arab journal for the humanities

# Postmodernist Poetry: Some of its Challenging Salient Trends

Ahmad Y. Majdoubeh*

* Ph.D. in American and Romantic Poetry, Cornell University, U.S.A., 1984. Assistant Prof. in Dept. of English, University of Jordan, Jordan.

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to shed light on some of the prominent features of (English and American) Postmodernist poetry which pose a special challenge or difficulty for students, readers, and instructors. The assumption here is that Postmodernist poetry, due to a noticeable lack of awareness on the part of students and readers of its characteristics, is made more difficult to read, understand, and appreciate than both traditional and Modernist poetry. An apt familiarity therefore with such characteristics makes the reading and teaching of Postmodernist poetry both less difficult and more fun. The characteristics, as I shall show, include: deceptive simplicity, suggestiveness, infinity of meanings, fragmentation, advocacy of revisionism, and playfulness. Throughout, I shall provide examples from poems written in the second half of the twentieth century to support my contention.

Postmodernist poetry is especially difficult to read as well as to teach – perhaps more so than the poetry of any other era, including the Modernist era out of which Postmodernism has grown and against which it has reacted.[1] While it is a real challenge for readers as a whole, and students in particular, to read and understand Modernist poetry (as well as for teachers to teach it), it is equally challenging for many of them to read and understand what has come to be known as Postmodernist poetry.[2] What applies to students and reading, with respect to Postmodernism, applies to instructors and teaching. For if one is not amply aware of salient Postmodernist features and modes of expression, one (i.e. a teacher or a student) will not have much to say about it and will most likely underestimate it.

The difficulty in the former case (Modernism) stems, largely, from a number of features, foremost among which are (a) the language of the poem (in many cases, its peculiar Modernist jargon itself), its allusions (implied and stated), its unfamiliar lexicon, its highly convoluted syntax, (b) the minuteness, elaborateness, and extreme richness of most of the images via which the argument of the poem is conveyed (in many ways the Modernist image is as elaborate as the metaphysical conceit, if not more), and (c) the implicit, indirect connections between the elements of the argument.[3]

Whereas some Postmodernist poems are as complex structurally, stylistically, and thematically as Modernist poems, many of them look or sound deceptively simple.[4] In the latter case (the focus of this paper), there is not much difficulty at the level of language.[5] The lexicon, the syntax, and the jargon are not serious impediments to understanding the meaning of the poem. But neither are the images – which are generally less elaborate, complex and inscrutable than those of Modernist poetry. The literal meaning does not pose a problem, in the majority of cases. Rather, the problem is primarily semantic: it has to do with what the poem means as a whole. While students and teachers find a lot to talk about when discussing either Modernist or traditional poems (the language, the imagery, the allusions, the ideology, the prosody), they – unless they happen to be well-acquainted with the main tenets of Postmodernism – may not be able to say much about Postmodernist poems beyond a few generalizations or introductory remarks. The minute you read a Postmodernist poem in class and ask what it is about, there is often dead silence on the part of students. Herein lies an epistemological as well as a pedagogical problem.

In what follows, supporting my argument with selections primarily from English and American poetry written in the second half of the twentieth century (which is the era we generally refer to as that of Postmodernism), I shall focus on some of the causes of difficulty which students, teachers and

readers encounter when they come across Postmodernist poems. Such causes, I shall suggest, stem directly from the characteristics or features of the poems themselves. I shall explore causes or features related to Postmodernist simplicity, suggestiveness, infinity of meaning, fragmentation, advocacy of revisionism, mundaneness, and playfulness.[6] Throughout the exploration of these dimensions, I suggest – directly as well as implicitly – how teaching Postmodernist poetry can be easier than one might think and also quite interesting and enriching.

Let's address the matter of simplicity first. It is somewhat paradoxical and oxymoronic to say that Postmodernist poems are difficult to understand and talk about in class because they are simple. How can simplicity be a source of difficulty? Well, it can. Students are used to reading and understanding poems which are based on logical arguments, be they direct and straightforward (such as that of Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love") or elaborate and complex (such as those of Chaucer's tales, the famous romantic odes, or Eliot's *The Waste Land).* Most often, the argument is stated explicitly (implicit arguments are less frequent); at times, it is presented through imagery. Once students get over the initial linguistic hurdle (through the help of a good dictionary), once they are able to identify and trace the various textual allusions, and once they interpret the various figures of speech and images, the overall meaning (which is a combination of what the speaker states, what the images signify, what the structure suggests – in addition to what the reader interpolates) becomes apparent.

One can safely assert that, from the beginning of Old English literature (i.e. "Caedmon's Hymn") to twentieth-century Anglo-American Modernism (i.e. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*), there is in every poem a meaningful construct – a build-up, a structure, a pattern of some sort. A poem is like a house, built according to a certain underlying design and decorated or enameled according to certain aesthetic principles. A Shakespearean sonnet, for instance, is composed of three quatrains (each containing an explicit idea or an idea presented through an image) and a couplet which sums up the argument, asserts a conclusion, or poses a question. The structure in a lyric like Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is woven around a logical argument in which "Had" (elliptical for "if I had") appears at the beginning, "but" in the middle, and "therefore" at the end. Even in poems where the argument is less meticulously constructed or where connections seem to be more loosely put together, students are able to reconstruct and arrive at an overall meaning. The argument in most poems prior to Postmodernism is built, constructed or patterned in a manner which readers/students learn to recognize, interpret, analyze, and understand. Much of the discussion in class makes its target the set of ideas of which the argument is composed, as well

as the structure and style employed in organizing or expressing these ideas and the individual constructs (thematic or aesthetic) of which the overall meaning is made up. Generally, poets build or construct an argument; readers explore and reconstruct it. Find your way through the argument or structure and you arrive at the meaning.

The problem with many Postmodernist poems is that the argument is either totally absent or perversely implicit. They are devoid of the literal, textual complexity which makes up traditional and Modernist poems and which provides students in class with the chance to say a lot about a variety of elements. Take, for example the following poem, entitled "In Memoriam John Coltrane" by Michael Stillman (1972):[7]

Listen to the coal
rolling, rolling through the cold
steady rain, wheel on
wheel, listen to the turning
of the wheels this night
black as coal dust, steel
on steel, listen to
these cars carry coal, listen
to the coal train roll. (176)

Notice, first, that there are no difficult words in this 3-stanza poem. Lexically, the poem does not pose a challenge. Perhaps the only difficulty is in recognizing the name ("John Coltrane") in the title. In most anthologies, however, there are footnotes which identify names and places. The footnote to Stillman's poem tells us that John Coltrane is a famous saxophonist who has influenced modern Jazz. Some students (i.e. beginners) may not know what the expression "In Memoriam" means, though most students are familiar with it. A good dictionary informs us that the expression refers to the commemoration of a dead person. The three stanzas are composed of words which any foreign student with a command of English at the intermediate level can identify. At the literal level, there is no difficulty.

But what does the poem mean? Such a question is not easy to answer. And students (and teachers) will greatly marvel at its meaning, even after a second or third reading. What do the sounds we are asked to listen to represent? What do the images we are indirectly asked to picture stand for? The footnote about John Coltrane and the expression "In Memoriam" suggest that the poem is an elegy of some sort. Nevertheless, the poem does not look like a traditional elegy – Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved Master William Shakespeare," Milton's "Lycidas," or Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard." In a conventional elegy, we are first introduced to a

speaker who is lamenting or grieving over the death of a dear person, who then delves into the virtues or contributions of the deceased, and who ends up celebrating the fact that the deceased is not in fact dead, for he/she lives in the mind of the speaker or people in general. Most, if not all, elegies begin by lamenting and end up celebrating. In other words, there is an explicit argument based on a logical progression of ideas, and there is a coherent structure. And there are images (such as flowers in Milton's "Lycidas" and natural elements in Gray's "Elegy Written...") whose significations are immediately and easily identifiable.

Stillman's poem does not reflect or mirror any of the elements of a conventional elegy, not even those of a Modernist elegy, such as Auden's "The Unknown Citizen." The speaker is not grieving or lamenting the death of anyone (even though the title and the footnote to it suggest that Coltrane is worthy of grief), he is not recounting the virtues or contribution of any (even though the footnote tells us that Coltrane contributed to the cause of Jazz), and he is not immortalizing the deceased (even though Coltrane has the potential to be immortalized through his music and through his performances). There appears, in fact, to be no structure in the poem, and no underlying design. And there is no explicit or recognizable argument. The only thing approximating a design or a pattern is the use of "listen" three times. If one does not glance at the title, there is nothing to suggest that the poem is an elegy. Moreover, the connection between the title and the body of the poem is indirect; to some, it may be nonexistent. The difficulty of reading this simple poem is primarily semantic.

Some may wish to place Stillman's poem in the tradition of Modernist imagism. Is not the whole poem composed of an image: visual as well as auditory – for in the poem we are asked both to listen and to look? Some critics believe that Modernism and Postmodernism do intersect especially when it comes to the use of imagery as a means of presenting an argument. Even though such a suggestion is plausible, one cannot but recognize – upon careful examination – a radical difference between imagist poems and the imagery in Stillman's poem and other Postmodernist poems. The difference, in my opinion, lies in the fact that even though the imagery in Modernist poems (e.g. Eliot's *The Love Song* or "Gerontion") is more elaborate, meticulous, and complex, it is ultimately more concrete and easily identifiable. We can understand, after some pondering, the meaning of an "evening spread out against the sky," "a patient etherized upon a table," or "Streets that follow like a tedious argument" from the first stanza of Eliot's *The Love Song...* . Other images may be more difficult but, upon careful analysis, they can be pinned down to meaning. The connection, in other words, between the literal

component of the image (the signifier) and the figurative (the signified) is easier to make, once the components of the literal component itself are sorted out and once the vocabulary used in constructing it is explained. In Stillman's poem, while the literal part of the image is clear and straightforward, the figurative is too abstract and infinite to pin down to any specific signification. What does the "coal" "rolling through the cold/steady rain" mean? It is hard to associate this image with a precise, specific and immediate meaning.

Stillman's poem is not meaningless, even though some extreme, nihilistic Postmodernists do claim that texts can be totally meaningless, just as life itself is meaningless. What I am trying to illustrate is the difficulty of arriving at meaning or meanings, due to the radical difference between the way traditional or Modernist poems present themselves and the way Postmodernist poems present themselves. In Postmodernist poems meaning is problematic. The textual clues pointing to it are much less directly present than in Modernist and traditional poems. Since there is – on the whole – no explicit argument, no direct statement being expressed, no imagery with specific signification, and no structure or design with an identifiable pattern, the reader will have a harder time understanding what the poem means. As Terry Eagleton has put it, meaning, in the absence of structure and an explicit argument, "is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, [as] it is never fully present in any one sign alone".

Another example of a simple but problematic poem is Francisco X. Alarcon's "The X in My Name" (1993):

the poor
signature
of my illiterate
and peasant
self
giving away
all rights
in a deceiving
contract for life (304)

Like Stillman's, this poem has no immediately identifiable argument, no noticeable structure, and no specific signification for the imagery it contains.

Three points about meaning (and these are also three features of Postmodernisin as well as causes of difficulty) need to be stressed here. The first is that while traditional and Modernist poems are most often explicitly expressive in what they wish to convey, Postmodernist poems are largely suggestive. In "In Memoriam John Coltrane" or "The X in My Name," the

speaker does not state directly the idea(s) he is trying to communicate. Compare those two texts to a typical poem by Whitman, by Eliot, by Pound, or by Auden. We can determine what Whitman is saying in "Song of Myself' or in any poem in *Leaves of Grass* with a great deal of certainty. We can pin down *The Waste Land* or Pound's Cantos to one or several meanings. What meaning or meanings can we pin Stillman's or Alarcon's poem down to? In Stillman's poem, the speaker is asking the addressee to listen to three things: to "the coal/rolling," to the "turning of the wheels, and to "these cars carry coal." What does this mean? There is no direct hint from the speaker. Much of the meaning is suggested by the image of blackness emphasized throughout and by the faintness of the sounds we are asked to listen to. What does the image suggest? The speaker is perhaps drawing a line between the blackness of the coal in the cold rain (and blackness may be less derogatory than sublime) and the black saxophonist, and between the sound of the wheels and train on the one hand and jazz music on the other. Since there is also a reference to a train rolling in darkness and to a deceased person in the title of the poem, the speaker may also be suggesting the idea of a journey to death or immortality.

One could offer other possible meanings, but the idea to stress here is that there are a lot of maybes when we talk about meaning in this and many other Postmodernist poems. Indeterminacy, as Ihab Hassan has argued (1983, 1985) is an essential feature of Postmodernism. What we have or what we hope to arrive at, in other words, is not a fixed meaning (or a fixed set of meanings) but either shadows of meaning or suggested versions of it.

The principle of suggestiveness can be seen in many Postmodernist poems. One can look, for example, at the second half of William Stafford's suggestive poem "Ask Me" (1977):

> I will listen to what you say.
> You and I can turn and look
> at the silent river and wait. We know
> the current is there, hidden; and there
> are comings and goings from miles away
> that. hold the stillness exactly before us.
> What the river says, that is what I say. (15)

The last line is revealing. The speaker is refraining from expressing himself directly and allowing the river to speak for him: "What the river says, that is what I say." But what does the river say? To answer the question we have to ponder what a "silent river," whose "current" is "hidden," means? The image here, as in Stillman's or Alarcon's poem, is suggestive – not directly telling or expressive. The semantic possibilities of a silent river with a hidden current are infinite.

It is also interesting to note that the speaker, as the title reveals, is asking the addressee to ask him but is avoiding the question. It is as if by asking the addressee to seek the answer from the silent river, he is delaying or deferring explanation. Evasion, delay, or deferral of meaning is a Postmodernist feature (Selden 87-92).

Infiniteness of meaning is another important characteristic (and source of difficulty) of Postmodernist poems. As is the case with Stillman's, Alarcon's, and Stafford's poems, Postmodernist poems in general espouse not only a multiplicity of meaning but an infinity of it. Postmodernism is seen by many as, in part at least, a reaction against the fixedness of meaning and the stability of assertions. We no longer speak of one theme or a number of themes but of numberless, infinite themes. Before Postmodernism, readers thought of the signifier (the sign or symbol) as having either one signified (a meaning) or a limited number of signifieds. With the advent of poststructuralism, the signified itself becomes a signifier for another signified which itself, in turn, becomes a signifier, in a never-ending cycle; meaning itself becomes an infinite process of interplay between signifiers and signifieds, and keeps sliding and shifting (Selden, Eagleton). It never stands still, and we can never keep a firm handle on it. Postmodernist poems resist fixedness of meaning. Meanings are fluid, infinite, elusive or indeterminate.

Look, for example, at the following poem by Carole Satyamurti "I Shall Paint My Nails Red" (1990):

Because a bit of colour is a public service.
Because I am proud of my hands.
Because it will remind me I'm a woman.
Because I will look like a survivor.
Because I can admire them in traffic jams.
Because my daughter will say ugh.
Because my lover will be surprised.
Because it is quicker than dying my hair.
Because it is a ten-minute moratorium.
Because it is reversible. (248)

The speaker in this poem is providing a series of answers to the question – presumably posed by a skeptical, cynical, traditional, short-sighted, or narrow-minded person – why she has decided to paint her nails red. What does the act of painting one's nails red mean? The answer is not one but many – ten answers in fact. The same thing applies to the symbolism of red nail-paint itself. Even though the speaker has given ten answers (each line containing one answer), the poem makes it clear that the answers are not finite – i.e. only ten answers – but infinite. The ten are just examples, and there is no indication that the last line in the poem is the last answer, for one can well

imagine the speaker to go on and on with the catalogue of responses. Indirectly, the poem is not just about the meaning of red nail-paint, one sees, but about the meaning of things, symbols and human motives and acts in general. The meanings of anything – including something as mundane and simple as red nail-paint – are never finite and simple. They are, rather, infinite and boundless. Meaning is open-ended. Through the series of suggested meanings, the speaker is indirectly telling people not to simplify, fix, or limit meanings of things but to be imaginative, and explore things. Nothing – not even red nail-paint – can be pinned down to one meaning.

This poem can be used by instructors in poetry classes to illustrate the role of the reader/student of poetry. The role of the latter is like the role of the speaker of "I Shall Paint My Nails Red." Just as the speaker in the poem insists on the multiplicity of meanings for symbols or signifiers, the reader must do the same. It is the reader, not the author or teacher, who decides on the meanings of signifiers. Just as red nail-paint means so many things, the images in a Postmodernist poem (such as the Stillman poem, for example) also mean different things. What do the images in Stillman's poem mean? What does the poem as a whole mean? Since Stillman or his speaker is not offering any meaning, it is the role of each reader to suggest a meaning or more. It Is particularly important to explain such a strategy to Arab students, many of whom or of whose teachers are still conservative when it comes to determination of meaning, believing that a poem has either one, or a fixed number of, meanings.

Related to this is another feature, a further source of difficulty, in reading Postmodern poems, namely the fact that they are often fragmentary or incomplete (Boyne & Rattansi, Hassan, 1983, 1985). Many such poems are fragments. Unlike a traditional poet, the Postmodernist poet gives us often an isolated thought, an idea, an impulse, an emotion, an image, or an impression which is neither developed nor placed in context. This is also a source of difficulty for students because they are used to either semi-complete or complete poems. Stillman's, Alarcon's, and Stafford's poems are a perfect example of this. In the texts of the poems per se (i.e. putting aside the title and the footnote), the reader is given no clue as to the context and background of the action; neither are we given any development of any of the ideas. No elaboration, no explanation, no preparation of any sort. All we have is what we get, a fragment. In Stillman's poem, we do not know who the speaker is, where the train is going or why it is there; we do not have any plot. All we see is a few isolated lines in which a speaker is saying "listen" (to whom we do not know). In the Stafford text we have ten answers to an assumed question. We are told nothing about the situation or occasion. No meaning we can come up with is certain or complete, for the poem itself is incomplete.

The case in other (traditional or Modernist) poems is different. Most of them can stand on their own as giving us a complete meaning. The sonnet, though a short poem, is complete. It can stand 'independently; we do not have to perform a lot of guesswork to complete its meaning. A twoline epitaph stands on its own firmly, and is never seen by readers as either a fragment or incomplete. Even 'in the case of the widely quoted two-line Pound poem "In a Station of the Metro," ("The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/Petals on a wet black bough" (91)), there is a complete idea. Not only is the image easy to explain and dig meanings out of, but one reads it and feels that the poem is both substantially autonomous and independent. When one reads the Stillman, the Alarcon, or the Stafford poems, quoted above, one cannot but feel that something is lacking, something is incomplete.

Fragmentation or incompleteness, we must tell our students who often demand completeness, is characteristic of some Postmodernist poems. Fragmentation or incompleteness is not a blemish or a drawback but a point of strength and a basic feature. It can also be explained philosophically: a Postmodernist poet is deliberately giving us fragments out of the conviction that one is no longer capable of seeing the overall picture. In the modern world (Postmodern, to be precise), human beings do not see and experience except in fragments. This could be attributed to the momentum of urbanization and the fast rhythm of modern life. Wholeness is almost lost to us; reality is too disparate, partitioned, and compartmentalized to be perceived in its totality. While a Romantic, Victorian, or Modernist intellectual had the patience and time (there is so much time, for example, available not only to Wordsworth's protagonists, Keats', or Thoreau's but also to Arnold's, Tennyson's, and T.S.Eliot's – for example to Prufrock "And indeed there will be time/... There will be time, there will be time/ Time for you and time for me") to enable them to ponder, elaborate, contextualize and develop their points to dwell at length on matters, the Postmodernist touches on matters briefly, quickly, and momentarily. One may go so far as to claim that brevity is characteristic of most Postmodern poems. The Postmodernist poem has the rhythm, speed, and size of a modern song.

Because many Postmodernist poems are incomplete, because they are fragments, instructors, in pursuit of suggested meanings, are called upon to draw students' attention to the semantic significance of omissions in such poems. Traditional poems are generally all-inclusive. They include within the body of the text itself most of the clues needed to understand what the poem is about. Most poems in the long tradition of English and American literature are largely self-contained or autonomous. Whenever we go outside these texts, it is for further analysis or understanding. This applies not only to an

epic like the old English *Beowulf*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; a Chaucerian tale, a carefully structured metaphysical poem, an eighteenth-century elaborate satire, or a complex Romantic ode, but also to a short sonnet or lyric. And this is why some literary critics espouse the intrinsic approach. In many Postmodernist poems, by contrast, a great deal is omitted; they exclude a lot that may be needed for understanding. There are so many gaps in the texts of the poems themselves and in the contexts which students/ readers have to learn to fill for a better understanding of these poems. What should be stressed here is that these gaps, omissions, or exclusions are part of the poem. The poet, in other words, expresses through both what is included and what is excluded. Omissions are not a failure on part of the poet to include but a deliberate choice to exclude. The reader's job is to include the excluded, to invoke what is not present in an attempt to fill some of the gaps.

Look at the following poem, for example, by Denise Levertov, "Leaving Forever" (1964):

> He says the waves in the ship's wake
> are like stones rolling away.
> I don't see it that way.
> But I see the mountain turning,
> turning away its face as the ship
> takes us away. (131)

A great deal is omitted in this poem. We do not know who the speaker (presumably female) is; we do not know who the "He" in the first line is. Are they husband and wife? Are they engaged? Are they boyfriend and girlfriend? Are they friends? Are they simply companions on a journey who have just met? Who's the speaker talking to in the poem? We are told nothing about where they are right now, where they have been, and where they are going. We are told nothing about the background of the conversation: why the female partner has said what she has said, and why she is responding. We are not told much about the psychological state of the speaker: is she angry? Is she happy that she is disagreeing? Has there been a quarrel between the two, or are they simply looking at things from various angles? Has the encounter affected their life? What is the bearing of the disagreement on their relationship? Are they going to be separated? It is obvious that the whole poem is a fragment and incomplete; but it is also obvious that many questions come to our mind which are not easy to answer. The point to stress is that all these questions, which correspond to gaps in the text, are important to ask, if we wish to understand, in part at least, what the poem is about. The way these questions are answered determines, to a great extent, the way we understand and appreciate the poem.

Some may argue that one will have to work only with what is included, and forget about what is excluded. To an extent, this is true, for one can still tell a lot from what one has. Knowing that the speaker is probably female (because the poet is female), one can see the poem as a conflict between the female and male views of things. Both are talking about the meaning of what they see, and both give it different interpretations. Gender influences the way one sees and understands. But asking questions about gaps, omissions, and exclusions will enrich the meaning of the poem, as well as discussions in the classroom, even though one cannot come up with conclusive answers. Students appreciate guessing and pondering about meanings of poems, and they often come up with compelling answers.

Some Postmodernist poems compel readers to seek meaning from the context surrounding them. As the text does not offer sufficient clues for satisfactory meaning (and students or teachers crave satisfactory meanings), the context – which in some Postmodernist poems is seen as complementary to the text – is sought in order to provoke explanation of some suggestive terms and expressions. The poem itself directs the reader to its context. Consider, for example, the following poem by N. Scott Momaday, "Simile" (1974):

What did we say to each other
that now we as the deer
who walk in single file
with heads high
with ears forward
with eyes watchful
with hooves always placed on firm ground
in whose limbs there is latent flight (121)

The speaker is comparing himself and another person (or others, most probably) to a deer at the moment of anticipation, ready to run from danger. What does one make of this comparison? The text does not tell us much, beyond how one's life looks in the context of danger. The choice of a hunting metaphor, as well as the reference to the deer, suggests something related to the Native American situation in America. Native Americans are originally hunters who themselves become hunted when the European man arrives on the American continent. Such a reading is supported by our knowledge of the life and writings of Momady who has written a lot about the Native American cultures. Read in a cultural, historical context, the poem reveals a great many meanings; read on its own, it reveals little. Upon reading the poem once or twice, however, one is compelled by the deer simile and the hunting theme to think of the Native American experience. The text, in other words, points to the context.

One of the salient characteristics of Postmodernist poetry is its revisionist orientation. Many Postmodernist poems are, in a sense, corrective or complementary. They, at times implicitly, argue against a certain traditional stand or idea. Postmodernist poems are deconstructive in the sense that they point out certain false assumptions that have been accepted or taken for granted, certain general notions whose specifics run counter to a truth, and certain inherent contradictions in accepted constructs. Some of what has been repressed, marginalized, or hidden gets expressed. Among the poems that are revisionist, for example, is Howard Moss's 13-line poem entitled "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" which parodies and rejects part of the argument of the Shakespearean sonnet which bears the same title. The first two lines, which reflect clearly the parody and the rejection of Shakespeare's argument, give an idea about the style and mode of the whole poem: "Who says you're like one of the dog days?/You're nicer and better" (116). Another example is Paul Simon's "Richard Cory" which also parodies and implicitly rejects certain notions and assumptions in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem bearing the same title.

An example of a revisionist poem is Jose Emilio Pacheco's poem "High Treason" (1969) 'in which he argues, in an indirect and suggestive way, against blatant, traditional patriotism. In the opening of the poem, he says: "I do not love my country. Its lustre/is beyond my grasp" (40). Clearly, the two lines shock, perhaps even offend, many readers because they run counter to sentiments that we harbor and notions that we cherish toward our country. Immediately in the third line, however, the tone and the argument shift radically: "But (although it sounds bad) I would give my life/for ten places in it for certain people,/ seaports, pinewoods, fortresses...." What he means to say, one concludes, is that patriotism is not said but felt and patriotic feelings appear in specific concrete situations, not in speeches or songs. Ultimately, the poem rejects blatant, vulgar, loud, and theoretical patriotism, not true patriotism.

Postmodernist poems are Bloomian to a great extent. Many of them have precursor or parent poems against which they argue and with which they quarrel or disagree – directly or indirectly. At times, they at once emulate and violate conventional arguments. For to Harold Bloom, modern authors are generally influenced by precursor authors, not so much by emulation as by resistance, disagreement, and difference. And one of the best ways of teaching Postmodemist poems is to try to trace the precursor poems against which they argue. Finding the parent poem can be not only fun, but also highly instructive.

Most feminist poetry is revisionist. The feminist movement itself comes, in the second half of this century, with the aim of correcting many misconceptions and false images of women. Such misconceptions and images include:

wifehood, motherhood, femininity, masculinity, the role of women in public life. Feminists argue that women have been not only suppressed and repressed physically and mentally for a long time, but also imprisoned and fixed in the many false notions perpetuated against them in male-chauvinist societies. In the third stanza of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (1951), Adrienne Rich sees the "wedding band" on her aunt's hand as a symbol of enslavement and control by her husband, not of security and love:

> Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
> Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
> The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
> Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand. (7)

In Anne Stevenson's "The Victory" (1974), the female speaker (a mother who has given birth to a male child) depicts a very untraditional, perhaps even shocking, image of motherhood. Beginning by complaining, she addresses her son thus: "I thought you were my victory/though you cut me like a knife/ when I brought you out of my body" (96). Her emotions then heighten, and she describes him as an "antagonist, gory,/blue as a bruise." Such description goes against the traditional feelings of love a mother has for her newborn who is normally described as an angel. A careful reading of the poem shows that Stevenson is rejecting the traditional image of motherhood, as well as the predictable feelings of mothers. The mother who is always loving, patient, caring, and benign, and who represses her feelings of pain and anger and is selfless in her relation to her children, is replaced by a mother who is angry at being hurt physically. She cares about her self, about her body, about her feelings; and she is writing to lay the blame on her son – even though at the end of the poem she asserts that she does love him, even though she does not see why she should do so. While a traditional mother loves and gives without limits, the mother in the Stevenson poem loves but also chides and rebukes. She is influenced by the feminist ideology which affirms a woman's right to full control over her body and to the assertion of selfhood and individuality. The mother does not have to be a silent sufferer. The female speaker in Levertov's poem appears to be a feminist who does not accept the male interpretation of symbols. Rather than accept the opinion of her male partner, like a traditional woman, even though she may not agree with it, she voices her objection: "I don't see it that way."

One important characteristic of Postmodernism, to conclude our discussion, is playfulness. Postmodernism comes, in part, as a reaction against the seriousness of Modernist and traditional poems. We are well aware of the long tradition of satire/humor in the British/American literary canon. Satire/humor has flourished in important literary eras, from the time of

Chaucer to the present. Mainstream satirical/humorous poems, however, are on the whole serious poems. Some of the best poems in the history of English and American literature are satirical/humorous: essentially all of Chaucer's tales, Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*, Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.[8] In Postmodernism, however, you get many poems which sound trivial, un-serious but are not. And these are written by established or promising mainstream poets. Playful Postmodernist poems are the counterpart of Modernist seriousness, for Modernists on both sides of the Atlantic, and in almost all of their poetry, are serious to the extent of being dismal and even tedious. Many Postmodernist poems are light, cheerful, brief, but also very profound.

Take, for example, the following poem, "On My Boat On Lake Cayuga," by William Cole (1985):

> On my boat on lake Cayuga
> I have a horn that goes "Ay-oogah!."
> I'm not the modern kind of creep
> Who has a horn that goes "beep beep."' (167)

If you ask students about this poem, many of them will not take it seriously at first. I asked a class of 60 fourth-year university students to tell me upon reading the poem twice what they thought of it. About 45 of them felt it was not to be taken seriously, even though the poem was anthologized in a famous collection of poetry selected by serious professionals. When I asked them why, they said the subject matter and the tone are not serious. This is not, in their opinion, "real" poetry. Who cares about the distinction between one sound of a horn or another. What difference if the sound of a boat horn is "Ay-oogah" or "beep, beep"? The poem does not seem to contain anything worthwhile to them.

The other fifteen students disagreed. They thought the poem was excellent. They appreciated the humor it contains, as well as its playful tone. They said that students (and readers) after a while get bored studying/reading serious poems, and one needed to read something playful in tone. But they also felt the idea (some called it "theme") to be very important. When I explained to them where Cayuga lake is located and what type of people ride boats on it, they were able to appreciate the cultural point the poem is making, as well as the universal. Cultures throughout the globe make all kinds of distinctions which may not be immediately perceived or appreciated by individuals from other cultures. Just as the various brands of T-shirts or shoes make a difference in certain cultures, to the extent that you can tell the social status of a person or even the quality of their personality from the types of clothes they wear, the various types of boats and their horns do also say something about peoples' status and quality of personality. In the poem–

which reflects clearly Postmodernist interest in fine, subtle, and seemingly insignificant distinctions – the sound "Ay-oogah" seems not only to harmonize with "Cayuga" but to also be considered prestigious. The sound "beep, beep," by contrast, is considered both obnoxious and reflecting bad taste.

The question of boat horns reflects a tendency in Postmodernism to dwell on seemingly mundane, insignificant, and "low" subjects. Modernism, as well as traditional poetry, deals with lofty, elitist and high themes, in general. At this level, Postmodernism may be looked at as an outright rejection of Modernist and traditional elitism and as a brave espousal of the more common, down-to-earth, ordinary, and even mundane subjects. Several critics have in fact stressed the point that whereas Modernism deals with "high" culture, Postmodernism deals with "low, " "mass," or "popular" culture (Boyne & Rattansi). Hence, there are studies nowadays – in the realm of discourse analysis – of the material written on breakfast cereal boxes, of obituaries, of personal love letters, of congratulatory notes, of election slogans, of business letters, of any written or oral words on practically anything.

Playfulness is a sign of liberalism, allowing poets to break new ground, experiment with new themes and modes of expression. The mundane, the common, the ordinary, or the seemingly trivial becomes an important subject of poetry. In a poem called "Six Variations"" (1961), Denise Levertov compares the way a dog drinks water to music. The result is a very interesting, playful poem:

> Shlup, shlup, the dog
> as it laps up
> water
> makes intelligent
> music, resting
> now and then to take breath in irregular
> measure. (229)

There are, to be sure, other features and other causes of difficulty. Among these is the exploration of taboos. Postmodernists are more revolutionary than any other school of poetry in tackling directly subjects and matters that were considered taboos for a long time. Sexuality (in all its forms and dimensions), some sensitive political issues, relations among races and minorities, ecology, are among these matters. The Postmodermists write also about polarities: matters and perspectives that are diametrically opposed. And there are many other matters and themes. I have only selected what I think some of the salient features the awareness of which makes our understanding (as students, readers, and teachers) of Postmodernist poems easier and our appreciation of them more genuine and more firmly based.

## Notes

1. Not long ago (i.e. in the 1960s and '70s), instructors, students, and researchers were debating whether it is easier or more difficult to read/teach the earlier periods of British literature (i.e. Medieval and Elizabethan), where one has to look up so many words and allusions which one does not normally come across or the later periods (i.e. Modernism) where many of the concepts and styles are radically unfamiliar. My study is contributing to this debate by raising the same question in relation to the latest newcomer on the literary scene, Postmodernism.

2. Modernism and Postmodernism are both similar and different, interconnected and separate. Increasingly, however, they are being seen as two distinct schools of thought. For a fruitful discussion of the relation between the two schools of thought, see especially Hassan 1983,1985, Boyne & Rattansi and Waugh.

3. For a comprehensive study of Modernism, see Bradbury and McFarlane and Ruland and Bradbury.

4. Not all Modernists are alike, of course: Pound, Eliot, Moore, Millay, Williams, and Stevens have differences at the level of both philosophy and style. Moore, for example, is more obscure than Eliot, and Millay is more explicit than Pound. Stevens can be considered both as Modernist and Postmodernist. But all Modernists also have a great deal in common. The same principle – similarity and difference – applies to the Postmodernists themselves, with the understanding that the differences among the Postmodernist are wider and more prevalent than those among the Modernists.

5. What I will be addressing and asserting in this study applies to a large number of Postmodernist poems but not to all of them. There are, in other words, poems in the Postmodern tradition which what I am saying may not be applicable to them. We have to remember that Postmodernism includes within it several (at times radically different) versions.

6. In discussing all of these characteristics, I am greatly indebted to Hassan's groundbreaking works and to Boyne and Rattansi's important study, in addition to Waugh's and Eagleton's.

7. All poetry citations in this paper are taken from Kennedy and Gioia. The number of the page on which the citation is to be found in the anthology appears at the end of each citation.

8. Playfulness is neither mainstream satire nor farce. It is, rather, the choice of light subjects and fight tone, but with deep meanings underneath. There is, as opposed to satire and farce, no deliberate trivialization of the subject nor exaggeration in the treatment of it.

## Works Consulted

Barth, John. "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodern Fiction." *The Atlantic Monthly,* January 1980.

Bertens, Hans. *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History.* London & New York: Routledge, 1995

Bloom, Harold. *Anxiety of Influence.* London: London University Press, 1973.

Boyne, Roy & Ali Rattansi, eds. *Postmodernism and Society.* London: MacMillan, 1990.

Bradbury Malcolm & James McFarlane. *Modernism: 1890-1930*. Sussex& New Jersey: Penguin, 1978.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University Press, 1983.

Hassan, Ihab. "The Critical Scene: Issues in Postmodern American Criticism." *Journal of Literary Criticism*, June, 1985.

—— "The Culture of Postmodernism." *Modernism in the Plural: Challenges and Perspectives*. Champagne-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985.

—— Desire and Dissent in the Postmodern Age." *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 5 (Winter) 1983.

Kennedy, X. J. & Dana Giola. *An Introduction to Poetry*. New York: Longman, 1998.

Ruland, Richard & Malcolm. Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. New York: Penguin Books: 1991, 269429.

Selden, Raman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

Waugh, Patricia. *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Postmodernism*. London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

* * *