact, a nucleus of opacity within a network of transparent significations. The incest prohibition is no longer a scandal one meets with or comes up against in the domain of traditional concepts; it is something which escapes these concepts and certainly precedes them-probably as the condition of their possibility (1978:283).

This very concept, that is, the incest prohibition becomes a fundamental aspect of the nature/culture opposition. It is impossible to differentiate one in the absence of the other. As a matter of necessity it is the very condition of its existence. The findings of Levi-Strauss are in line with the discovery of Heisenberg and Godel. This phenomenon which spreads from science to anthropology and even language studies as Derrida articulates it 'is most characteristic of our epoch' (1973:136).

At this point one may ask what the connection between the undecidable and literary studies is. According to John Cage, 'art changes because science changes – changes in science give artists different understandings of how nature works' (1970:194; see also Arnold, 1976:28). In other words, any change in the structure of knowledge has a notable effect in language because the two are entirely immersed in thought (see Akwanya, 1997:66).

However, between 1906 and 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist made a fundamental proposition about the nature of language: that in a semiotic set, a sign is made up of the signifier and the signified, that the meaning relation which holds between the entities is arbitrary and differential. Capitalizing on the differential nature of language, Derrida posits the undecidable nature of discourse which he identifies as 'differance' – that is, radical alterity of literary language. The term 'differance' is synonymous with pharmacos – which is both poison and cure, supplement – surplus and lack, and trace- which is both presence and absence. These are undecidable movements which work in discourse just as the scandal in kinship relations. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Jacques Derrida articulates it thus:

Differance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be present, appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the

mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present. (1973:142-143).

By wider implication, one cannot locate the proper ground of subjectivity, being, or truth that is not caught up in a web of other relations or a chain of differentiation. All determinations of identity are broken apart by the necessity of alterity.

The next issue for determination is to what extent we may apply this in literary interpretation. First, we must affirm that discourse by its nature is overdetermined. By overdetermined, according to Freud, is that a number of different connections or meanings converge on the same one form (cited in Alan Durant, 1990:216). Secondly, that discourse has a surplus value which is 'exorbitant' (Derrida, 1974:162). At every instance of discourse study, the question of the undecidable arises either at the level of narrative or metaphoric shift of discourse. One or two examples will suffice to illustrate the point (this concept).

In Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1951) the necessity that drives the text is the reason Raskolnikov has murdered Alyona Ivanovana. At the level of discourse study several reasons are advanced, all of them valid and undecidable. The question still remains why does he kill her? Akwanya (1998) summarises the position as follows:

In Raskolnikov's confession to Sonia, we see that he is equally unable to explain what he has done, unless what he does is actually to over-explain it. He puts forward at least ten different explanations: that it is for the purpose of plunder to help support his mother; that it is as a result of psychic illness and social maladjustment; that it is as a result of his sulkiness and resentment against an oppressive social system; that it is part of a quest for power, or just for the sake of daring or as the underground man would say, out of spite; and each is rejected in turn by the man himself. But there are still others, no sooner enunciated than withdrawn (246).

In this instance of discourse, one cannot categorically affirm that is the reason why he murdered Alyona. Whatever position we may put up as the correct interpretation is undermined by the next position which is supported by the text. In discussing such novels as Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, J. Hillis Miller argues that *Lord Jim* resembles "a dictionary in which

the entry under one word refers the reader to another word which refers him to another word which refers him yet to another and then back to the first word again, in an endless circling' (1982:39). As a matter of necessity, the undecidable in *Lord Jim* (1921) is constituted by the simple question; why did Lord Jim jump out of the ship carrying the pilgrims? As early as the first two chapters of the text, the narrator highlights the childhood dreams of Lord Jim of being a good sailor, of how he will save a sinking ship and the crew.

On the lower deck in the babel of two hundred voices, he would forget himself, and before hand live in his mind the sea-life of light literature. He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, barefooted and half naked, walking on uncovered reefs in search of shellfish to stave off starvation. He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men- always an example of devotion to duty (5).

If this is the dream of Lord Jim to be a good sailor, ever ready to offer himself in the service of others especially on the sea, why does he abandon the ship in a moment of crisis? This question is such that those who know him cannot understand why Lord Jim abandons the ship. In the discourse of the narrator and old Jones, the latter sees the issue from a different perspective, yet he finds it nearly impossible to understand why Lord Jim abandons the ship.

"why did he commit the rash act, Captain Marlow – can you think? He slapped his low and wrinkled forehead. "If he had been poor and old and in debt – and never a show – or else mad. But he wasn't of the kind that goes mad, not he (41).

For old Jones, the only reason why Lord Jim may have abandoned the ship is that he is old and in debt. But, Lord Jim is neither old nor in debt. This to some extent re-echoes the undecidable in the narrative, as to why Lord Jim abandons the ship. Even the jury that tried him cannot understand why he abandons the ship. In trying to understand the whole enigma, the jury asks whether there is anything like a state of emergency. Nothing of such is found in their inquiry. The question still remains; why did he abandon the ship? According to the judge, there is no substantial evidence as to the cause of the accident. The judgement reads,

"There are several questions before the court. The first as to whether it was in every respect fit and seaworthy for the voyage. The court finds she was not. The next point, I remember, was whether up to the time of the accident the ship had been navigated with proper and seamanlike care. They said yes to that, goodness knows why, and then they declared that there was no evidence to show the exact cause of the accident (100).

The judgment of the court further heightens the undecidable in the text. If the court cannot ascertain the cause of the accident, the question still remains a puzzle why did Lord Jim abandon the ship. This enigma at the heart of the narrative is such that even the narrator does not know why Lord Jim abandoned the ship. As Marlow puts it, "I was being made to comprehend the inconceivable. I was made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and on the essential sincerity of falsehood" (36). At another level of undecidable, a text may successively negate its previous assertions. This is evident in *Molloy* by Beckett (1951).

And once again I am, I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, but how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means ... (12).

A and C I never saw again. But perhaps I shall see them again. But shall I be able to recognize them? And am I sure I never say them again? (15)

There is no need to despair; you may scabble on the right door, in the right way, in the end. It's for the whole there seems to be no spell. Perhaps there is no whole (31)

The pale gloom of rainy days was better fitted to my taste, no, that's not it, to my humour, no, that's not it either (35).

Yes, even then, when already all was fading, waves and particles, there could be no thing but nameless things, no names but thing less names ... saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing (37).

Then I went back into the house and wrote it is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining (240).

We recognize a pattern of undecidable thesis which exist side by side as assertion and negation. How then do we interpret this structure of presence and absence. We shall find out later? The undecidable also exists at the

level of metaphor. Our understanding of metaphor in this context is based on Paul Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor (See Akwanya, 1996:203).

In *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) the figurality of the text is constituted by the dissemination of the sun. It first appeared in the discourse of Chris Oriko. After the executive meeting the Honourable Commissioner for Education slams the door in front of His Excellency. Instead of a rebuke for the latest offender, His Excellency says nothing. The metaphor of the Sun conveys the friendly disposition of His Excellency.

But His Excellency speaks instead. And not even to him the latest offender but still to me. And he is almost friendly and conciliatory, the amazing man. In that instant the day changes. The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud; we are relieved and immediately celebrating (3).

In a reverie Ikem identifies the sun not as friendly and conciliatory but as an enemy. Ikem identifies the sun as the enemy, as the source of all the ills of the land. For that reason it needs to be overthrown.

The sun in April is an enemy though the weatherman on television reciting mechanically the words of his foreign mentor tells you it will be fine No my dear country men, you will not be fine until you overthrow the wild sun of April (28).

Furthermore, in a "Hymn to the Sun", the metaphor of the sun captures the plight and suffering of the people of Abazon. In chapter eight the metaphor of the sun is a means of passage for Idemili to make contact with his subject.

In Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), the movement of the sun is more radical and undecidable. The sun which is highly metaphoric takes on various linguistic meaning when it is related to Mersault, the main character.

Algiers the city where the novel is set is described amongst other things as a very sunny city and very busy. Most people spend their time in the beach to cool off the effect of the sun.

During Mersault mother's burial, the sun is said to be at its peak. Many times during the walk to the village, the heat and rays from the sun tries to check Mersault's progression, however, he moves on against all odds. The sun washes over the landscape leaving it almost un-natural and mysterious. Mersault is exhausted after the burial and on his way

back home, only one thing is on his mind and that is to go and merge his sun burned body in the beach. Here the sun takes on the role of a tormentor.

Mersault's trip to the beach, a day after his mother's burial is to gain relief from the intensity of the sun. It is here he meets Marie, an old acquaintance, and he has sexual relations with her afterwards.

The sun functions as an evocation of evil in many instances in the text. If it rises to its peak any time, Mersault is to commit a crime. The first crime charged against him by the law is that he has an affair with a woman a day after his mother's burial.

Mersault's second crime of killing the Arab is also connected to the sun. From here, we can distinguish the heat of the sun from the rays. After he and the other characters leave the beach, he goes back again because he is hot as he advances towards the sea, the heat of the sun and the light rays as a result of the sea's proximity tries to check his progress. But he goes on in the process of killing the Arab.

In the law court when he is asked by the judge why he killed the Arab and shot him five times he simply answers "it is the sun". It is the light rays on the knife that blinded his eyes and made him to shoot the Arab five times. The sun here which is also an equivocation of evil, takes the semantic element of the accused or the cause of the crime.

Furthermore, whenever the sun is at the peak, Mersault is disorganized. In the scene when Marie comes to see him in prison, they are talking when the sun outside rises to its peak. Mersault is no longer able to hear Marie, everything around him seems to have gone white because it is so unnaturally.

Similarly, throughout the proceedings in the law court, whenever the sun is at its peak, Mersault seems to be deaf to everything being said.

In the foregoing analysis of metaphoric shifts of all kinds in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *The Stranger* it is evident that if language is radically metaphorical in nature, it's meaning is always caught up in an endless chain of difference. It is only by suppression of textual elements that one makes a categorical statement by way of literary interpretation. Literature, as Gabriel Josipovici argues, 'is the ruin of all references, the cemeny of communication' (cited in Eagleton, 1983:146).

Invariably, for one to look for meaning that refers to the real in a work of art may not be possible because of the undecidable nature of discourse. What the text says on the one hand on the other hand it denies. The entire work is constituted as a perpetual field of displacement of meaning; this is evident in the pattern of discourse itself, the pattern of

syntax and the intertextuality of discourse (See Paul de Man, 1979). Representation in this sense becomes a delimitation of reality or what Immanuel Kant calls 'Transcendental illusion' (Kant, cited in Samuel Stumpf, 1977: 310-315).

By way of interpretation, literature has nothing at stake other than as a mode of writing. As a mode of writing, 'it suspends logic and opens up vertiginuous possibilities of referential aberration' (See Paul de Man, 1980:124), discourse then becomes a play of linguistic signs. As Akwanya (1997) puts it, 'the sustaining power in the language of literature is play' (18). This level of playfulness with language involves three modes of operation as Michael Foucault puts it,

Discourse is a play of writing in the first case, of reading in the second, and of exchange in the third, and this exchange, this reading, this writing never put anything at stake except signs. In this way, discourse is annulled in its reality and put at the disposal of the signifier (cited in Young, 1981:66, see also Derrida, 1982:5).

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