

“The Influence of Postmodern Writing Techniques on Creating a Generative Style”

A Poetry Project and Creative Thesis

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Postmodern poetry can be defined as innovative, experimental, or rebellious. It contrasts more traditional forms of poetry through its evocative language, disruptive nature, and manipulation of reality. It resists Aristotelian narrative and encourages detaching the author from the poem. However, Postmodernism continues to be a concept not easily defined. In *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-garde*, Peter Osborne claims, “Just what the postmodern might mean, philosophically -- in the sense in which, for example, thinkers as opposed to Habermas and Foucault share a general conception of the philosophical discourse of modernity -- remains totally obscure” (Osborne VII). However, it is through its characterizing resistance of old writing methods that Postmodern poetry remains a constant generative process that builds upon itself. In this project, I seek to explain this generative concept through my own postmodern influenced poetry. Through my experience and research of Postmodernism, I exemplify my knowledge of the subject and how I integrate postmodern methods with older methods to generate a unique style.

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I have been a writer of poetry for a significant portion of my life. My style has evolved and taken on diverse directions. As a young writer in high school, I often wrote with a mix of lyricism and spoken word. For the last six years, while studying at Millersville University, I had the pleasure of working under the guidance of Judy Halden-Sullivan for three semesters of study within innovative and experimental styles of postmodern poetry. I have learned to practice several techniques within this genre and applied them to my poetry writing throughout the past couple years. This nurturing of craft at Millersville brought out promise in me, having been honored with my own poetry published in George Street Press and MUings: The Graduate Journal. My hope for this creative thesis is to show how the postmodern genre of poetry can influence a unique style. Postmodern poetry offers methods that can be integrated with other styles -- old and new -- and still be considered postmodern. It is in that experimental integration that postmodern poetry becomes continuously generative. To understand the influences I appreciate through postmodern aesthetic, a broader view of the cultural elements behind the movement helps illustrate my use of this genre. Three prior movements led to the evolution of postmodernism that I will elucidate to identify the elements that shape my artistic approach: abstract expressionism (Dadaism), political and cultural revolt, and psychoanalytic influence.

What is Postmodernism?

Starting in the 1960's, postmodernism was and is a movement that influences literature, art, theatre, and the like. As opposed to previous movements, the definition of postmodernism isn't clearly defined in academic theory, as its parameters are not clearly defined due to its almost lawless features. "Just what the postmodern might mean, philosophically -- in the sense in which, for example, thinkers as opposed to Habermas and Foucault share a general conception of the philosophical discourse of modernity -- remains totally obscure" (Osbourne VII). What can be explained about postmodernism are significant trends in arts and politics that influenced its establishment in the historical timeline of cultural and political movements. Periods of history are labeled to mark major moments in cultural consciousness. "Modernity,' post modernity,' 'modernism,' 'postmodernism' and 'Avant Garde' are categories of historical consciousness which are constructed at the level of the apprehension of history as a whole" (Osbourne IX). The period of post modernism came out of a rejection toward the institutional systems and capitalist ideals of the 1960's and 70's. Postmodernists often wrote from the persona of lower-class experience, new sexual pride/liberation, racial protest, and drug/psychedelic culture. Art and literature represented the progressive changes of the world around. "Its main characteristics include anti-authoritarianism, or refusal to recognize the authority of any single style or definition of what art should be; and the collapsing of the distinction between high culture and mass or popular culture, and between art and everyday life" (MoMA). Postmodernism didn't completely abolish

previous styles, but often integrated them with others for a new style. The Museum of Modern Art further explains that “postmodern art can be also characterized by a deliberate use of earlier styles and conventions, and an eclectic mixing of different artistic and popular styles and mediums” (MoMA). This set the tone for a new freedom from authority in artistic and literary expression.

The Influence of Abstract Expressionism (Dadaism)

The early 20th century introduced new ideas and issues to the forefront that were the impetus for several cultural movements. Decolonization and nationalism took hold. Progressivism began to permeate, initiating protests for women’s rights and against monopoly titans. The empire was falling. Art began to follow the lead of the world around, representing the progressive cultural shifts. This shift enabled the creation of the Dada movement in art, which influenced the postmodern poetry and art movements that followed in the second half of the 20th century. The artists associated with Dadaism “celebrated chance, parody, playfulness, and attacked the central role of the artist,” which were to become central tenets of the postmodern poetry era. The Dada movement protested old traditions of art and embraced artistic freedom through fragmented images and decentralizing self-expression.

Marcel Duchamp, created the readymade sculpture called “Fountain,” which consists entirely of a porcelain urinal with the label, “R. MUTT.” Duchamp’s work is arguably equivalent to the conceptual poetry of the postmodern poetry movement, which encouraged “uncreative writing” and language appropriation -- emphasizing the initial concept rather than the final poetic product (Goldsmith). Duchamp says, “The

individual, man as a man, man as a brain, if you like, interests me more than what he makes, because I've noticed that most artists only repeat themselves" (Cabanne 98).

Duchamp promotes the attitude that a thing which is already made is art in itself, and speaks significantly about human nature, therefore, imagination is not required.

Imagination drags us further from the present truth" (Goldsmith).

Another example of how Dadaism influenced postmodern poetry was in the development of collage, which included using materials from advertisements, popular images, or illustrations from popular novels. In "How to Make a Dadaist Poem" Tristan Tzara claimed that to construct a Dadaist poem, one only needs to put arbitrary words in a hat and pull them out one after the next (Sharma and Chaudhary 190). Dadaism and collage then evolved to Neo-Dadaism, which became the descriptor for early 1960s to "designate experimental art, including assemblage, performance, Pop art, and nascent forms of minimal and conceptual art" (Craft 4). "The concept of Neo-Dada emerged in the late 1950s and characterized art's opposition with more emotional and painterly practices of the "then-dominant movement of Abstract Expressionism." An example of Neo-Dada would be the work of Andy Warhol, who created pop art such as the famous Campbell Soup collage.

Poetry as Protest

Art moved with the progressive protests of the Dada and Neo-Dada era, and poetry followed suit. Postmodern poetry not only protested politics that inform society, but also the culture of poetry. It protested any rules that previous movements required of writing poetry. Contemporary poet Dean Young says, "If the poet does not have the

chutzpah to jeopardize habituated assumptions and practices, what will be produced will be sleep without dream, a copy of a copy of a copy” (Young 24). Postmodernism protested prior movements that promoted writing restrictions. For example, the Romantic era set out to describe emotions through descriptive words -- a very traditional method. “The romantics endeavored to place significance and value on subjects through different sets of dichotomies -- body and mind, feeling and thought, “pressure of reality and imagination” (Altieri 606). The postmodern poets chose to evoke emotion, as well as the meaning and significance around them. They expressed truths in a way that did not follow a traditional descriptive method. For example, they used free association when deciding on words to write. Free association is a psychological practice that postmodern poets used to demonstrate the association of conscious with unconscious language. Recording free association created a meta level of fragmentation. Though postmodernists may have integrated old ideas, they abandoned traditional translations of communication as a revolt against fixed patterns.

Even the Modernist era became traditional -- serving old structures of writing by which postmodernism rebelled against. “Their primary concern is a rejection and reformulation of the humanist framework which they see underlying modern poetics” (Altieri 609) Detaching oneself from the poem was also a rejection of a previous framework, as it takes one’s ego from the poem. This goes against the grain of the poet being the author of representation. Robert Duncan suggests that value and order do not solely depend on man’s creative imagination: “Central to and defining the poetics I suggest here is the conviction that the order man may contrive or impose upon things about him or upon his own language is trivial beside the divine order or natural order he may discover in them” (Collis and Lyons 202). In postmodern poetry, there is an

emphasis on depersonalizing in order to get at the unfiltered truth -- a truth unsullied by the human imagination.

Furthermore, protesting habituated practices that emphasized the poet's ego in poetry was seen as a conscious rejection of any higher power or authority. "The technical revolt against New Critical in the fifties by poets like Olson, Ginsberg, Levertov, Duncan, Snyder, and Creeley was part of a sociopolitical revolt against the U.S. empire and its institutions, and this historical coincidence has contributed to the slippage between poetic techniques and political values that informs histories of contemporary poetry" (Blasing 15). This was a radical move, as people felt they were able to protest with their poetry, and all that language influences in society. Language has power, and manipulating it away from authority and traditional values was empowering. "Language has been shaped by and is shaping the social and political forces throughout our culture and this is the necessary subject of the postmodern poet who does not approach representation in language as pure and unmediated material: instead the language becomes foregrounded as both the medium and the potential subject of poetry" (Corcoran 44). The use of language for control and conservation of tradition is rebelled against. Richard Kerridge further elaborates "Language is exposed as a system, not inhabited as utterance" (Kerridge 109). In the postmodern era, language is reevaluated. This allows for more language liberation, giving poets a choice to not follow established patterns. The timeless attraction to postmodern style is that there is a consistent desire for resistance or liberation that moves with a constantly changing society. Several movements continue to stem from the postmodern poetry movement, such as the Beat or projectivist movements. "The appeal of eman- cipation is that as a concept broader than class struggle it can potentially embrace the projects of old and new social

movements” (Pieterse 6). Writing as an act of resistance is a central tenet of postmodernism that continues to promote and inspire generative styles for contemporary writers.

Another attribute of postmodernism that contributes to that generative process is the Beat movement. The Beat movement of the 50’s was one of several submovements that informed and promoted the postmodern aesthetic of authentic spontaneity. Following the disillusionment with World War II cruelties and the Cold War, the beat poets rejected conformity and political/cultural repression. “Beat poets sought to write in an authentic, unfettered style” (PF). In Beat poetry, there was a commitment to what Allen Ginsberg referred to as “a spontaneous bop rhapsody, requiring that poetry be composed in immediacy rather than tranquility.” Ginsberg also argued against subsequent revision, convinced that what came first was best” (Gray 45). Judy Halden Sullivan emphasized this point often, wording it as “first word, best word,” so that no student would forget. Beat poetry is all about speed and rhythm. Keep writing -- don’t stop. The natural flow of your pen (better to use than a computer, as to resist making edits) assists in pushing a forward momentum across the page. Beat poetics offer writers freedom through authenticity, accessed by spontaneity.

Another movement that significantly influenced the postmodern era was the projectivist movement, which started amongst a group of poets that taught in the Black Mountain School of New York from 1933 to 1956. Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan all practiced poetry in a similar style of projective verse, which encourages spontaneity and removing subjectivity (Poets). Pioneering postmodernist poet Charles Olson’s influential manifesto “Projective Verse” introduced his ideas of “Composition by Field” through projective or open verse. The manifesto

emphasizes three key elements for writing projective verse. The first is the *kinetics of the thing* (Olson). Writing poetry is an active experience, where energy directs and redirects itself. The poet's ego is abandoned, and they are submissive to the energy surrounding them. There is no metric system like traditional poetry; it is something actively and openly being created. The poem unfolds. "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge" (Olson). This is to say, energy orchestrates the poem.

The second key factor or projectivism according to Olson "is the *principle*, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition, and, when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being." Olson continues to emphasize this point by instructing that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." In other words, the poem is informed by its influence. It is the written language -- a literary manifestation -- of the physical reality.

This leads to the third factor: *process*. Olson says, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION." A poem should have movement, and that is brought on by a word leading to the next word with speed. One method for this is structuring the words in a way that directs your eyes to move across the page through spaces and line breaks. Olson also insists on breath's role in Field by Composition. He conveys that there are "certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings." Olson illustrates his point with the following:

"the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE”

By emphasizing this line with capital letters, Olson conveys the importance of the emotive quality in breath, and how it distills a physicality in writing that is not equal to the role of intellect.

Psychoanalytic Influence on Postmodernism

Though postmodern poetry embraces openness, there are some features that characterize it -- including the aforementioned use of free association psychology. There are five core ideas that often influence the creation of postmodern poetry:

- 1) Embracing of Randomness -- Postmodern poetry rejects absolutes, encouraging arbitrariness, chaos, and disorganization, representing the “curio cabinet” of the mind or “mind palace” (Di Leo and Motte).
- 2) Playfulness -- “While modernist writers mourned the loss of order, postmodern writers revel in it, often using tools like black humor, wordplay, irony, and other techniques of playfulness to dizzy readers.”
- 3) Fragmentation -- Postmodernism often practices collage, going for worldly deformity and pronounced jumps in ideas and thoughts.
- 4) Metafiction -- Postmodern poets experimented with the metaphysical in their work, directing the reader’s attention to the work’s glib and tongue-in-cheek nuances. Mental detachment and turning away from the ego is a result.
- 5) Intertextuality -- Since collage and fragmentation is often a feature of postmodern poetry, many poet’s work went openly into dialogue with other

media. One tool they used was pastiche (imitation of another poet's aesthetic) and integrating high- and low-class society (poetry that addresses controversial, sometimes indecent subjects matters) (MasterClass).

These five features -- particularly fragmentation -- have been influenced by earlier developments in psychology. Fragmentation and the idea of a "fragmented subject" appeared in the latter end of the nineteenth century, "reflecting discoveries in the fields of psychology and cultural anthropology" (McNeil and Oliveira). Robert Langbaum has referred to this concept in writing as "the movement toward depersonalization and abstraction in literature" (Langbaum 216). The stepping back and withdrawing one's ego the construction of a poem detaches their authority and bias perspective of what they are musing on. "Poetry is particularly amenable to this type of phenomena, for poetic language intrinsically generates 'discordance' within the Self, engendering an 'unsettled and questionable subject" (Kristeva). This particularly unsettling characteristic of postmodern poetry "renders the subject of enunciation hetero- geneous" as exemplified in Lacanian Theory. (McNeill and Oliveira). The paradox of desire and discomfort of the Lacanian Real is observed in the practice of postmodern poetry. Postmodern poetry is unsettling, yet it is simultaneously intriguing for its authenticity. As mentioned, the authenticity and Lacanian truth or "Real" is the aim of postmodernist poetics. Postmodernism reveals a "Real" that is in equal parts shocking and attractive.

My Role as a Postmodernist -- A Discussion

Evocative authenticity and unadulterated truth attracted me to postmodernism and contributes my ethos as a postmodernist. Projectivism was one of the central gilding movements for informing authenticity in my work, as it trains my mind to follow energies around me. For a while, one of the challenges I had with poetry was learning not to linger too long on the flow of my words. Projectivism's engagement with the environment was a game changer to my writing, helping to create a flow that was natural and evocative. Simon Blackburn describes projectivist philosophies to "distinguish between nature as it really is, and nature as we experience it as being. "The way we experience it as being is thought of as partly a reflection or projection of our own natures" (Blackburn 1). Learning about and practicing projectivism helped me to write poetry to the fullest experiential potential. I learned how to purposefully evoke something impressionistic and emotional. "Poetry is energy transferred from where the poet got it, by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" (Creeley). Learning to be evocative brought out something experiential in my already ethereal and "mysterious" writing, as Judy Halden-Sullivan would critique. One of the most influential projectivist poets that Judy introduced to me was Robert Creeley. His style can be described as "lyrical and romantic" (Hoover 125). In his Norton Anthology, *Postmodern American Poetry*, Paul Hoover conveys that Creeley's poetry "explores the immediate sensation but in language that is often oblique and evocative rather than direct and descriptive; the hesitation offered by his short lines and his use of enjambment suggest both the graceful stumbles of everyday speech and the lyrical

cadence of song” (Hoover 125). These themes are often reflected in my poetry, including some poetry in this collection.

Postmodern writing has helped me to not completely subject myself to the constraints of traditional rules of writing. This is not an easy task, since we are all trained to follow rules in writing and other forms of communication. Experimental writers within the postmodern genre deconstruct these rules. Judy Halden-Sullivan’s Creative Writing course heavily focused on Julie Armstrong’s text, *Experimental Fiction*, which breaks down experimentalism and why people subscribe to it despite its erraticness and disorder. Armstrong suggests that going against the rules of traditional writing brings out a truth that is more authentic than standard Aristotelian narrative. Armstrong says that “narrative is very appealing to readers; this is because it offers simplicity and predictability, which is comforting, unlike experimental fiction, which can be unpredictable, random, and confusing... Therefore, a reader’s response is sometimes one of frustration and even anger, leading to confusion and even disengagement, as experimental works subvert expectations. And yet, experimental fiction is more like real life, in that real life is tangled, non-linear and complex; it refuses to be packaged into simplistic plots” (Armstrong 5-6). There is a quality to experimental writing that gets at actual experience. This quality is something I try to exemplify in my poetry.

While I have taken inspiration and influence from these poets introduced to me by Judy Halden-Sullivan, I have invested into paving a way for my own unique style to form. Postmodernism inspires a constant rebellion of previous styles. It inspires individuality that is not restricted by rules. This is how I started to generate an authenticity that doesn’t conform to traditional poetics -- a style that takes influence

from integrating multiple styles. I have looked to the themes and flow of Tim Seibles, incorporating a similar level of intensity in emotion and structure to my poetry. My fascination with his style started with reading his popular poem, “Blade Unplugged” (POL), which is intimate, lyrical, and visceral with its language and elongated flow -- characteristics in most of his writing. “Seibles approaches themes of racial tension, class conflict, and intimacy from several directions at once in poems with plain spoken yet fast-turning language” (POL). I connected with “Blade Unplugged” because it evoked the emotional intimacy of hearing a violin as well as the nostalgia of childhood fascination with fantasy. He says, “my heart is that black violin played slowly” and “the first time I killed a vampire, I was sad: I mean we were almost family” (Seibles 24). The societal examinations and musings in my poetry are reflective of social issues within Seibles’ poetry as well as Amiri Baraka’s poetry.

In addition to lyricism, I am also inspired by Nikita Gill as I expand on the Romantic themes of fantasy, making the realness of life feel significant. Like in the ancient Greek tales, there is fate and destiny, as well as good and evil analyzed. I endeavor to emulate her fantasy themes to address feminist topics. In her book, *Greek Goddesses*, Gill tells Greek stories from the female characters’ perspectives. For example, she writes, “They murmur, in the beginning of everything: from the bones of Chaos, rose a girl who built the universe, the stars, the planets, all because she was looking for a place to dance” (Gill 5). My poetry can often come from a place of either searching or feeling empowerment. I was moved by Gill's work, so it is my hope that my work has a similar effect on readers. Though he is prior to modern feminism, I must also add that John Keats’ whimsical writing is also a robust source of ethereal material. In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” Keats writes, I met a lady in the meads, Full beautiful—a

faery's child, Her hair was long, her foot was light, And her eyes were wild" (Keats).

Some poets might argue that this material goes against antifeminist views exemplified by ecofeminism, which claims that women are demeaned by being so frequently associated with nature. However, I strive to reclaim it as something new through defamiliarization,

While I emphasize defamiliarization, I adapt Aristotelian narrative into some of my writing. My poetry has evolved into a unique style that blends a degree of old with new. Some of my work abandons traditional narrative; some of it channels narrative structure with postmodern fragmentation and evocation of the metaphysical. I read a lot of poetry that goes beyond what I read in Judy's class. I read a lot of old and new styles so I can take inspiration from the language. These generations of poets include W.H. Auden, Rainer Maria Rilke, Alice Walker, Nikita Gill, Rumi, etc. Crossing generations and styles, I fragment old with new, not subscribing to a generation's rules (which, ironically, is actually what makes it subscribe to postmodern rules). I deconstruct what I see and connect it with the environment and present experience around me.

One of the ways I create fragmentation is through memory. Memory is a constant theme and source of inspiration throughout my work. Looking to the past for situations to project and evoke has been helpful for creating a quality that is atmospheric.

Remembering only pieces of memory is only better, because it creates fragmentation. For example, this quality is similar to what Tennessee Williams evokes in his memory plays. For me, memory is an endless fountain of inspiration. In his novel, "Letters to a Young Poet," Rainer Maria Rilke describes this process, telling the readers that "even if you were in a prison whose walls did not let any sound of the world outside reach your senses -- would you not have your childhood, that precious, royal richness, that

treasure-house of memories? Turn your attention towards that” (Rilke). Sometimes, I have to recall and contemplate a memory, while other times, I look to poetry to prompt a memory. Then I think to myself: *what was I feeling at that moment? Is it a strong memory? Or is it fading or vague? Is it possibly a false memory?* I try to evoke the memory’s emotion rather than strictly narrate the sequence of events. While experimental poetry focuses more on looking outwards, I try to integrate a method of also looking inwards.

One of the ways I access the mentioned themes of intimacy and looking inwards is through spiritual and metaphysical themes. The Beat poets focused their attention to spirituality for inspiration, specifically Buddhism. The Beat poets were spiritual seekers, having rejected the central religions of their country along with the dogmatic views and asserted beliefs about anything else. “The exploration of Eastern religion was not faddish, as writers on both coasts sought other ways of being and perceiving” (Gray 46). Using spirituality in writing poetry is a helpful method for channeling the metaphysical elements of postmodern poetry. It supports evoking emotion and the projecting of an abstract reality. It also assists in the rejection of worldly corruptions that influence our lives. Spirituality through the lens of postmodernism helps me to be a contemplative writer, focusing on my experience of being and presence. I often use spiritual and metaphysical evocations in my poetry, similar to the writings of Gertrude Stein in the postmodern age and the Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century. What can be found in the postmodern age is “the DNA of Emerson’s gospel of radical individualism, esoteric correspondences, continual revelation, personal spiritual discovery, Romantic nature, salutary solitude, and language’s creative force” (Tanner-Kennedy 2). These two different ages of writing also share a more ancient connection. These poets are equally

influential to my writing as the Ancient Sufi poetry of Rumi, who is well known for connecting intimacy with mystical experiences. He “made claims for a ‘religion of love’ that went beyond all organized faiths” (Ali). I take inspiration from these metaphysical and spiritual writers as I integrate their ideas into my writing.

I will conclude this section of the thesis by reiterating probably the most important postmodern methodology for writing. This poetic piece -- while it will show some of the themes and structures I referenced -- does not have strict parameters set. Writing poetry within the postmodern genre is experiential, requiring letting the language come in the moment that it is experienced and recorded. Being open to the language that comes will nurture a needed organic quality. The poetry -- it's themes, structures, evocations -- unfold as I write. Postmodernism, even in its generative form, requires open mindedness.

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