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**UNDERSTANDING THE POST IN POST-MODERN AMERICAN  
POETRY**

**NJUME EMMANUEL EKINDESONE (PhD)**

Department of English and Cultural Studies  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Buea, Cameroon  
Tel: (+237 650 699 007)  
Email: Njume.emmanuel@ubuea.cm/ njume\_ekins@yahoo.com

**ACHO LESLEY LEM (PhD)**

Department of Bilingual Letters  
Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences  
University of Yaounde I  
Tel: (+237 673 259 471)  
Email: lesleybrigt@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT**

The question about the meaning of the postmodern text has become quite a complex and often controversial one in contemporary literary circles. What was accepted as poetics as prescribed by Aristotle, Alexander Pope and the Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, emphasizing tranquility, requiring rhyme schemes, decorum and diction, leading to meaning; has given way to a type of art which celebrates chaos, upholds experimentation transcends genres and traverses borders of meaning. Literary discourse even in Neo-Classical times emphasized the iambic pentameter and the rhyme royal used by many of its advocates. However, post WWII, poets, as well as post-industrializations' poets have assumed a rather controversial position by engaging in pastiche to the detriment of the meaning of the poem. The paper hypothesizes that the meaning of the postmodern poem, cannot be appreciated without referring to inter-textual and other trans-meta-con-textual interpretations which continually nuance the meaning of texts.

**Keywords:** Postmodern, Postmodernism, Poetics, Poetry, Meta-Texts

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Postmodern art in general and postmodern poetry in particular has become the subject of contemporary inter-trans disciplinary discourses, as the meaning of the postmodern poem cannot be derived from a close reading of the poem; but rather from an inter/intra/trans/contextual appreciation of the piece. In defiance to classical Greco-roman and Neo-Classical, Augustan, Elizabethan and other Renaissance conventions, postmodern poetry departs from the latent meaning of poems gotten from their gestalt configuration; to pluri/Multi-layered meanings of the poem when read from a postmodernist lens. Thus, the dominant tendency of many a postmodernist poet is not only to dissociate the author from the text, but also to involve the reader in the process of constructing textual meaning, after extra-

textual influence. This has been the tendency with what has been considered as postmodern poetry.

The breakaway from the convention of romantic and other classical forms and styles is the focus of the postmodern poet who also carries the name of the avant-garde poet in a postwar society.

## WHAT IS POSTMODERN POETRY?

First used by Charles Olson in October 1951, the term “Postmodern Poetry” covers the historical period following World War II and refers to avant-garde poetry by American poets from 1950 to the present. (Hoover 2013, p xxix)

Postmodern and popular cultures have significantly altered perceptions of truth and reality in contemporary modern societies. This is because of the pluralist interpretations and multiple meanings derivable from postmodernist works. “The Culture of Late Capitalism” and the contemporary consumerist culture have given way to a chaotic representation of postmodern society in art, as one in a permanent search for truth, equilibrium and identity in the web of twenty-first century experience. However, defining Postmodernism is as slippery as understanding Deleuze-Guattarian primes.

Although a relatively difficult concept to define as it straddles different disciplines; Postmodernism has largely been associated with a tendency in post-war fiction in the United States of America. It is obvious that postmodernism departs from Modernism in many different ways and that is why it is crucial to define modernism before venturing into the definition of postmodernism.

Arising from within the economic context of postwar consumer society marked by overwhelming influence of large corporations, the philosophical context of existentialism, the technological context of even more powerful mass communication; the period contains several markers: 1775 – End of the Vietnam War, 1989 - the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 9/11 2001 – the Terrorist Attack of the World Trade Center USA and the tragedy expanded by global capitalism seems to be the hallmarks of this period (Hoover, 2013); the postmodern period is thus characteristic of the post-World War II, post-industrialized society’s excesses.

Disputably portrayed as a new aesthetic Hassan (1987), a condition (Lyotard, 1984; Harvey 1990), a culture (O’Connor, 1997), a cultural dominant (Jameson, 1991), a set of artistic movements employing a parodic mode of self-conscious representation (Hutcheon, 2002), an ethical or political imperative (Bauman, 1995), a period in which we have reached the end of history (Baudrillard, 1994; Fukuyama, 1992; Vattimo, 1988), a new horizon of our cultural, philosophical and political experience (Laclau, 1988), an illusion (Eagleton, 1996), a reactionary political formation (Callinicos, 1989) or even just a rather unfortunate mistake (Norris, 1990, 1993); our working definition of postmodernism is a bricolage of the definitions advanced by Mary Klages, Francois Lyotard, Frederic Jameson and Ihab Hassan. These four theorists purport postmodernism is both a cultural condition, as well as a complex aesthetic movement.

Federic Jameson contends that “it is safest to grasp the concept of postmodernism as an attempt to think about the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place”. This is due to the notion that new narratives have arisen to debunk all meta-narratives. In the same line of thought with Baudrillardian “simulacrum”, postmodernists have preference for the image over the object, the copy to the real.

Messy, rather than neat, quotationists or citationists, double-coded, oblique rather than straight forward, plural rather than singular are some of the tenets associated with postmodern theory. This no doubt explains why Jameson posits that “Postmodernism is characterized by aesthetic populism, the deconstruction of affection, the end of the bourgeoisie ego, and the imitation of dead styles and the symptomatic loss of individualism in a consumer economy. As a result of this imitation is the concept of “pastiche” which Jameson views as a patch –work of styles.

Indeterminacy in language helps us differentiate between early and late postmodernists, especially as the new poetics works in opposition to the motives of twentieth century romanticism. While machine poetics, constructivism, proceduralism, death of subjectivity are some defining aesthetics of Postmodern Poetry; the problem of Postmodern poetry is valued on the premise of writing as process over writing as product. This has been the tendency found in many poems written after 1945.

## **Broadly speaking, Hoover (2013) submits that:**

“Postmodernism is not a single style with its departure in Pound’s Cantos and its arrival in Language Poetry; it is rather, an ongoing resistance to and comment upon dominant practices. William Carlos Williams rallied against the sonnet, Ezra Pound against the pentameter; today’s conceptual poets Kenneth Goldsmith and Crag Dworkin question creativity itself. With each new development we recognize that the language of poetry is continually in play”. (xxxiv)

Resisting and breaking away from earlier poetics is definitely what Hoover admits here in O’Hara’s words as “improvisatory poetics” when he asks poets to “just go on your nerve” (ibid). It is therefore not singularity but plurality which thrives in postmodern art. This is because of the indeterminacy of what proceeds the post (post)modern, especially given the fact that there are residual, as well as dominant and emerging paradigms of postmodernism.

Residual postmodernists would borrow from Modernism, Neo-Classicism and Romanticism and others debate the fact whether postmodernism is an extension of Romanticism and Modernism both of which still thrive (Hoover, xxx). This is true of the poetry of John Ashberry which is influenced by the romantic poet Wallace Stevens and the modernist Augustan W.H. Auden.

Dominant modernists on the other hand, as well as emerging postmodernists grapple with Jameson’s concept of “Pastiche”, as an extension of the modernist collage/ montage. This justifies the multiplicity of styles which typify their works. Irony, wry humour, Dadaist, existentialism, individualism, cynicism, personism, consumerism, paranoia; schizophrenia etc are postmodernists tenets which permeate all of the literature of the Post World War 2 period. Emerging attributes of postmodern art would include cyber poetry, performance poetry, conceptual poetry within the context of postlanguage poetry; that is to imply, poetry whose

language resists meaning; either because of the lack of subject/object or due to the intentional deconstruction of syntax and pun. To further buttress this fact, we must fit of all endeavor to delineate the course of what is today considered as the poetics of postmodern poetry.

## FORMS OF POSTMODERN POETRY

The answer to this question is not as complex as the question what is poetry? However, we did not set out in this paper to distinguish between definitions of poetry from classical to modern times, but to investigate the poetics of the poetry of those who write during this period. Postmodern poetry decenters authority and encourages a prismatic view of the poem preferring “empty words” to the transcendental signified, the actual to the metaphysical, postmodern poetry follows a constructivist rather than an expressionist theory of composition as method is interwoven with intuition towards the drive in poetic composition.

Critics of Cleanth Brooks' (1947) *The Well-Wrought Urn*, lamented its emphasis on traditional and universally accepted modes of craftsmanship due to the fact that many of the artists were of the school of New Criticism which advocated a traditional, close-reading of the text. The American New Critics of this early postmodern period placed emphasis on the use of paradox, irony, organic unity and gestalt configuration and held that poems “were sonorous well-made objects to be judged independently of the author’s experiences” (xxxv). However, New Criticism’s demand for objectivity and critical distance and formality would soon be dropped by the poets of the Beats Generation whose harbinger Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, as well as early poets like Robert Duncan had begun to set the stage for a publicly gay role in literature after the publication of his manifesto “The Homosexual in Society”.

There is no doubt that this early period witnessed the canonical wars of anthologies, given the discrepancy in the choice of contributors, as well as in their revolutionary poetics which despised the formality of the anthology of Robert Pack; to the strangeness, unfamiliarity and irrational improvisation of Donald Allen’s anthology published after the birth of the San Francisco Renaissance which Jack Kerouac describes in *The Dharma Bums*:

“Anyway, I followed the whole gang of howling poets to the reading that night, which was amongst other important things, the night of the birth of the San Francisco renaissance. Everyone was there. It was a mad night. And I was the one who got things jumping by going around collecting dimes and quarters from the rather stiff audience standing around the gallery and coming back with three huge gallon jugs of California Burgundy and getting them all piffed so that by eleven o’clock when Alvah Goldbrook (Allen Ginsberg) was reading his, wailing his poem “Wail” drunk with arms out-spread everybody was yelling Go! Go ! Go! (like a jam session) ....” (15)

The Birth of the San Francisco Renaissance ushered in the Beats Movement, which was led by Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Grosco, Gary Synder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and fiction writers like Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Beat writing is public, direct, performative, ecstatic, oral and incantatory. With its roots in Romantic spontaneity, Beats writing is both spiritually aware, as well as irreverent. The word “Beat” suggests exhaustion, beatitude and the jazz improvisation that inspired many of its writers who were predominantly male and Jewish, Irish, Italian, Black or Gay, living in New York or San Francisco. They were uncooked, as compared to their cooked predecessors- the Modernists. Because their poetry is a self-conscious, almost

absolute Zen-like Buddhist chant attention was therefore drawn to any such (un)consciousness of the poet which found expression in feminism and multi-culturalism as well as other minority rights movements which characterized the 1950s to the turbulent 60s.

Although it found expression for the introduction of gay subjects into poetry, the Beats influence has been far reaching on newer generations as they glorify the mythology of youth and visionary ambition of the immediacy of life. While Ginsberg, Kerouac et al make up the San Francisco School, their East Coast equivalents were John Ashberry, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Barbara Guest.

Unlike their West Coast contemporaries who were not of academia and did not teach at Universities and thus were considered uncooked; most of the poets of the New York School (East Coast) taught at Harvard and were of an educated elite and were gay (Hoover, xxxviii). It is important to underscore the fact that their open expression about their homosexual identity, could also be understood as resisting, rebelling from the straight heterosexual human being. In relation to the weird sexual (dis)orientation of many a postmodernist poet, Hoover maintains that "Ginsberg experimented with drugs, was expelled from Columbia University for writing an obscenity on the window of his dorm room, spent time in the psychiatric ward of Rockland State Hospital (ibid).

Experimentation therefore and improvisation as hallmarks of the postmodern poets cannot be discussed without a brief discourse on the Black Mountain Poets, (post)language poetry, newlipo, conceptual poetry and cyber poetry (flarf). The Languagepoets, otherwise known as those of the New Criticism school, were scholars who believed in the esoteric use of language, which can only be understood and interpreted by an "initiated few". Language poetry purports an intelligible reading of a text from the use of the devices deployed therein. A close reading of the language of such poets reveals multiple layers of meaning derived not from the language of the text, but from the artistry of the poem. For many of these poets, "what a text means, has to do with how it was written than what it expresses" (xxxv). Hence, the meaning of the poem gradually shifted from the language of the text, to the style, design, structure and soul of the text. Poets of this school began challenging speech and breath amongst other aspects of the poem to demonstrate innovative improvisation.

As editor of ART news, Art in America, John Ashberry's leading role in contemporary American poetry cannot be undermined since his publication of Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1975). As a crusader of the period's most important theme "indeterminacy", Ashberry's poetry points to a new mimesis in art, with consciousness itself as the model. His poetry has the ability of saying everything, in his saying nothing. In a 1981 interview by Richard Jackson at the University of Alabama, John Ashberry speaks about his poetics which according to Frank O'Hara reveals the indeterminacy of language, as well as the tendency of compositional final and closure. In essence, Ashberry's poems are loose-endish and can always accommodate new ideas and interpretations.

In my case, the purpose would be to draw attention to the continuing nature of poetry which has to come into being, in order to return to a further state of being.... I don't begin with the intention of writing a particular thing, though I can often look back and see things that must have been part of some unconscious intent. I actually try to begin



writing with my mind a tabula rasa; I don't want to know, can't know what I'm going to write. .. I am notorious for my confusing use of pronouns which, again, is something I consciously aim at. There are questions as to whether one character is actually the character he's supposed to be. I feel not too sure of who I am and that I might be somebody else, in a sense at this very moment that I am saying "I". "I" as single ego-a plurality of voices, voices lost in a labyrinth of textuality. ("The Imminence of a Revelation", Acts of the Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets, 69-76).

This interview undoubtedly reveals Ashberry's thoughts about the nature of his poetry, even as he straddles consciousness and unconsciousness of the creative mind at work. His "I", is definitely not him but another, and his voice could just be hers or another's. Hence, not only is the language of Ashberry's poetry difficult to understand, the meaning of his poem can hardly be determined. Hence, his text is always in a state of undecidability, or unrest; yielding place to multiple and pluralistic points of view about the subject/object of the poem.

**Black Mountain poetry** evolved under the leadership of Charles Olson, just as Beats poetry did after Ginsberg and Kerouac. They were more programmatic than the beats poets and advocated their leader's notion of "open poetry" in which field composition replaces the closed form of the past. True to the spirit of spontaneity and immediacy or presence, the poet "put himself in the open" improvising line by line and syllable by syllable, rather than using an inherited line such as iambic pentameter. Rober Creeley, Ed Dorn, Dennis Levertov and Robert Duncan can be considered as leading poets of the Black Mountain School.

Paying attention to Charles Olson's notion of the two halves which are the Head and the Heart; Olson's emphasis is on syllabic improvisation, by way of the ear – what we listen as well as by way of the heart – the breath of the line. He purports that the relation of speech and breath to the poem is organic and thereby urgent and necessary. Thus, attention to unit of breath in a line is of crucial relevance for Black Mountain Poets. Such exhaustive speech and breath patterns abound in Ginsberg's poetry, as well as in the poems of Olson and Creeley.

**Aleatory poetry**, considered as chance poetry is one of the earliest forms of digital poetics. It was not widely practiced by earlier generations of the avant-gardists even though it thrived on indeterminate and accidental artistic creations. By employing mesostics – a form of acrostic in which emphasized letters spell out words vertically at the center of horizontal lines of poetry, aleatory poets such as John Cage and Jackson Mac Low attempt to free the language from syntax.

**Newlipo poetry** is inspired by a French group Oulipo or Ouvroir De Litterature Potentielle. Christian Bok, its leading poet makes use of the lipogram, which is the process of excluding one or two letters of the alphabet from the work being produced. Founded by Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais in 1960, newlipo developed as a hub where scientist and mathematicians met to discuss potential new forms of writing. Harrytte Mullen's collections in *Muse and Druge*, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* abound with such examples of newlipo.

**Conceptual poetry** is influenced by earlier international experimental movements including the *Noirgrandes* in Brazil. They sought to materialize the word of the poem as word, rather than as a vehicle of representation. As precursors of this movement, Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin, Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, set forth two major principles – "hyper realism

and uncreative writing”. Conceptual poetry defines itself as unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts (Hoover, xiix). Information management, word processing, databasing, extreme process are its methodologies, and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionless as its ethos.

**Cyber poetry** as defined by Brian Kim, its leading practitioner is “writing that takes advantage of the possibilities afforded by digital technologies – such as the internet or graphics programs such as illustrator or Photoshop, or animation/audio/interactive programs such as Flash in their creation and production or writings that are informed by new ways of thinking brought about by the way digital technology has impacted our world. The primary technique of cyber poetry is sampling, that is cutting and pasting texts and /or images located onto the web onto a page where you have decided to construct a poem. Having developed its own theoretical imperative which uses DOS and Diastext4 programs to generate or construct poetry on the web. Terms like hacktivist, wordtoys and generative text and database aesthetics are some of the new vocabularies associated with cyber poetry. This technique also draws from collage, sampling and copy paste options as the cultural legacy of the web.

**Flarf** as a brand of cyber poetry was founded by Gary Sullivan in December 2000, when upset that his father was being scammed at a poetry contest, decided to write the worst poem ever. Flarf poets set out to decidedly write bad poems and emailed them to colleagues who massaged the results into verse, resulting into poetic pyramid. Although poets associated with this form have never made a statement on their poetics; “their poems were so bad, they were good” (Iiii). Flarf seems to favor bad over good, although there is in flarf a superabundance of content, to the detriment of form. By May 2001, the flarflist included the following poets Nada Gordon, Drew Gradner, Kasey Mohamed, Jordan Davis etc. Flarf stands at the opposite pole from post language poetry. Despite its use of oblique phrasing, flarf can take moral action by controversially presenting the situationist detournement of the disagreeable aspects of culture - what seems to be a new low in poetry.

Despite the claims made by the computer revolution, the computer today remains a tool for editing, research, and composition for a great majority of poets. We should thus not imagine that a single style rules postmodern poetry, such as language poetry, conceptual or post-language lyric because the poem relies on uncertainty, indeterminacy, boredom, nonsense and meaninglessness etc.

As Walter Benjamin notes that: “the presence of the original is prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.... The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical... with the rise of machine reproduction, the simulacrum or copy began to take on its own aura. Jean Baudrillard notes that “today simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance, it is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality, a hyperreal” (1).

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