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Poetics and Metamodernism: A Critique of Billy Collins *Litany*

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Abstract

Metamodernism is described as a progressive shift in philosophy, art and culture which has evolved from postmodernism. It is a recent paradigm in critical and cultural theory. As a critical/cultural sensibility, metamodernism is considered to be both a new approach to literary composition and a method for analysing and researching literary works for academic study. The current article examines and assesses metamodernism as an efficient tool to gauge its fundamental characteristics in poetics and attempt to apply them to the interpretation of the poem Litany by Billy Collins, an American poet. Although the references are employed to the prominent standpoints of metamodernism, the primary model that will be employed for analysis of the poem is that of Timotheus Vermeulen and Van den Akker pioneered in their groundwork, *Notes on Metamodernism (2010).* The findings of the study reveal that the poem lacks the ideal balance of modernism, the fragmentation of postmodernism, and possesses the oscillatory motion of

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metamodernism which mediates between the former two stances, thus implanting the novice perception of "New Sincerity".
Keywords: Metamodernism, Postmodernism, Paradigm Shift, New Sincerity, Neo-romantic sensibility

Introduction and Review of Related Literature:

Metamodernist approach is a recent cultural pattern, philosophical movement and a methodology which is pioneered by Vermeulen and Akker in their research essay, Notes on Metamodernism (2010), has purportedly proved to be an essential roadmap for the emergence of something authentic and sincere through employing strategic mode of *Oscillation* between modern and postmodern modes of thought. It's oscillatory and yet balancing paradigmatic shift is exerted to dislodge postmodernism as the most effective cultural paradigm of recent times. This research aims at presenting metamodernism as a new perspective to art, societal structures and life aesthetics to express the idea that it can add significantly and meaningfully to literary fields. Bunnell (2015) states that a great number of research both in academic and cultural field enunciates the idea that it's a high time to welcome a newcomer in field of current literary theory. In his article, Burn (2008) highlights post-postmodern features in Jonathan Franzen's fiction. Kadagishvili (2013) states in his paper, *Metamodernism as We Perceive It*, that metamodernism is all pervasive in poetry contemporary architecture and culture of the today's world. Bunnell (2015) establishes the idea in his essay that the current time

is the era of metamodernism and discussion regarding inculcating the old and new into a whole updated version of literary theory. Moreover, the angles of modernism and postmodernism can form a whole new organic whole having irony and sincerity as their hallmarks. Biekart (2015) explores that "metamodernist fiction treads a middle ground between modernist and postmodernist fiction".

With respect to the history of literary and critical studies, competing literary/philosophical movements often show a way forward against the earlier model so that they can present something novel or completely/partially unique which of why metamodernist paradigm, even when it adds "oscillation" as the foundation of its philosophical stance, acknowledges the notion that the current movement will not be able to transcend the basic notions of modernism and postmodernism but to cater and nourish the sense of "speculated neoromanticism".

Metamodernism has invited a great deal of attention in the literary and socio-philosophical scenario, particularly in American, as it got proven by the *American Book Review* which contributed an entire issue to metamodernism and its current manifestations in the year 2013. However, a great deal of research related to metamodernist literature is based on fiction and it has not as such explored especially in the poetic scenario. This paper provides the practical application of the concept of metamodernism and some of its potential meanings, by analysing Billy Collin's poem *Litany.*

Moreover, "while modernism creates complete hierarchies, and postmodernism creates destabilized ones, metamodernism creates a

paradoxical middle…" (Yousef, 2018:59). The selected poem under contains both the modern and the postmodern elements, securing a specific space for metamodernist elements to show up as a reaction to the emergence of a new school of thought between the two binaries but without substantially adhering to each of them.

The poem throws light on the various modes of perception which the speaker adapts in order to move on in the world where having an absolute truth is relative to the situation, where everyone can live and survive on his own mode of conduct. Metanarrative or mini narratives are the phenomena of past what matters now is oscillating balance which is amendable and stretchable.

Collins poems are always a matter of great interest for literary critics as they show multiplicity of perceptual modes. There is not only the variety of certain themes but also a diversified set of metamodern techniques which are deployed to bring evolution in the poetic modes with respect to changing times. Although a number of his poems, including" Litany", have been studied, yet not dealt primarily as a metamodernist poem. A great deal of available literature focuses upon a short number of his poems including Introduction to *My Hero, Nostalgia, Forgetfulness, Aristotle* and the huge part of literary discussion is based upon his "Introduction to Poetry" (1998). Dumitrescu (2014) in her work, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, refers Collins along with other poets who are contributing commendably towards the progression of paradigm shift from postmodernism to metamodernism.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Current Study

2.1. What is Metamodernism?

Metamodernism is a term that has been used in multiple contexts including Literary and cultural studies since the 1970. This research article has taken up the concept as it was pioneered by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 essay, *Notes on Metamodernism*. The underlying logic for the using the prefix of "meta" explores three standpoints of "with", "between", and "beyond" and so they termed this pattern of feeling metamodernism (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010). In accordance with their viewpoint, the new period engraved an action, an oscillatory motion between and beyond the modern as well as the postmodern sentiments and can be rightly called metamodernism. It surpasses modernism and postmodernism in order to counter the current social scenario. Its major stance is that of belief, dialogue, trust, and new sincerity which may act as panacea to cure postmodern detachment and irony.

2.2. Two Metamodern formulations: Neoromantic Sensibility and Oscillatory Motion

In this part, the researchers will discuss metamodern essentials in literature that enables a reading which rightly shifts the focus from a postmodern emphasis on a linguistically constructed world where absolute truths are extinct, to a world where there are many other possibilities and avenues to negotiate the truth and its mighty existence.

Oscillation or oscillatory motion is explained by Vermeulen (2012) in one of his interviews with Thank Magazine as "an oscillation, a swinging or swaying with and between future, present and past, here and there and

somewhere…". It's all about fluctuation among the several modes at one and the same time since this oscillatory motion is not supposed to generate a grounded balance or a fixed duality. Vermeulen and Akker (2010:6 as cited in Yousef, 2018) argues, "there is equal probability to oscillate between three four or a number of poles, one should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance…".

Neoromantic sensibility is implied in the sense of the emergence of something ordinary into the garb of extraordinary, something realist into the light of romance. Vermeulen elucidates the situation that "What characterises the Romanticism … is romantic irony: to strive for infinity in spite of one's finiteness; to hope in spite of one's better judgment" (Interview, 2012). So, "it's all about an earnest… ironic distance, and cynicism … addressing 21st-century problems" (2012).

3. Research Methodology

The methodology for current study will be close reading of the poem with special focus on meta-modern framework discussed in introduction and some of the new concepts being added to the progression of this critical theory. The methodological approach employed in this article is explorative as well as analytical in nature. This study adopts a qualitative approach for data analysis. Moreover, secondary sources like certain reviews, research articles and critical books written on meta-modernist perspectives and frameworks are also incorporated in this study. The research design chosen for this purpose is hermeneutic and interpretive in nature since it aids in the interpretation of the underpinnings of social actions and their ultimate impacts.

The researcher has found it more suitable to keep the research questions very general in order to let the text speak for itself. The researcher is interested to explore what kind of meta-modern characteristics are present in the poem, and how they are visible on different levels of the text: in the terms of its themes, narrative structure, character portrayal, meta-commentary on changing moods of the poet, or motives behind the language chosen for verbal and nonverbal expression.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The ensuing debate about the poem Litany by Billy Collins is structured on the idea of paradigm shift and its defining characteristic features as pioneered by Vermeulen and Akker (2010). Billy Collins is one of the most famous contemporary American poets and the renowned author of eleven prestigious collections of poetry. Litany originally published into an issue of *Poetry Magazine* in the year 2002, and eventually became the part of Collins book *Nine Horses: Poem (2002)*. Collins was a Poet Laureate of United States and has gained popularity for his witty humor and conversational language displaying simplicity and whimsicality. Most of the poems included into Nine Horses: Poem including Litany has an unsteady mixture of contradictory ideas and a continuous oscillation between the polarities of love and coldness, the surreal and the real, the lost and the immediate. The dominating elements are concurrently simple and complicated, sagacious and humorous, silent and noisy, modern and postmodern. The current poem is a unique statement on the idea of love which is not all about showing complete gratitude towards beloved and renders the sentiments of adoration to

complement the ravishing beauty of her. Contrary to it, love is like a competition in which lover and beloved are equal competitors if one is bread and butter the other is the air which facilitates the breathing process. Moreover, this poem ‘s engrossment with self-realization, its ardent quest to integrate his importance self with that of beloved while adhering to the novel literary traditions suggested this poem as a metamodernist one that can be set within the framework of Vermeulen and Akker regarding the metamodernist theory as explained above.

Litany

You are the bread and the knife,
The crystal goblet and the wine…
(Jacques Crickillon)
You are the bread and the knife,
the crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass
and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker,
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air.

It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.

And a quick look in the mirror will show
that you are neither the boots in the corner
nor the boat asleep in its boathouse.

It might interest you to know,
speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,
that I am the sound of rain on the roof.

I also happen to be the shooting star,
the evening paper blowing down an alley
and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.

I am also the moon in the trees
and the blind woman's tea cup.
But don't worry; I'm not the bread and the knife.
You are still the bread and the knife.
You will always be the bread and the knife,
not to mention the crystal goblet and–somehow–the wine.
(Billy Collins, *POETRY*, 2002)

The researcher intends to explore the standpoints of metamodernism as *Oscillation* etc. by tracing them out in the poem *Litany* by Billy Collins. The poem comprises of modernist and postmodern phenomena, leaving a definite vacuum for metamodern elements to get themselves manifested between the two opposing binaries.

The above poem is dealt as a critique of love poetry and Collins through deploying certain metaphorical expressions shifts the idea of adoring the beloved towards the adoration of lover who is a speaker as well. It is a quirky poem dealing with squeaking human emotions. Collins goes on expanding the epigraph and making a series of expression by the usage of comparative metaphors in order to express an ambiguous praise for a loved one. Litany is a religious concept which includes a number of repetitive statements commonly associated with Christian rites and ritual which are performed by the call and response between priest and congregation resulting into a series of conventional dialogue.

In a more general sense, a litany is considered to be a list having a chain of "complaints". So, the whole poem praises and mocks a loved one, that delights and confuses the readers since speaker keep on oscillating from one viewpoint to another presenting the most ordinary images into extraordinary light.

There is a sequence that the author follows throughout writing this poem and that is of introducing mundane imagery exploring a comparison between speaker, the first person "I", and the "Other" one who could be a beloved, an entity, a pet, a deity or just someone close to speaker's heart. The speaker unconventionally starts the poem by resembling his beloved

with the most ordinary yet sustaining items which are exigent for living a life like bread, butter, wine, dew, sun but the succeeding metaphor refers to something highly uncanny, the marsh bird suddenly in flight, which shows his muddled approach towards the idea of his beloved' faithfulness as if he doesn't know whether it's the flight which is ravishing or the marsh bird itself in that specific posture. Now, the speaker has given an account of all those things which have the resemblance with the "other", so, he feels to state what this 'other' is not, as if to nullify and counterbalance the previous sentiments and that is rightly called the concept of "New Sincerity" which is the representation of essential and real carrying the postmodern irony and modern stream of enthusiasm. It's vacillation which makes the speaker to list that phenomenon which the "other" is not by introducing wind, the house of cards and the plums. There is the mentioning of pine-scented air, which as per speaker; this 'other' is certainly not as if saying out of contempt and utter derision. The speaker's sardonic humor and witty sense of selection deconstructs the idea of love and that of connectivity with someone or something. But this is the sudden turning point of the poem in which speaker takes a stock of his own self and realizes himself as a new "Subject of Metaphor". He feels himself the sound of rain, a shooting star emitting a burning yet soothing light, a discarded newspaper blown away to the alley and the basket of chestnuts which propounds the idea of home and intimacy. So, he is edible, hot and forsaken as if some important news is getting lost forever. He calls himself the moon that is a feminine symbol to balance the image of the burning wheels of sun to which he associates with that "Other". At last he feels

himself a *blind woman's tea cup* which is the most poignant yet the most revealing metaphor because it shows the position of the speaker that, no doubt, the beloved is the wine but he is the cup through that blind beloved, completely forgetful about the love, is drinking merrily. This pungent image gives a bizarre twirl to the whole situation and reconstructs the previously deconstructed notion of love into something which is tortuously beautiful and a living illusion ready to be dissolved. The speaker ends the poem with same optimistic note and concludes the last lyric by repeating the same starting line as if nothing in between has ever happened. So, it shows an optimistic and balanced outlook of modernism, and an ironical disbelief of postmodernism while the poet has retained its own position as a distant observer who is not ready to get partial but equally appreciating both.

The reading of Collins's poem from a modern perspective, we find it quite convincing and rational in its implications: The speaker is in unconditional love with his beloved because the end and the start are same showing the iconic "Cyclical Motion" of modernism. From a postmodern perspective, the speaker is not really in love but lost somewhere into his own fragmented self where loves die, and nothingness takes birth. It is entirely an "either, or" paradigm where just one side of hierarchy would be acknowledged. The postmodern reading of the poem categorizes it as a fragment which is meticulous insignia of a mini narrative in which it is all right not to have an absolute or ultimate truth. If the poem is gauged from a metamodern perspective, it expounds the impacts of both the studies i.e. modern and the postmodern. The poem as a compact whole delineates a

witty yet reflective nod, an oscillating condition where the speaker is loved or not does not matter. The thing which stands prominent is the idea of self-reflexivity through which the lover is approaching the value of his own self. He is honoring his individual self by placing himself as an equal competitor in the pursuit of love. However, "this situation does not stay for a longer and gives birth to another polarity, an oscillation between the two states… no stable condition for either side of the equation" (Yousef, 2018: 59). Although the speaker is more a person of himself not a beloved's man, yet he concludes the poem with the same nod appreciating the beloved for being his real sustenance. The irony does not end here but goes on to the very last line:

You will always be the bread and the knife,

not to mention the crystal goblet and–somehow–the wine.

Last line creates an unending series of doubt in which speaker uses the expression of "somehow". A postmodernist reading would garner a sense of non-belief as well as suspense about this situation ironically dealing it with apathy but metamodern factor deals with it as a part of man' experiences in general conditions of life. The whole of the poem is a powerful combination between a stable optimistically oriented modern attitude and an ironic/skeptical postmodern stance without permanent adherence to any one of them. It is neither a love lyric nor a reflective nod with anchored hierarchies but something flowing out of the way. This technique of oscillation is deployed to create a sense of engagement counteracted by the feelings of detachment and neutrality. Moreover, "The very moment the reader gets carried away by the story, he is reminded of

his own existence as a detached reader… the deliberate (ab)use of the sources makes the reader put his trust in the text" (Yousef, 2018, 59). There are the elements of irony, pastiche and inter-subjectivity but fragmentation is not as such the defining feature of the poem because unity can be traced out within the totality of the poem and its coherent subject matter in which the metamodern stance keeps on shifting its directions back and forth. In the poem, the poet reconstructs the subject matter by employing a completely new set of meanings to an age-old religious concept of Litany. It is a recreation or a metamodern combo of irony and enthusiasm to get it evolved with respect to the present times.

It is also observed that the metamodern writers have great deal of regard for their readers contrary to postmodern and modern writers. This is highly relatable concerning Billy Collins whose poetry is reader friendly as it seems he knows how to deal with the minds of the readers with the strategic scheming of simplicity and whimsicality. Collins writes: "I have one reader in mind, someone who is in the room with me" (qtd. in Watson, 2015:271). In the poem *Litany* he provides the readers a chance to go with the flow and enjoy the ongoing show by cultivating a collaborative connection between the poem and the readers. In his seminal work "Introduction to Poetry" (1988), Collins puts forth a suggestion that it's essential on the part of readers to get patient and nonconventional while reading the poems. The readers are supposed to probe inside the poetry but without "beating" the meanings. He wants readers to discover the real essence of the poetry but not getting detached from the surface.

Metamodern is new dominant which can not only an essential ingredient for Billy Collins but also the part of so many other renowned poets such as Geoffrey Hill, Jillian Sullivan, Seth Abramson and Kay Ryan. Although none of these writers consciously aim at writing the metamodern work, each was reacting towards the shifting paradigm which occurred after the recent demise of postmodernism. The above-mentioned poets along with others strive to cater a merger of globalization and localization to exceed the modernist as well as postmodernist ideals exalting them into a new sensibility to channelize a wave of progression.

5. Conclusion

Metamodernism being a philosophical, cultural and literary movement is superseding the era of postmodernism in literature, an ideal sensibility that has certain defining properties such as lack of genuine emotions, irony, fragmentation and the loss of real or simulacra. The oscillation between modernist and postmodernist sentiments produces a new metamodernist spectrum of literature and culture. Investigation of the metamodern elements in literature always takes the postmodernism into account, resultantly creating clear and more comprehensive understanding of recent literary texts. It would be quite true to state "that modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism exist side by side and metamodernism is the unique mixture of the best qualities of its previous companions. Although there is unending debate among the metamodernists over the accurate definition of "New Sentiments" and "New Sincerity", yet Vermeulen and Akker's (2012) description of metamodernism has given the foundation to the current debate. Oscillation

and constant switching between modern and postmodern features are rampant in the poem *Litany* by Billy Collins. The poem is, in fact, neither modern nor postmodern but a synthesis of the most appropriate qualities of both which are not apparent but artistically hidden and giving a way to the new epoch of world' literature termed as metamodernism. Being investigated into metamodern theory, the current analysis shows the paradigm shift from postmodern inconclusiveness and cold irony to metamodern resilience, eventually, transformed into a hopeful mellifluous voice heralding the formation of a new person in the process of love. The poem shows an epic journey of the consummation of three segments which permits the writer to employ the technique of "Fragmentation" but, simultaneously, he is endeavoring to knit a coherent narrative in which there is a unique merger of competing metaphors to show the totality of individual' experiences. He shows simultaneously his feelings of love, compassion, coldness, ironic indifference, derision and attachment towards his beloved in neoromantic vein. Being a romantic chap, he invites Nature and its manifestations to conquer his heart than his beloved who can never be as alluring as pine scented air and cornflower.

The researcher attempted to analyze the defining characteristic features of metamodernism along with encompassing the journey of the remarkable change between the vacillating moods of the speaker sublimating into a more evolved self. The poem ends with an air of "New Sincerity" which puts forth a notion that being loved or being hated in the process of love is not important but what really matters is self-discovery which is a pivot point of existence.

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