Conclusion: Celebrating the Fragmented, or, Fragmented Celebration?

The end of the millennium consciousness appears to accept more readily a sense of a fragmented reality than a modernist sensibility ever could. The two Wars and the increasing pace of technological and scientific advancements have to a large extent been responsible for this change in attitude. A fragmented reality as an urban phenomenon has invaded every sphere of society - its culture, politics, arts. The collective consciousness meditating on fragments rather than totalities makes postmodernism distinct from modernism, and yet a "continuation of and not a break from the fin-de-siecle Modernist revolution."1

I perceive modernism and modern poetry in particular, to be the "poetics of postmodernism,"2 where it is the critical rather than a poetic act that precedes a critical theory. In other words, modern poetry like that of Eliot and Stevens may be described as postmodern theory in verse, and the postmodern theories appear to be prosaic modern verse. Both are indefinite and open to multiple interpretations. From such a perspective, modern poetry like that of Stevens and Eliot, may also be comprehended as postmodern
poetic theory “from the site of practice.” It must be conceded though, that modern poetry is largely responsible in the gradual acceptance of a fragmented, fractured reality and for giving artistic credibility to the individual perceptions towards reality in general.

The poetry of the Eliot and Stevens suggests in free verse “an open and flexible descriptive structure by which to order our current cultural knowledge,” which is what most postmodern theories concerns itself with. What distinguishes modernism from postmodernism is a change in the attitude towards an ephemeral and increasingly fragmented reality rather than any revolutionary breakthrough. Instead of moaning and groaning about the Wars, a postmodernist sensibility would view it as bringing cultures closer, and also, a greater exposure to unfamiliar contexts. As fragmentariness becomes a banal and routine reality, the end of century consciousness has learned to accept and live with a sense of fragmented and decentered reality. The world of internet, a primarily urban phenomenon, a product of advancements in communication technology, and as an information dispenser becomes an apt metaphor for our fragmented and “textual” reality. Paradoxically, the “globalization” of urban consciousness leads to greater fragmentation of reality. Thus, what is celebrated is the ability to celebrate fragments, holding on to the fragments while it lasts; celebrating local issues while participating in the global ones. There is no one central meaning to any
“text”, but even that is no cause for despair as associated meanings are given a hearing, and local issues are addressed too.

A postmodernist perspective to modern poetry not only breaks down the barriers between time, but also geographical and political barriers in the understanding of the works of Western canonical poets. I have used the difference between two periods of time as a point of reference in my application of postmodern critical thought to modern poetry. Such an analysis points to postmodernism more as a term for convenience, to highlight a differing attitude, rather than using it as a specific period in literary “history”. Certain issues have been appropriated from modernist texts, by postmodern thought, making it distinct from modernism and yet a part of it. It is a postmodern context that enables us to look beyond the totalising view to extract fragments of meaning as per their relevance to the local issues or individual perception. Christopher Norris believes that “the whole political thrust of postmodernist thinking . . . identifies the meaning of historical events with the way they are represented according to this or that dominant propaganda-line or rhetorical strategy.” Thus, even the meaning of historical events are not represented in factual totality but are represented according to the prevailing ideology. Norris’s statement draws attention to the skepticism of postmodernist thinking regarding the manner in which literary history is represented. Postmodern critical thought, in my view, has certainly appropriated certain features from modern poetics to give it its distinctive
identity. One of those features is the skepticism towards the established texts of the past. Stephen Coote comments on this postmodern critical thought which is to be found in modernist works:

No longer could European faith - Christianity - be seen as a unique or even necessarily useful revelation. In line with this, the immense work of Sir James Frazer, culminating in *The Golden Bough* offered a picture of past faiths which severely questioned the unique dignity of the Christian religion and, sustained by ideas of historical development, could further suggest that far from being a special revelation vouchsafed to man a particular moment of time, Christianity was, in fact, a successful derivative of much older cults. These cults, of course, play a crucial role in *The Waste Land*.6

At this juncture, I would like to draw attention to the selection of Eliot's and Stevens's "major" poetry in my analysis, which again is influenced by the postmodern rhetorical strategy that has been applied to the poems. From such a perspective, it may be argued that the choice of "major" poetry is based more according to the manner in which the poems lend themselves to a postmodern critical analysis than on any historical fact that would identify my choice of the poem as constituting the major works of the poets. Such a selection of the of the poems does not, in my view, undermine the significance of the poems which have not been mentioned in the analysis. However, opting some works over the others ratifies the fact that as a matter of aesthetic principle, fragments of the total are easier to comprehend than the total body of texts. A fragmented perspective focuses more closely on the
microcosmic dimension of texts rather than on their macrocosmic, universalistic tendencies.

Applying postmodern theories to modernist poetics is a task fraught with paradoxes, since postmodern theories are themselves anti-foundationalist. Derrida's theory of deconstruction dismantles the center of texts to reveal the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (CPWS, 10) at the heart of the center. Such a reading of the texts indicates the problematics of the notion of reference. The idea has been to show, that one works with a system of signs. It is not just the present which is in a state of febrile and continuous state of flux; the representation of the past events in the present are subject to just such a state, as the events in the past are constantly scrutinized and re-evaluated in the present. In the early 1930's, T. S. Eliot wrote:

All time is unredeemable
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been point toward the same end,
Which is always the present. (CP & P, 171)

It is the Imagination which structures a coherent reality out of a chaos of random events in the past, in order to make sense of the present. Reality in that respect becomes referential, and the problem is that the referential context is itself rather indeterminate and subject to multi-pluralistic interpretations and subsequent representations.
Modern poetry may be viewed as the "poetics of postmodernism" as it takes into consideration the multiplicity of cultural discourse. Such poetry attempts to present an "image" of the reality that it represents, where image is an instance captured in time. It is not possible for creative works such as poetry to capture an entire image in its totality. Therefore, modern poetics was a new way of interpreting reality in fragments rather than wholes where the interpretation of reality remains eternally inconclusive. Also, reality at any given point of time would be structured according to the imagination of its interpreter. For instance, the poet's image of reality would differ from that of a scientist, sociologist or an economist.

Rajeev Patke in his application of deconstructive criticism to poems of Williams Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens has made a note of the habit of the two poets "of granting their poems dual identities." Attention is directed to the fragmented structure of modern poetry "where parts are wholes in themselves and wholes are aggregated out of smaller independent wholes." It is in this respect that modern poetics attempts to mimic the structure of the reality that it represents, as each poem stands independently by itself, and is yet a part of the whole body of the poet's entire works. A scientific reality smashes the wholeness of form in order to scrutinize and understand it. Poetic imagination, on the other hand, begins on the premise that there is no wholeness in reality or a total form, and its main agenda is to structure a "reality" of a whole form by bringing together fragments culled from various
sources. A sense of fragmented reality enables us to structure and conceptualise reality in multiple ways, thereby, giving marginalized reality, space at the center. Modern art, poetry, psycho-analytical theories, began such a task to reach the point where strangeness or monstrosity could be accepted without pejorative comment. The previously marginalized themes for a while occupied the center till they were dismantled and replaced by contemporary postmodern forms of art and theory which recognize the fact that there is no permanent center, oppose all forms of totalitarianism and are skeptical towards foundational reality. In my view, the contemporary context demands a combination of the modernist poetic imagination to structure reality out of fragments, and a postmodern attitude of accepting a fragmented reality, in order to keep pace with the constantly changing face of "global" reality. Fragmentation appears to become a necessity both for technology and the creative arts. By splitting parts from the whole, both science and the poetic imagination attempt to seek perfection in reality. Such a penetrating scrutiny into the taken for granted reality which started at the beginning of this century culminated in specialized disciplines. Paradoxically, the scrutiny which fragments, also seeks to structure a complete whole, or at least find ways where a sense of wholeness can be achieved. For instance, the foundationalist status of language had been questioned in modernist poetics that led on to the formation of Linguistics, a specialist discipline in the study of language and communication. A scrutiny into the efficacy of language and the
written word to communicate and express one’s innermost thoughts was found to be sadly inadequate. This is one of the reasons why modern poetry alludes to other forms of art such as painting and music and incorporates associated disciplines - history, anthropology, psycho-analysis. The “pattern” of the poetry breaks the barriers between time in the attempt to “reach the still point of the turning world.” It is the moment of aesthetic perfection which is described as being:

Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point.

(CP&P, 173)

The search for a perfect reality is an endless quest both for science and the creative arts. Theorists like Baudrillard are of the opinion that the search for a perfect reality leads to its aestheticization which in the long run proves to be a self-defeating exercise since beyond a certain point “nothing is true.” This is the effect of simulation which can be seen in news, history, music and science. Baudrillard’s warning is grounded in contemporary reality where the effect of simulation threatens to take over the human forms itself when science claims to achieve absolute proximity, first through cloning of sheep, and then threatens to extend it to humans. The age old moral and ethical issues are given a new twist by the scientific and technological
advancements. Art and especially modern art has always claimed to represent social reality with all its flaws and blemishes. It made no attempt to gloss over the ugly urban images. The attempts to perfect the means of representing reality through images has seen the rise of television and the print media. Paradoxically, the quest for perfection has only led to increasing the distance between visual reality and the processed reality via the mass media. Thus, like most other concepts even perfection may be regarded as illusory.

A postmodern reading to modern poetics, as such, can have no conclusion. A conclusion is yet another illusory concept as there can be no final resolutions to the reality of representative reality such as that of modern poetry. I can only hope that such an exercise has created more problematics than resolutions, and in the words of Derrida, "invoke[d] rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigour, criticism and pedagogy."¹⁰

NOTES

³ Hutcheon 226.
4 Ibid., 222.


8 Ibid., 164-5.
