Innovation and the Poetic Discourse: Reading Experimental Trends in Post-War American Poetry

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Abstract

This paper aims at analysing the rise of innovative and experimental poetics within the American poetic grounds and the factors that remain extremely influential in establishing an alternate poetic culture that emerged with the rise of modernism within poetic circles. With influential and significant American poetic voices like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and innovative women poets like Gertrude Stein popularising the use of ‘experimental’ techniques within the processes of poetic construction, the American poetic culture witnessed the rapid growth of an alternate realm of poetic activity that particularly gained significant recognition in the post-war era. This paper attempts to present an overview of the various post-war poetic groupings that contributed to the establishment of an experimental tradition within contemporary American poetics.

Keywords: Modernism, Innovation, American, Experimental, Poetics, Contemporary.
With a long history that dates back to antiquity, the poetic genre exhibits a complex diversity of subcategories that often remain specific to particular cultures and their inherent manifestations. Many of such poetic forms have particular practitioners that popularise the unique features of their poetics that often serves to promote as well as propagate their ideological inclinations. But with the ever increasing purview of the globalised networks, almost all forms of poetic creations have grown in their scope as well as recognition with many new poetic groups appearing on international grounds. With increased ease of transcontinental interactions, particular movements emerging within specific national boundaries have witnessed expansion with other continents also experiencing similar poetic resonances.

However, the process of poetic creation and its interpretation does not remain a universally defined phenomenon with any singular definition qualifying for all poetic forms. With the literary criticism regarding the nature of poetry being manifold across the ages, the study of poetry has always remained closely associated to its aesthetics of creation. The literary, cultural or political movements taking place at regional, national or international levels also exhibit a significant impact on the contemporary poetics and its propagation amongst the masses. Thus, an understanding of the social and historical conditions of a particular time period remains crucial to the study of any poetic movement.

The development as well as the evolution of the American poetic discourse in the wake of the modernist movement remains significant for a simultaneous growth of a mainstream as well as an alternate poetic tradition that emerged with the progression of the twentieth century. With modernist poetic voices like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot in the early decades of the twentieth century, and later poets like Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, E.E. Cumings and Louis Zukofsky, propagating diverse stylistic innovations within
poetic works, the later half of the century also witnessed the rise of many poetic groups and schools that developed upon this tradition.

One of the most popular American poetic groupings that became dominant in the years that succeeded the Second World War remains the ‘Beat Generation.’ Though emerging as a small group of poets, the movement around the Beat poetry gained significant attention within both the literary and the cultural realms. Having radical social and political leanings, the Beat poets stood apart from the mainstream poetic circles and popularised a new poetics of their own, as noted below:

The end of World War II left poets like Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso questioning mainstream politics and culture. These poets would become known as the Beat generation, a group of writers interested in changing consciousness and defying conventional writing…. The battle against social conformity and literary tradition was central to the work of the Beats. Among this group of poets, hallucinogenic drugs were used to achieve higher consciousness, as was meditation and Eastern religion. Buddhism especially was important to many of the Beat poets; Snyder and Ginsberg both intensely studied this religion and it figured into much of their work. (‘A Brief Guide to Beat Poets’)

The other major poets associated with Beat poetry remain Jack Kerouac, Anne Waldman, Michael McClure, Neal Cassidy and William S. Burroughs. Initiating an anti-academy poetics in the 1950s, the Beat poets remain notable contributors to an alternate American poetic tradition that was taking a strong hold in the post-war era.

The Beat poets also remained closely associated with the contemporary activities of the San Francisco Renaissance, a literary and art movement that dominated the San Francisco Bay Area towards the end of World War II and encapsulated another significant poetic
grouping that advocated experimental and innovative trends in their poetics. The major San Francisco poets included Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and Michael McClure. The poetry that emerged out of their work presented an innovative blend of the local culture and diverse influences, and the movement continues to exert its significance in the form of the cultural landmarks that were created at the time, as also described below:

Recalling the expressive exuberance and regionalism of Walt Whitman’s poetry, the poems of the San Francisco Renaissance were frequently confessional and deeply evocative of their Pacific coast and San Francisco surroundings. The poets’ influences ranged from European modernism and surrealism to Eastern religions and literature. Isolated from the poetry mainstream in New York by geography and style, the San Francisco poets started many of their own publishing houses and small magazines and journals, including City Lights and Evergreen Review. ("A Brief Guide to San Francisco Renaissance")

A few of the San Francisco Renaissance poets also remained influenced by the poet Charles Olson and remained associated with the Black Mountain School which remains an important venue for the consolidation of another avant-garde grouping around the same time. Centered around the Black Mountain College in North Carolina that lasted only twenty-three years (1933–1956) and remaining heavily influenced by Charles Olson’s seminal essay “Projective Verse” published in 1950, these Black Mountain poets included Robert Duncan, Larry Eigner, Paul Blackburn, Ed Dorn, Hilda Morley, Denise Levertov, John Wieners and Robert Creeley. The Black Mountain Review, edited by Creeley remained an important publishing venue for these poets and also included works by other contemporary innovative poets.
Another post-war poetic grouping that also gained prominence around the same time remains the New York School of American poetry that was aligned with the New York School of painting in the 1950s and 1960s. As described on the official website of *Poetry Foundation*, “the main figures of the New York School are Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, James Schulyer, Kenneth Koch, and Barbara Guest.” It further describes the group as follows:

Influenced by relationships and collaborations with painters such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, and Larry Rivers, the New York School poets are known for their urbane wit, interest in visual art, and casual address. A second generation of New York School poets grew up in the 1960s and included Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman. (“New York School”)

Regarding the poetic diversity of the New York School poets, Catherine Daly notes:

New York School poetics rejects many traditional forms and rejects mythology as content or model. While Guest has described all poetries as confessional, the confession and narration of the New York School poetry is not confrontational, as in the poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, or Anne Sexton. The poetry is dramatic but does not enact psychological drama. The abstract, intellectual poems written in plain American idiom place a value on pleasure and aesthetics. The poems are expressive: they clearly and carefully capture emotional states. The surface of the poems is elusive and allusive. The words delineate gestures and juxtapose ideas of different textures, evocative misunderstandings, and everyday events. O’Hara’s poems about his urban environment, which he described as “I do this, I do that,” form an
autobiography. Ashbery's are allegorical in a mysterious way. Schuyler wrote intimate still lives. (Daly 268)

The New York School thus also remained a significant post-war group of poets that composed poetry in innovative forms. However, the most significant literary document to legitimise these post-war poetic groupings that appeared in the second half of the twentieth century is *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, edited by Donald M. Allen and published by Grove Press in 1960. Publishing the works by these young and experimental poets, the anthology appeared at a crucial time, as noted below:

Poised almost at mid-century, it provides a summing up of a very particular situation in poetry as it looks back to the achievements of the 1950s and ahead to the possibilities of the 60s…. When the Allen anthology came out, several of the featured poets had barely been published. Of necessity, they existed on the margins, outside mainstream publication and distribution channels. Of necessity, they invented their own communities and audiences (typically indistinguishable), with a small press or little magazine often serving as the nucleus of both. (Clay and Phillips)

With the mimeograph machine providing a direct access to the means of publication to these poets, the succeeding decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw the appearance of another poetic school that remains one of the most prolific of its kind. In 1978, a very significant poetry magazine titled *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* appeared as a part of the experimental poetic circle in America and the name soon became synonymous to a group of highly innovative poets that continue to remain important contributors to contemporary American poetry. With Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Barrett Watten, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Tina Darragh and many others remaining significant part of the Language School of
American poetry, the movement surrounding their poetry and poetics remains a landmark within experimental literature that succeeded the earlier post-war groupings. Thus, all the above discussed poetic schools, though subject to debates regarding their constitutions and defining poetics, remain significant in their contribution to an alternate poetic tradition that is marked by its rejection of the traditional modes of poetic constructions and an exploration of the possibilities offered by innovative methodologies. Developing an avant-garde poetics arising out of the modernist claims of novelty and innovation, the experimental trends in post-war American poetry remain important for their dynamic usage of the poetic medium in diverse forms and stand exemplary for the innovative potentials within the contemporary experimental literature.
Works Cited and Consulted


