

# CONTEMPORARY POST-MODERNISM: POSTMODERN FEATURES IN POST-9/11 POETRY

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**Abstract** - This Article Aims To Challenge The Prevalent Assumptions That Postmodernism Is Something Completely Trivial And That 9/11 Engendered The Death Of It, Through Analysis Of Two Post-9/11 Poems – “High Haunts” By Tish Eastman And “The Dead Have Stopped Running” By Matthew Mason. While The Former Poem Reflects Liminality, The Latter Is In Keeping With Jacques Derrida’s Critique Of Binary Oppositions And His Concept Of Spectral Repetition. This Article Ultimately Communicates The Message That The Presence Of Such Postmodern Features Is Questionable From The Standpoint Of The Objective Truths Of The Speakers’ Perceptions, But Not From The Standpoint Of The Emotional Truths Of Those Perceptions.

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**Keywords** - Binary Opposition, Liminality, Postmodernism, Post-9/11 Poetry, Spectral Repetition.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars agree that the traumatic event of 9/11 engendered the death of a great many narratives, of which there were the narrative of neo-liberal globalization, that of American innocence and the life-narratives of those people who witnessed the incident and those who were victimized by it. There are also intellectuals who regard 9/11 as the death of postmodernism. The notable poet, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, for example, observes:

Only a rich capitalist consumer society such as ours before 9/11 can afford artists a poets that basically present only their own private concerns in works that have little relation to the world around them and nothing important to say about that world. If 9/11 spelt the death of the postmodern, among other myriad deaths, perhaps it was high time that artists and poets got a Wake Up call, as America itself got one.

The feminist editor, Daniella Gioseffi, also repudiates “postmodern irony, or playful, experimental, autotelic writing in general” (Gray 262) in the wake of 9/11. However, such attitude trivializes the term “postmodern,” ignoring the fact that postmodernism is also present in much more serious ways in some interesting post-9/11 poems. The aim of this paper is to identify a number of serious postmodern features in two post-9/11 poems – “High Haunts” by Tish Eastman and “The Dead Have Stopped Running” by Matthew Mason - and thus pose a challenge to the prevalent assumptions that postmodernism is something completely trivial and that 9/11 has engendered the death of it.

## II. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Both the poems under consideration occur in *An Eye for An Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11*, edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson, one of the major anthologies of 9/11 poetry that came into

being in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks. The aim of this anthology was “to gather the voices of America’s poets to establish a different historical record of these monumental events (9/11 and the set of incidents following it like the war in Afghanistan, the anthrax terror and so on)” (Cohen i), that must challenge “the corporate controlled media, presidency, and congress” (Cohen i). Unlike most of the poems of this anthology which are politically involved, the two poems in question are free of any political ideology and articulate spectral consciousness.

In “High Haunts,” the speaker asserts out of a sense of shock conditioned by 9/11 that it is difficult to explain the sudden, simultaneous death of so many innocent people as a result of 9/11 just as it is hard to interpret the supernatural tales like those of spirits “passing unhindered through solid doors newly hung,/ stopping to weep at doors long demolished,” or those of ghost “soldiers visible only from the knees up/ marching through a cellar.” The speaker thereafter argues that if the grandeur of skyscrapers turns into dust in the twinkling of an eye, then it might not be impossible to have had some supernatural experience. However, the most interesting aspect of this poem from the standpoint of the purpose of this article is the representation of the specters in the last stanza, where the speaker imagines of a human eye staring at numerous specters on a soothing night:

Will a city like New York ever be still or dark enough for any living soul gazing upward on a warm Indian summer night to see a thousand wisps spiraling down stairwells suspended in the sky disappearing at the 20th floor, reappearing at the 60th shadow moments repeating fiercely where only falcons fly? It is pertinent to note here that the world of the spectres like that of human beings has movement and life, but of a different kind. It is at once visible and invisible. It is neither a full presence, nor a full absence, but

something in between the two, that suggests liminality.

Before examining the next poem, it is necessary to address Derrida's critique of binary oppositions as this critique could be taken as an underlying rationale for the representation of specters in this poem. In *Of Grammatology* (1974) Derrida argues that Western metaphysics is based on a series of binary oppositions like 'presence' / 'absence', 'self' / 'other', 'life' / 'death' etc, which are mutually exclusive and interdependent terms. These oppositions do not coexist peacefully as "an opposition of metaphysical concepts . . . is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination" (Derrida, *Margins Philosophy* 195). Again, in the "Afterword" to *Limited Inc*, where he defines metaphysics by implication as "The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc," (236), he claims that "All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way (according to this definition), conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc" (236).

In "The Dead Have Stopped Running," directed by a sense of tremendous loss and pain due to 9/11, the speaker sees ghosts of the casualties of 9/11 everywhere. The opening lines of the poem, "They walk / through the air, now, / above the living, with the living", unsettle the binary opposition, 'we' / 'they', as the speaker recognises both similarity and dissimilarity between the behaviour of the phantoms (represented by "they" in this poem) and that of living human beings (signified by "we"). As the poem progresses, the phantoms become a more intimate part of the consciousness of the living human beings as the latter come into contact with the former almost everywhere and experience a sense of being haunted:

We breathe the dead into our lungs,  
brush past them in our hurry  
down the grey stairs of the subway.  
They rest at our coffee tables,  
move their fingers across the kitchen  
counters.

The poet's following acknowledgement in "The Dead Have Stopped Running" that "We have ceased our old segregations, / we live with the dead;," explicitly questions the traditional binaries, 'living / dead' and 'presence / absence', suggesting that life itself has become a shadowy, phantom-like continuity which was never experienced before. This poem marks an imaginative advance over the previous one as it brings us into direct, lively contact with spectral

experience both in its public and private forms. There is also no "hierarchy", or "order of subordination", or any "priority thought" in the seemingly oppositional terms either used or implied in the poem.

It is, furthermore, worth noting that the lines. 12 to 16 of "The Dead Have Stopped Running" and the two penultimate lines of "High Haunts" (" . . . spiralling down stairwells suspended in the sky / disappearing at the 20th floor, reappearing at the 60th") are associated with the notion of spectral repetition clarified by Jacques Derrida in *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994) in the context of explaining the reappearance of the Ghost at the outset of Hamlet in particular and "hauntology" in general. As the author explains,

From what could be called the other time, from the other scene, from the eve of the play, the witnesses of history fear and hope for a return, then, "again" and "again", a coming and going. (Marcellus: "What, ha's this thing appear'd againe tonight?" Then: Enter the Ghost, Exit the ghost, Enter the Ghost, as before). A question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back. Think as well of Macbeth, and remember the specter of Caesar. After having expired, he returns. Brutus also says "again --" "Well; then I shall see thee again?" Ghost: "Ay, at Philippi" (IV, ii). (11)

What Derrida means to say is that the condition of being "a revenant" entailing disappearance followed by reappearance is an essential feature of a spectre, that destabilizes the binary, 'beginning' / 'end'. We find reflections of this idea in "The Dead Have Stopped Running", when the speaker repeatedly experiences ghosts at subway, coffee-table, kitchen and other places; and in "High Haunts", which conjures up the image of a human being staring at numerous spectres who disappear and then reappear on "a warm Indian summer night".

## CONCLUSIONS

It could be safely concluded from this careful study that it is wrong to assume that 9/11 engendered the death of postmodernism. Postmodernism figures quite prominently in contemporary literature or, more precisely, in post-9/11 poetry. It is also wrong to assume that such presence is trivial and playful.

Instead, postmodernism as reflected in the two poems discussed above is essentially connected to the themes of shocking loss, dejection, death and destruction, and conditioned by the traumatized psychological state of the speakers of those poems. It is questionable how much the use of postmodernism signifies as a medium of knowing the objective truths about the speakers' perceptions as such use is an outcome of trauma. But it is never questionable how

much such use appeals to us as a medium of stirring up our deepest emotions.

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