

## Remodeling Centeredness in Postmodern Poetry and Poetics

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**Abstract :** My paper locates its point of departure inside the discourse of systems' theory to examine how the postmodern interpretation of centeredness, both in poetry and poetics, has been remodeled. The point made in this paper is that in its most generic and metaphoric manifestations, the idea of the center evinces deep ambivalence for postmodernism in general and postmodern poetry in particular. Hence, in the context of this multidisciplinary and sophisticated enterprise, the dynamics between stable and unstable, local and global, stability and fixity never resolves clearly. Throughout the most engaging body of poems by John Cage, John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, and John Berryman, which I will examine in my paper, the concept of centeredness sits uneasily against the cultural and aesthetic pressures to produce that kind of poetry, which captures some of the most nuanced re-collections of the postmodern experience.

**Key words:** systems' theory, postmodern poetry and poetics, centeredness, inclusion

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My paper locates its point of departure inside the dynamics of systems' theory to examine how the postmodern interpretation of centeredness both in poetry and poetics has been remodeled. In the context of this interdisciplinary and sophisticated enterprise, the postmodern remodeling of the center can be seen as participating inside a much broader spectrum of wide-cultural and scientific developments. Thereby, the point made in this paper is that in its most generic and metaphoric manifestations, the idea of the center evinces deep ambivalence for postmodernism and postmodern poetry in particular.

In principle, the center is generally understood as stable, because it comes implicated in the prerequisites of the system itself as long as its basic parameters remain unchanged. Lyotard, among others, has taken up the notion of centeredness and system's stability: in his interpretation of Thom's work, he invites the reader to suppose that the birthrates and death rates of a primitive tribe are "equivalent" in number and that food and other indispensable "resources" are supplied in a stable way. In such case, the system remains stable as long as its parameters – birthrates, death rates, and other supplied "resources" – have remained unaltered (Toffler 1984:xxi). If however, for whatever reason, any of these factors changes, the whole system moves from a relatively stable into a far-from-equilibrium condition during which the slightest changes cause cascading and irrevocable effects. Eventually, whether the system is stable or not can only be determined by examining the local and its morphologies.

Lyotard has theorized the "demise of 'grand narratives'" and especially the 'incommensurability' of local 'language games' in his reputable *The postmodern condition* (1979; transl. in 1984). Together with other postmodern theoreticians including Foucault,<sup>1</sup> and Habermas,<sup>2</sup> he fundamentally insists that it is necessary to appreciate and to show a greater deference "for diversity, for local differences, for the plurality of ways in which humans choose to live," because these local morphologies are the ones that in truth define the inherent condition of the whole system and how it is going to subside (Leitch et al., 2001:1609 – 10).

Postmodern poetry and poetics has been influenced by these theoretical developments. And, in fact, one of the earliest examples to have taken into account these considerations, not only thematically but also aesthetically, is John Cage's technique of composing "mesostics." Around 1939, he composed *Imaginary landscape No. 1*, ("six-minute radio piece [...] for piano, cymbal, and two variable-speed record turntables"). Ironically, however, after having put into use such "complex intermedia," including the radio, magnetic tape, and computer technology, Cage proceeded with writing pieces of 'mesostics' which are pieces that consist of a single instrument (Perloff, 2005).

Cage wrote the following mesostic in 1970. It is entitled "President."

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1 For more details please refer to the chapters "The unities of discourse," "Discursive formations," and "The formation of objects" in Foucault's *The archeology of knowledge* (1972).

2 For more details please refer to "The idea of the theory of knowledge as social theory" in Habermas's *Knowledge & human interest* (1971).

rEmembering a Day i visited you --seems noW  
 as I write that the weather theN was warm-- i  
 recall nothing we saiD, nothing wE did; eveN so  
 (perhaps Because of that) that visit staYs.<sup>3</sup>

Later on he uses 'mesostics' more radically by de-familiarizing "normal syntax." The most significant aspect of 'mesostics' in my perception is closely related to the gravitational effect of the local upon the global, especially, in the use of "proper name' strings to what we might call the 'sentence' string" (Perloff, 2005).

On that account, in "What you say ...," Cage "recharge[s] individual words by consistently shifting their context and hence their use" as, for example, in "[i]t interests me that a part can function as a **whole** or that a **whole** can be thrown into a situation in which it is only a part. It interests me that what one takes to be a **whole** subject can suddenly be miniaturized [...]" (Cage in Perloff, 2005).<sup>4</sup> Consider the following:

oF it  
 a whole sUbject  
 aNd then  
 a whole Can be  
 whaT you say about  
 It  
 Occupy it  
 a whole caN  
 hAve  
 different timeS and  
 tAkes  
 can be throWn  
 and perHaps at the same time  
 Or  
 how does one deaL with  
 diffErent times and

The "mesostic string" "FUNCTION[s] AS A WHOLE." However, the local "questions" the very essence of "this function" (Perloff, 2005).

The 'whole sUbject' is in apposition to a mere 'it'; 'a whole Can be' 'whaT you say about / It', 'a whole caN / hAve / different timeS and / tAkes', it can be 'throWn / and perHaps at the same time'. On the next page, 'wHole' furnishes Cage with the 'H' mesostic letter and thus becomes a 'hole'.

[...] 'What one takes to be a whole subject can suddenly be miniaturized'. Cage's own text enacts precisely this statement: what we 'take to be a whole' dissolves into a number of possibilities. Not only can this 'whole' be 'miniaturized' but it 'caN / hAve / different timeS and / tAkes'; there is no essential truth behind the word: 'a whole Can be / whaT you say about it'. A neat illustration, as it were, of Wittgenstein's proposition that 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'. (Perloff, 2005)

Language has limits thus, for Wittgenstein, "the limits of the language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of my world" (Perloff, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Cage in Perloff, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis has been added by Perloff, 2005.

“[T]he limits of the language” never synthesize. Neither do the fragmented pieces of the self in Creeley’s “The Flower.”

The Flower

I think I grow tensions  
like flowers  
in a wood where  
nobody goes.

Each wound is perfect,  
encloses itself in a tiny  
imperceptible blossom,  
making pain.

Pain is a flower like that one,  
like this one,  
like that one,  
like this one.

Altieri argues that the “primary experience” intends “increased distance, of a consciousness that is withdrawing from any dynamic interchange with experience.” Thus, he continues, “[a]s the speaker alternates from ‘this one’ to ‘that one’, the reader sets a terrifying glimpse of the way the mind can move from participation, to pointing and cataloging” (1979:177).

The latter, however, “is fragmented,” as the local “ones” “both mock the speaker’s desire for a single unified consciousness and remind the reader that consciousness cannot create its own unity.” In this sense, the local objects obtain tonalities that act as “unique aesthetic phenomena” (1979:177). “[M]eanings melt continually into contending localized tonalities” (Leitch et al. 2001:84), and poetry “overflows, yet [it] is always coming; there is no sense, however, that one will come to a full meaning” and “complete accomplishment” (Murphy 1981: 106).

This is a realm of “heterogeneous materials and heteroglot discourses deployed in a nonhierarchical field of tension” (Leitch et al. 2001:84). In *A tradition of subversion: the prose poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (1981), Marguerite S. Murphy identifies this realm with what she calls “a poetics of inclusion;” “[...] long poems, adding up to 118 pages altogether, [...] a variety of discursive types (i.e., inclusion of all types of discourse).” [A]lso “the inclusion of other voices mutes and disperses the central poetic voice, supporting an existential desire to reach beyond the ‘I’, the speaking or writing self” (169).

Inclusion intended as “a variety of discursive types” stipulates an interesting point of departure as Ashbery calls it in his volume *Three poems* (1972). It is “one of [the] aims” of his poetry: ‘[m]y idea in writing’, he claims, ‘[...] was to allow all kinds of prose ‘voices’ to have their say in what I hoped would be poetry – so that at times’, he adds, ‘it sounds like journalism or letter writing or philosophy, both Cracker-barrel and Platonic, and so on. I guess I was trying to ‘democratize’ language’ (Ashbery in Murphy 1981:169).

One of the best examples of ‘democratize[d]’ language is the prose poem, which Murphy defines as ‘postmodern’ drawing from Lyotard’s definition of the latter as ‘the unrepresentable in presentation itself’. The prose poem entails “by necessity a subversion of other prose forms,” which are “never” able to “[p]redict its ‘future’ as text or genre” (1981:170).

To the question “[w]hat essentially distinguishes Ashbery’s expansive prose poems from Williams’s and Stein’s briefer texts other than their chronological relationship to modernism?” Murphy responds that Ashbery in trying to ‘put things together’ “produces a prose whose superficial coherence is very unlike the disjointed fragmentary style of Williams’s *Kora in hell* or the disorienting semantic moves of Stein’s *Tender buttons*.” Finally, she settles that “[...] the question of reference no longer defines the point of conflict between tradition and innovation,” but rather, “[...] directs his attention elsewhere in his problematizing of language and its capabilities” (1981:171). Thus,

*Three poems*, of course, is not conventional meditation, but is prose with instabilities that put certain norms of reading prose in question. Ashbery’s undermining of traditional meditative discourse and its assumptions – the movement toward enlightenment or a greater truth, the identity of the thinking subject, the reliance on metaphysical system outside the text – becomes apparent as one examines the unforeknowable movement of his prose, its subverted assumptions, and even its focus on its own

discursive strategies, which inevitably forestalls the closure promised by self-reference. Its 'poeticity' may indeed reside in these artful dodges from meditative prose; certainly it is the surprises that appear as Ashbery's rumination progresses that make the language fresh for us – the unstable pronouns, the abrupt shifts from figurative to literal meaning in the elaboration of an image or notion, and, likewise, the unannounced shifts into self-reference may easily be read into the text. Such shifts naturally disrupt any movement toward affirmation of a single truth or construction of a philosophical system that might answer the existential questions appearing throughout the text, or even the construction of a contemplative self. (Murphy 1981:172)

This does not mean "nihilistic collapse." On the contrary, the scene is identified with "the experience of experience." That's also how Ashbery himself defines his own poetry; "[...] and the particular experience is of lesser interest to me than the way it filters through to me. I believe this is the way in which it happens with most people, and I'm trying to record a kind of generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long" (Ashbery in McCorkle 1985:106).

Consequently, this kind of poetry writing "is not a passive register of the world." It is "a recognition of the social" intended on clear terms 'as an internal force that manifests itself above all through the multiple presence of conflicting discourses'. Such discourses, McCorkle argues, "not only allow for a change of self", but also invoke what Marjorie Perloff calls, drawing from Roland Barthes, a 'corrected banality' (1985:106 - 7).

In McCorkle's argument, Ashbery has ultimately altered and "decenter[ed] the identities of pronouns" (1985:107). The pronouns that collapse the unitary concept of Be-ing, 'I', 'You', and 'He' cannot be "easily discriminated" – "it is as if Aeschylus had not yet summoned the second actor from the chorus to argue against that first great voice, or as if the persons of the drama here, 'the debris of living', were indeed 'proposed but never formulated'" (Howard 1985:40).

This scenario is similar to Kubernski's notion of 'chaosmic self', which "designates a principle of subjectivity no longer strictly punctual, expressive, or interior" (1994:139). Thus,<sup>5</sup>

[t]he chaosmic self, as an aspect of a self-organizing, organic process, is expressed at different levels of reference and within different temporalities by corresponding contexts. One could say that this 'self' is the expression of a series of interinvolved, temporally and spatially imbricated environments. [...] it insists upon the exclusive reality or significance of a 'single' environment is to confine and amputate it. (Kubernski 1994:139 – 40)

The chaosmic self or the incoherent whole splits into multiple parts, which in turn are very difficult to be interpreted and "sung".

John Berryman's *The dream songs* is a case in point. The work splits into configurations that range from "Berrymanisms, [to] Negro and beat slang, and baby talk." Furthermore, the parts are not "dreams." They are only "hallucinations, which anything that might have happened to the author can be used at random." These multiple parts are things that John Berryman has "seen, overhead or imagined." "The poems are about Berryman, or rather they are about a person he calls Henry" (Lowell 1987:107).

In fact, "Henry is Berryman himself seen as himself, as poète maudit, child and puppet." At the end, "[h]e is tossed about with a mixture of tenderness and absurdity, pathos and hilarity that would have been impossible if the author had spoken in the first person" (1987:108). Let us consider the following:

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,  
End anyone and hacks her body up  
And hide the pieces, where they may be found.  
He knows: he went over anyone, & nobody's missing.  
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.  
Nobody is ever missing<sup>6</sup>

5 Philip Kubernski has drawn from Prigogine and other scientists such as Gregory Bateson, David Bohm, Erich Jantsch, Humberto Maturana, and Francisco Varela to develop his notion of 'chaosmos' as "a unitary and yet untotaled, a chiasmic concept of the world as a field of mutual and simultaneous interference and convergence, an interanimation of the subjective and objective, an endless realm of chance which nevertheless displays a persistent tendency toward pattern and order." (Kubernski in Freese 1997:273)

6 Berryman in "Dream Song 29."

The “pieces” for David Perkins are the “inventories of Henry’s states, therefore, Berryman’s states: “desperations, death wishes, sexual hungers, grieves, drunks, boredom, follies, fractures and so forth.” In fact, As Berryman splits the center, Ashbery questions its very essence. By doing so, he avoids immobility and calcification as in the following lines:

Have you begun to be in the context you feel  
 Now that the danger has been removed?  
 [...] has the motion started  
 That is to quiver your head, send anxious beams  
 Into the dusty corners of the rooms  
 Eventually shoot out over the landscape  
 In stars and bursts? For other than this we know nothing  
 And space is a coffin and the sky will put out the light  
 I see you eager in your wishing it the way  
 We may join it, if it passes close enough.

The “you,” “I,” “it” as well as “your,” “that,” “this” entail instability. David Shapiro according to Murphy ‘discern[s] a progressive from a ‘you’ as beloved to a more solipsistic ‘you’,” while for Bonnie Costello, the ‘you’ is “inscribed or fictive reader.” In *Three poems*, she finds that the narrator’s self-consciousness ‘is modeled after the psychic split of a performance and audience or a writer who must imagine a reader. [...] ‘The desire of all consciousness, like the desire of all literature, is to end this duality through absorption’” (Murphy 1981:173).

Further, to destabilize the center of pronouns means to bring up the multiplicity of local discourses, which operate on local rather than global level. Hassan has listed a number of features that pertain to this type of writing among which he includes:

Postmodernism, paraphysics/Dadaism, antiform (disjunctive, open), play, chance, anarchy, exhaustion/silence, process/performance/happening, participation, decreation/deconstruction, antithesis, absence, dispersal, text/intertext, rhetoric, syntagm, parataxis, metonymy, combination, rhizome/surface, against interpretation/misreading, signifier, scriptable (writable), anti-narrative/petite histoire, idiolect, desire, mutant, polymorphous/androgynous, schizophrenia, difference/différence/trace, the Holy Ghost, irony, indeterminacy, and immanence. (1987:92).<sup>7</sup>

This kind of writing for Hassan translates into “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation.” Deformation for Hassan presumes “decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delimitization” (1987:93).

Michel Foucault in his *The archeology of knowledge* proposes to interrogate the notions of the so-called “unities,” “psychopathology, medicine, or political economy” and to examine closely the kind of “discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation” that undercut the so-called “initial project.” At first, he excogitates whether these “unities” are “simply a reconstruction after the event, based on particular works, successive theories, notions and themes some of which ha[ve] been abandoned, others maintained by tradition, and again others fated to fall into oblivion only to be reviewed at a later date?” Secondly, Foucault examines the “unity of discourse in the objects themselves,” in what he calls “their proximity or distance.” At the bottom, lays not “a configuration” or “a form,” “but [rather] a group of rules that are immanent in a practice, and define it in its specificity” (1972:51).

In discussing about psychopathology, for example, Foucault concludes that “what has emerged” from his analysis “is a unity of another type, which does not appear to have the same dates, or the same surface, or the same articulations, but which may take account of a group of objects for which the term psychopathology was merely a reflexive, secondary,

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<sup>7</sup> Hassan has presented this list alongside another that stands for some of the main features of modernism; “Romanticism/Symbolism, Form (conjunctive, closed), Purpose, Design, Hierarchy, Mastery/Logos, Art Object/Finnished Work, Distance, Creation/Totalization, Synthesis, Presence, Centering, Genre/Boundary, Semantics, Paradigm, Hypotaxis, Metaphor, Selection, Root/Depth, Interpretation/Reading, Signified, Lisible (Readerly) Narrative/ Grande Historire, Master Code, Symptom, Type, Genital/Phallic, Paranoia, Origin/Cause, God the Father, Metaphysics, Determinacy, Transcendence” (1987:92).

classificatory rubric." Consequently, "[p]sychopathology finally emerged as a discipline in a constant state of renewal, subject to constant discoveries, criticisms, and corrected errors; the system of formation that we have defined remains stable" (1972:51).<sup>8</sup>

Akin to Foucault's suspicion of globalization is also Ashbery's "Fragment." What Bloom calls Ashbery's "most difficult rumination," "Fragment" "is the elegy for the self of the imperfect solipsist, who wavered before the reality of another self, and then withdrew back into an interior world" (1985:67 – 68).

For Bloom, "the title evidently refers not to an aesthetic incompleteness," "but" rather "to this work's [overall] design," and at the end "to its resigned conclusion" in which "the protagonist remains alone, an 'anomaly' as he calls himself in the penultimate line" (1985:68). Consider the following:

But what could I make of this? Glaze  
Of many identical foreclosures wrested from  
The operative hand, like a judgment but still  
The atmosphere of seeing? That two people could  
Collide in this dusk means that the time of  
Shapelessly foraging had come undone: the space was  
Magnificent and dry. On flat evenings  
In the months ahead, she would remember that that  
Anomaly had spoken to her, words like disjointed beaches  
Brown under the advancing signs of the air.

For Benjamin Colbert Ashbery "hovers uncertainly, almost affectionately, about the 'threshold' of meaning." Thus, Colbert continues, it is "[t]hat nexus between the inside and outside, kernel and flower, planet and orbit, meaning and unmeaning" that "fascinates him [and] informs his imagery" (2000:44).

Ashbery's fragments "are far more self-consciously speculative, and hold up sign posts to their own inadequacy," ultimately, "a form of self-mockery," as in the following lines (Colbert 2000:45):

[...] the externals of present  
Continuing – incomplete, good-natured pictures that  
Flatter us even when forgotten with dwarf speculations  
About the insane, invigorating whole they don't represent.

What may be regarded as 'complete in itself', Colbert argues, with Ashbery becomes "bluntly [...] 'incomplete'" as in the following (2000:46),

I think it was at that moment he  
Knowingly and in my own interests took back from me  
The slow-flowing idea of flight, now  
Too firmly channeled, its omnipresent reminders etched  
Too deeply into my forehead, its crass grievances and greetings  
A class apart from the wonders every man feels,  
Whether alone in bed, or with a lover, or beached  
With the shells on some atoll (and if solitude  
Swallow us up betimes, it is only later that  
The idea of its permanence sifts into view, yea  
Later and perhaps only occasionally, and only much later  
Stands from dawn to dusk, just as the plaintive sound  
Of the harp of the waves is always there as a backdrop

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<sup>8</sup> "But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not the objects that remain constant, nor the domain that they form; it is not even their point of emergence or their mode of characterization; but the relation between the surfaces on which they appear, on which they can be delimited, on which they can be analyzed and specified" (Foucault p. 52).

To conversation and conversation, even when  
 Most forgotten) and cannot make sense of them, but he knows  
 the most familiar, unmistakably thing, and that gives him courage  
 as day expires and evening marshals its hosts, in preparation  
 for the long night to come.

Ashbery's meaning in these lines as well as in other sections of *Flow chart* desists on its way upon accomplishment. The "fabulous elongation of syntax" remodels language into a labyrinthine context. That is the reason why Ashbery's work "offers pleasures en route, to a center that is not reached, because that is not what poetic syntax can do" (Ward 2000:179). In this sense, the local subverts and reorients the global in an aesthetic and ontological sense. The gravitational pulls of the local upon the global underscore not only the unpredictable and ever-changing parameters of the system, but also its potential for creativity and comprehension.

In conclusion, the re-interpretation of centeredness across systems' theory holds an important point of departure to study postmodern poetry and poetics, in spite of the inimical nuances of the stability and fixity. However, the dynamics between stable and unstable, local and global, never resolves clearly. Throughout the most engaging body of poems by John Cage, John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, and John Berryman that I have examined in this paper, the concept of centeredness sits uneasily against the cultural and aesthetic pressures to produce that kind of poetry that captures some of the most nuanced re-collections of the postmodern experience.

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