

Metamodernism Poetics and Its Manifestations in Billy Collins's "My Hero"

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Abstract:

Metamodernism has been defined as a set of developments in philosophy, aesthetics and culture which have emerged from and are reacting to postmodernism. It is a recent current in contemporary literary theory and culture and together with postmodernism have become the two most predominant modes of present critical analysis. As a critical/cultural sensibility, metamodernism has been recognized as a new entrant to the writing of literary works in addition to the academic study of literature. In this paper, metamodernism is explored as one of postmodernism's proposed successors, in theory and practice. This paper highlights the basic poetics of metamodernism and tries to apply them to the analysis of "My Hero", a short poem by the American laureate poet Billy Collins. Though reference is made to some of the major heralds of metamodernism, the primary model which will be discussed and utilized for interpretation is that construed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Van den Akker in their pioneering paper "Notes on Metamodernism" (2010).

Keywords: metamodernism, postmodernism, Vermeulen, Akker, Collins, Abramson.

1. Introduction and Review

Metamodernism is a recent cultural paradigm, a philosophy, a movement as well as a methodology. As introduced by Vermeulen and Akker in their article "Notes on Metamodernism" (2010), it provides a useful guide for the return of the genuine and the sincere through deploying the new strategy of "oscillation" between modern and postmodern sensibility. Its oscillatory and "as if" mindset is poised to displace postmodernism as the dominant cultural paradigm of the 21st century. This article presents metamodernism as a new approach to life, society, culture, and literature, and shows how it has something to add to literary and cultural studies. In our post-postmodern era, many works announcing the end of postmodernism have been published and several academic studies exploring the elements of metamodernism in many works of literature have been conducted (Bunnell, 2015:1). In his study, Burn (2008) identifies post-postmodern tendencies in Jonathan Franzen's fiction. Holland's (2013) analysis of new humanism in contemporary American fiction provides a useful framework for understanding postmodern and twenty-first century fiction and offers valuable insight. In his paper "Metamodernism as We Perceive It", Kadagishvili (2013) examines metamodernism in culture, particularly, in poetry and architecture. Dumitrescu (2014) deals with two novels from Western and Indian culture to illustrate the status of metamodernism in literature as a paradigm that informs an increasingly globalized world. In his dissertation, De'Toy (2015) examines the function of family as a thematic in the contemporary Anglo-American novel, basing his analysis on readings of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), A. M. Homes' *May We Be Forgiven* (2012) and Caryl Phillips' *In the Falling Snow* (2007). In their article "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution" (2014), James and Seshagiri base their argument about some contemporary novelists—among them Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith and J. M. Coetzee-- on Vermeulen and Akker's essay (2010). And in "Oscillating from a Distance: A Study of Metamodernism in Theory and Practice", Bunnell (2015:3) addresses the critical debate surrounding the post-postmodern movement in American fiction and its proposed successor which, he believes, must incorporate old and new, modernism and postmodernism, irony and sincerity." Stating that "the contemporary time is the era of metamodernism", Biekart (2015:4) argues that "metamodernist fiction treads a middle ground between modernist and postmodernist fiction".

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Metamodernism has attracted great attention in the literary scene, particularly the American scene, as proven by the fact that the well-respected literary magazine *American Book Review* contributed an entire issue to metamodernism in 2013. However, most of the research regarding metamodernist literature is focused on fiction and the concept and its implications have not been sufficiently explored especially in the realm of poetry. This paper presents a few occurrences of the term metamodernism and some of its proposed meanings, while exploring Collins's poem "My Hero" as illustrative text.

A large number of essays addressing various aspects of Collins's poems can be easily accessed electronically and in paper form but there is still a scarcity of academic studies on Collins's plentiful works. Though many of his poems, including "My Hero", have been studied, none of the previous studies has dealt with them as primarily metamodernist poems. Most of the literature concentrates on a limited number of Collins's poems including "Introduction to Poetry", "Litany", "Forgetfulness", "Nostalgia", and "Aristotle" and the vast bulk of them focus on his "Introduction to Poetry". In her thesis, Dumitrescu (2014: 16) refers to Collins among several others "whose works together signal a paradigm shift towards a metamodern sensibility."

2. Metamodernism as a Poetics:

Briefly identified, metamodernism is a set of developments in philosophy, aesthetics and culture which have emerged from and are reacting to postmodernism. It can be seen as a philosophy, a movement, a new critical sensibility or critical/cultural approach that has begun to characterize the new millennium. In their pioneering article "Notes on Metamodernism", the two Dutch cultural theorists Vermeulen and Akker (2010:1) defined metamodernism as a "structure of feeling... characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment". In their view, viewed metamodernism came as a response to a new cultural and artistic mode that had begun to supersede postmodernism which in turn had replaced modernism. Elsewhere, Vermeulen explains the concept in slightly different terms: "For us, metamodernism is not so much a philosophy – which implies a closed ontology – as it is an attempt at a vernacular... a sort of open source document that might contextualize and explain what is going on around us, in political economy as much as in the arts" (Vermeulen, Interview, 2012). Metamodernism is a synthesis of the best qualities of modernism and postmodernism, an integration of experience with innocence, of reason with sensibility and a transcendence of both paradigms.

It is now generally acknowledged that it was Vermeulen and Akker who first gave the concept its popular currency and that metamodernism as we understand it nowadays arose in 2010 when Vermeulen and Akker published their article "Notes on metamodernism", a publication that can be considered as the foundational document of metamodernism. Vermeulen and Akker's analysis of contemporary culture as "oscillating between postmodern irony and modernist sincerity" (2010: 4) has offered a great deal of headway in understanding culture in its present state and thus serves as a starting point for approaching the current poetics of metamodernism.

Like any other critical or cultural sensibility, metamodernism has certain distinctive features that set it apart from other schools of thought. The most distinct quality of metamodernism is "oscillation". Vermeulen and Akker conceived of metamodernism as a kind of oscillation, a perpetual movement between opposite poles, changes between positions and outlooks, and a movement from the present to the future, primarily between modernist and postmodernist values: "Ontologically [metamodernism] oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" ("Notes on Metamodernism", 2010:5-6). "Meta", Vermeulen and Akker noted, implies an oscillation between modernism and postmodernism and therefore must embrace doubt, as well as hope and melancholy, sincerity and irony, affect and apathy, the personal and the political. They further pointed out that "the prefix 'meta' refers to such notions as 'with', 'between', and 'beyond'. ... Metamodernism should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism" (2010: 2).

This oscillating to and fro marks a flexible movement, a swinging from one aesthetic or political commitment to another. Within this purview, it is possible to hold contradictory beliefs and attitudes. In an interview with *Thank Magazine*, Vermeulen discusses the meaning of the term metamodernism: "Meta signifies an oscillation, a swinging or swaying with and between future, present and past, here and there and somewhere; with and between ideals, mindsets, and positions." He adds: "For us, the prefix *meta* indicates that a person can believe in one thing one day and believe in its opposite the next.

Or maybe even at the same time. Indeed, if anything, *meta* intimates a constant repositioning: not a compromise, not a balance, but at times vehemently moving back and forth, left and right” (Vermeulen, Interview, 2012). In their opinion, the new period marked a tension, a fluctuation, an “oscillation” between—and beyond—the modern and the postmodern, and can therefore be appropriately called metamodernism. Metamodernism indicates a motion or a movement between as well as beyond; it is after postmodernism, beyond it and between modernism and postmodernism (5). It does not neglect the movements that preceded it; it oscillates between them, forging ahead to form something new and daring.

However, this oscillation is not meant to produce a steady balance or a permanent duality. Vermeulen and Akker hint that it is possible to oscillate between three, four, or more, poles; indeed, between infinite poles: “One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm” (2010:6). For the two theorists, the distinction between these poles (i.e. earnestness and detachment) is artificial for they believe that critical sensibility can be ironic and sincere, detached and involved at the same time due to a constant vacillation between different and polarized modes.

For Vermeulen and Akker, metamodernism also announces a new romanticism in the sense that it attempts to turn something ordinary into something extraordinary, the realistic into the romantic. They maintain that metamodernism appears to find its clearest expression in an emergent neoromantic sensibility (2010:8). Metamodernism exposes a tension that cannot be described in terms of the modern or the postmodern, but must be conceived of as metamodernism expressed by means of a new neoromanticism (12). Metamodern, “should not merely be understood as re-appropriation; it should be interpreted as re-signification: it is the re-signification of the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seamliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite” (12). Vermeulen later explicates: “I would say that what characterises the Romanticism that has been increasingly visible in contemporary culture since the early 2000s is romantic irony: to strive for infinity in spite of one's finiteness; to hope in spite of one's better judgment” (Interview, 2012). He further states that this new romanticism is at once “a passionate reaction to years of postmodern deconstruction, ironic distance, and cynicism ... [and] a response to changes in society which necessitate a different attitude. It's about addressing 21st-century problems” (2012). For Vermeulen, this neoromanticism also involves a new “sincerity” or “post-irony”: “What is meant, I think, when people talk about the so-called “new sincerity” ... is that someone temporarily suspends irony. That is why new sincerity has sometimes been called post-irony and other times Performatism. To be sincere, at least today, is not a natural quality but a choice, a performance you know might be impossible to put on forever, but try and maintain as long as you can” (2012). This means that new Romanticism attempts to recreate the values of modernism, while simultaneously being informed by postmodern irony that rules out the possibility of this task, leading to oscillation between the two ends, a kind of hopeful irony that seeks success despite awareness of inevitable failure.

Primarily, metamodernism attempts to overcome postmodern distances so as to recreate a sense of wholeness that allows positive change both locally and globally. As a cultural paradigm, metamodernism has become associated with engagement and bridging instead of the detachment and distancing associated with postmodernism. As the American poet and a major figure in contemporary metamodernist theory, Seth Abramson observes: “Postmodernism thrives on, and therefore entrenches, our feeling of being alienated from one another, and alienated from our communities, and alienated even from those aspects of our culture ... that are shared” (“Metamodernism: The Basics”, 2014). By contrast, he argues, metamodernism “seeks to collapse distances, especially the distance between things that seem to be opposites, to recreate a sense of wholeness that allows us to ... transcend our environment and move forward with the aim of creating positive change in our communities and the world (2014). Associating postmodernism with what he terms “the Radio Age”, and metamodernism with “the Internet Age”, Abramson asserts that “Radios and even the early years of technological industrialization, emphasized distance in a way that was unmistakable. The Internet, by comparison, is a strange mix of distance and closeness, detachment and immediacy ... that postmodernism doesn't really seem to describe well” (2014).

As conceived by Vermeulen and Akker, metamodernism came as a rejection of the notions associated with postmodernism such as its abandonment of the ideas of order, sequence and unity in works of art and literature, its open-ended stories and inconclusive narratives, its belief in fragmentation, its heavy reliance on irony, parody, pastiche and satire, its rejection of the boundaries between the different genres, and its skepticism.

In their article, they challenged the ideas of Lyotard's notion of "small narratives" which he posited as a replacement for what he called "grand narratives" which he considered a quintessential feature of modernism (1979, Introduction: xxi). In response, they cast doubt on Lyotard's views and instead of "postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth)", they posited "modern enthusiasm (encompassing everything from utopianism to the unconditional belief in Reason)" (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010: 4).

Rejecting postmodernist skepticism, originally a reaction against modernist optimism, metamodernism is mediation between aspects of both modernism and postmodernism. It tries to surpass modernism and postmodernism so as to respond to the current cultural mode. Its main tenet is that faith, trust, dialogue and sincerity can work to transcend postmodern irony and detachment. Instead of the conception of postmodernity which rejected the grand narrative and, by extension, all transcendent narratives and mythic systems, metamodernism called for a new "structure of feeling" (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010) which tried to re-impose the role of myth, grand narratives, romanticism and transcendentalism in the present world. While modernism was basically epistemological and postmodernism was primarily ontological, metamodernism questioned the universality and truthfulness of old modernism and the fragmentation and skepticism of postmodernism. Thus, metamodernism is not so much post-postmodern as it is simultaneously postmodern and modern, integrating modernist naïveté and postmodernist sarcasm, leading to a new sensibility.

Metamodernism does not mean a complete break with the traditional notions of modernism and postmodernism. As the postmodernist moment has passed, its strategies and ideological critiques continue to live on, as those of modernism, in twenty-first century too. As Vermeulen and Akker observed: "We do not wish to suggest that all postmodern tendencies are over and done with. But we do believe many of them are taking another shape, and, more importantly, a new sense, a new meaning and direction" (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010:4). Metamodernism is not so much a rejection of postmodernism as it is an attempt to curtail the unintended consequences of postmodernism. It still embraces parody, irony and metafiction; it seeks for moderation to them and the other extremities of postmodernism. Rather than simply signalling a return to naïve modernist ideological positions, metamodernism considers that our era is characterised by an oscillation between aspects of both modernism and postmodernism.

This is manifested as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism, a moderate fanaticism, oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, attempting to attain some sort of transcendent position, as if such things were within our grasp (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010:5-6). Metamodernism transcends the boundaries of postmodernism to associate with the novelties of the Internet Age. As Abramson (2014) observes: "Metamodernism *doesn't* dialectically erase or silence postmodernism so much as thank it for its many decades of service and enlist its most useful principles in a new reality whose most accurate descriptor is 'metamodern.'" Though several other theorists such as the American scholar Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, the English art critic Luke Turner, the New Zealand poet-scholar Alexandra Dumitrescu, and the American scholar-cum poet Seth Abramson have contributed to the formulation of the basic principles of metamodernism.

There is common consensus that it was Vermeulen and Akker who first established metamodernism as a new cultural paradigm, generating discussion on this groundbreaking concept. The ways in which various theorists of metamodernism use the concept may converge towards or diverge from Vermeulen and Akker's definition of metamodernism. Zavarzadeh (1975) did not even use the word precisely as it is used today (DeToy, 2015:4). Turner put out what he considered the main principles of metamodernism in a manifesto though for Vermeulen and Akker, "metamodernism is not a program, is not a call for whatever kind of protest" (Vermeulen, Interview, 2012). Claiming that her definition predated that of Vermeulen and Akker, Dumitrescu (2014: 169) defined metamodernism as "a cultural paradigm characterised by a search for "self-realization" () and as "a new cultural paradigm characterised by interconnections" (113). Her definition is in some respects similar to those of Vermeulen and Akker but in some others is markedly different. Some of her views were subsequently modified by Vermeulen and Akker's definition of metamodernism as a continuous oscillation.

Abramson's conception of metamodernism differs from mainstream post-modernism in that he finds juxtaposition and simultaneity, rather than oscillation, to be at the center of metamodernism. Abramson does not even affiliate himself with Vermeulen and Akker and his slightly diverging views have problematized the term even further.

As a major proponent of contemporary metamodernism who is second only to Vermeulen and Akker, Abramson notes that the postmodern culture of relativism, irony and pastiche has been superseded by metamodernism which he claims “is the dominant cultural philosophy of the Internet Age” (2015a). Abramson has written various articles and given several interviews on metamodernism, all of which aimed to summarize the state of metamodern discourse today. In them, we can see the term “metamodernism” being sometimes used in different ways from those with which it was first conceived of by the two original founders. Among his fifteen principles of metamodernism (2015b; 2016) perhaps the most important is the notion that though modernism and postmodernism are two cultural philosophies that include a number of diametrically opposed principles, metamodernism maintains that the principles of modernism and postmodernism need not be seen as being in opposition to one another, but in fact can both be operative simultaneously. Unlike Vermeulen who continued to believe that metamodernism is above all about oscillation, Abramson criticizes oscillation stating that “metamodernism has moved from a philosophy of oscillation to one of simultaneity” (2015b). He holds that as postmodernism utilizes deconstruction as a way of understanding how meaning is constructed differently, metamodernism deploys reconstruction in an attempt to unite opposing principles even if the result is a paradox. He further maintains that though postmodernism made frequent use of intertextuality through parody and pastiche, the uses of intertextuality are much more flexible in metamodern applications (2016). Admitting that the various theorists of metamodernism have different mindsets, Abramson states that “disagreements between metamodernists still abound and will continue to be a topic of conversation online and in academic journals” (2016).

3. Discussion:

The ensuing discussion of Billy Collins’s poem “My Hero” (2011) is structured primarily according to Vermeulen and Akker’s original thesis (2010) rather than the two lists of characteristics of metamodernism provided by Abramson (2015b; 2016) or the slightly divergent views of Dumitrescu (2007, 2014). However, occasional references to the latter two theorists will be made in due course. Though the three models share basic similarities and frequently overlap, each of them deserves a separate treatment.

My Hero

Just as the hare is zipping across the finish line,
 the tortoise has stopped once again
 by the roadside,
 this time to stick out his neck
 and nibble a bit of sweet grass,
 unlike the previous time
 when he was distracted
 by a bee humming in the heart of a wildflower.

(Billy Collins, *Horoscopes for the Dead: Poems*, 2011)

One of the most popular contemporary American poets, Billy Collins (b. 1941) is the author of eleven collections of poetry, including *Horoscopes for the Dead* (2011) from which the above poem is extracted. A distinguished academician, Collins was United States Poet Laureate from 2001-2003 and has earned a great reputation for his wry humour and colloquial language. Many of the poems in Collins’s *Horoscopes for the Dead*, including “My Heart”, have an uneasy combination of opposing ideas and a constant oscillation between such binaries as death and love, the fantastic and the real, the past and the present, etc. They are simultaneously simple and mysterious, humorous and wise, modern and postmodern. Like a horoscope, the poems in *Horoscope for the Dead* speak of the past, the present and the future, containing reflections on the large and small concerns of life and the joy and frustration they bring, making them easily fit into a metamodern perspective. This poem’s preoccupation with self-realization, its search for a balance and integration of the self and the poet’s desire to innovate while maintaining continuity with literary traditions recommend it as a metamodernist poem that can fit within the framework of Vermeulen and Akker’s theory of metamodernism as above explained.

Historically speaking, competing literary/cultural movements often attempt to break from the earlier model so that they can address something new or different. However, the metamodern paradigm, even when it embraces “oscillation” as the basis of its philosophy, admits that the contemporary cultural moment will not be able to completely surpass the basic notions of postmodernism. It will only oscillate between modernism, postmodernism, and a speculated neoromanticism (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010:4).

Taking a cue from the representations of the metamodern in contemporary literature, I shall explain how oscillation and many other metamodernist devices lay the foundation of Collins's "My Hero". While modernism creates complete hierarchies, and postmodernism creates destabilized ones, metamodernism creates a paradoxical middle ground between modernism and postmodernism where a subject's oscillating performance implies hierarchy and destabilization (deconstruction) at the same time. "My Hero" contains both modern and postmodern elements, leaving a space for metamodern elements to manifest themselves as a result of a movement between the two poles but without permanently becoming part of anyone of them.

As a metamodern poem, "My Hero" makes reference to the Classical fable of "The Tortoise and the Hare" by Aesop, a storyteller believed to have lived in ancient Greece. The story is about a hare who bragged about how fast he could run and a tortoise who, tired of hearing him boast, challenged him to a race. Certain of his speed and the slow movement of his rival, the hare stretched himself alongside the road and fell asleep while the tortoise continued walking until he was over the line before the hare could catch up and overtake him. Thus, the tortoise won the race. However, the situation in this poem is dramatically reversed. It is the hare that comes first and wins the competition while the tortoise busies himself enjoying a nibble on a bit of grass: "Just as the hare is zipping across the finish line, / The tortoise has stopped once again, / by the roadside/ this time to stick out his neck/ and nibble a bit of sweet grass" (l.1-5). The same result occurs in the last three lines of the poem from which we understand that the hare had previously won another race while the tortoise enjoyed himself listening to the humming of a bee: "unlike the previous time/ when he was distracted/ by a bee humming in the heart of a wildflower" (l. 6-9).

Reading Collins's poem from a modern perspective, we find it convincing and standing to any rational standard: The slow tortoise stands no chance of winning a race against a speedy hare. From a postmodern perspective, the hare can be celebrated as the hero and the tortoise is the neglected loser. It is an "either-or" dichotomy where only one side of the hierarchy (the winner-hare) can be privileged while the other side (the loser-tortoise) is ignored. Looked at from a metamodern perspective, the situation would be different from both modern and postmodern readings. The poem as a whole illustrates a humorous-reflective, oscillating situation where the tortoise seems not to care much about whether or not he wins the race; to him, all that matters is to have fun and enjoy himself. The tortoise approaches the issue "as if" he has already won the competition and the prospected jubilation of the hare seems to have faded away from the scene following the end of the race, thus leading to a new equilibrium.

However, this situation does not last long and soon gives way to a new polarity, an oscillation between the two states (modern and postmodern) with neither side of the polarity ever staying for long or perpetually prevailing. There is no stable condition for either side of the equation. Though the hare had won the race this time and the previous one, the tortoise can in one sense be considered the real winner of both races for he is the one who enjoyed the journey more as he took enough time to entertain himself twice: first with the sight of a "bee humming in the heart of a wildflower" and second, at "nibbl[ing] a bit of sweet grass". A postmodernist reading would entail a sense of doubt about this situation viewing it ironically and with a lot of apathy and skepticism. However, a metamodern view would look at the matter as an oscillation between an optimistic modern attitude and an ironic/skeptical postmodern view, trying to surpass any complete adherence to any of them. The "either-or" postmodern equation gives way to a "both-neither" metamodern one.

The poet's hero is both the loser and the winner but is neither of them; sometimes positioned as winner and sometimes as loser, but never fully either/or of a classificatory system. And so, we end up with a circulatory position where the demarcation between success and failure is unfulfilled and where neither of the two contestants can claim full victory.

Oscillation between winning and losing is not the only binary that we encounter in our reading of the poem on a metamodernist basis. The poem's binaries roughly correspond to those between the modern and the postmodern sensibilities outlined in metamodern theory. They can be appropriately summarized as an oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony; modern naivety and postmodern knowingness; modern engagement and postmodern detachment; modern trust and postmodern skepticism as will be explained below. Such oscillations occur when the reader is faced by a sense of engagement counterbalanced by a feeling of detachment. The very moment the reader gets carried away by the story, he is reminded of his own existence as a detached reader. When he is skeptical about the poem's deviation from the original story, he develops a deliberate non-critical stance and lets the poem tell its own story. The deliberate (ab)use of the sources makes the reader put his trust in the text while he simultaneously becomes more critical of the poet's use of his sources.

We know full well that the poem is giving a different version of the original story, but we take the inconsistencies as an integral part of the work. Once the reader is carried away by the human, he is reminded of the natural and eventually of the importance of integrating the two sides of the polarity. Dumitrescu (2014:20) rightly observes: “Metamodernism seeks the common denominator that makes communication possible within our humanity: respect for nature, for the self and for the other”. The poem is not only about the past but it is also about the present and the future, representing a true reflection of Vermeulen and Akker’s conception of metamodernism: “Metamodernism displaces the parameters of the present with those of a future presence that is futureless; and it displaces the boundaries of our place with those of a surreal place that is placeless. For indeed, that is the ‘destiny’ of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding” (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010: 12).

It is impossible to read the poem with either of the above notions being the highest force. In its thematic and structural organization, “My Hero” is reminiscent of Vermeulen and Akker’s metamodern “both-neither” metaxis polarity in contrast with postmodern parataxis “either/or” dichotomy. As Vermeulen and Akker observe: “Both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a ‘both-neither’ dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them. This dynamic can perhaps most appropriately be described by the metaphor of metaxis” (2010: 6). Thus, there is no “either/or” or a coalescence of the two polarities, but rather a “both/neither” space. The outcome of this polarity is a potential integration, a probable interconnection of the polarized values of modernism and postmodernism with neither side ever winning the day. As Vermeulen and Akker state: “Inspired by a modern naiveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility” (2010:5).

In his poem, Collins reverses a traditional narrative, making the pendulum swing from the situation of a traditional hero to a metamodern one. Traditionally, the hero is the winner, the efficient and rational competitor whose planning and power enable him to prevail. The metamodern hero depicted in this poem is the modest creature capable of enjoying the journey while looking forward to the future. Unlike the ambitious and competitive hare, the tortoise loses itself in the beauty it encounters, seduced by “a bee humming in the heart of a wildflower” or attracted by “a bit of sweet grass”. Though the poem starts as a simple anecdote about a simple creature, it soon turns out that it is more serious than it first appears for it contains a profound observation on human life as well. Translated into more concrete terms, the tortoise metaphor can be construed as an allegory of the metamodern heroes portrayed as the wanderers/adventurers of the world, the humble creatures seeking truths and questioning the established traditional hierarchies of life. Rather than trying to reach a special place or find a sacred treasure, they are searching for self-fulfillment and joyfulness. This view links to Dumitrescu’s remark that “within a metamodern paradigm, the power to inspire does not rest with the gifted and talented alone, but also with the ordinary householder, whose story and living example is [sic] apt to guide others” (2014:27).

In Collins’ poem, the hero loses the race, but is expected to finally arrive at his destination having enjoyed himself on his way to his ultimate goal. Whether he wins or loses, the arrival to destination is less important than the journey itself. Every moment of the journey can be rewarding and a true source of enjoyment, a clear reference to the journey of life as portrayed in Collins’s oeuvre. Collins’s hero is perhaps someone who can make the journey enjoyable and rewarding while still taking part in the race, but without necessarily ignoring the ultimate goal. He is a metamodern hero who reflects the optimism and sincerity of a modern outlook and the skepticism and irony of a postmodern perspective but with a view to maintaining a constant movement between the two positions while having a positive outlook on the future.

Viewed in human terms, the poem is a recognition that old mythical heroic quests belong to everyone for they mark a search for genuine self-fulfillment and spiritual growth. As a metamodern work, “My Hero” concurrently embraces moderate fanaticism and enthusiasm but without abrogating its limited concern with irony and apathy, thus opening communication and supporting the self in its journey toward self-realization. Under the rubric of metamodernism, postmodernism and modernism complement each other for they are not as different as some critics want to think. As Dumitrescu(2014: 175-176) again observes: “Metamodernism’s ethical concerns, as well as the search for balance, wisdom, and fulfilment as an avenue for self-transformation, link with some of the tenets of modernism”.

As aforementioned, in the original story by Aesop, the hare feels confident of winning the race, so he stops before he reaches the finish line and falls asleep. On the other hand, the tortoise continues to plod on to his goal without stopping and ultimately (ironically as well as paradoxically) wins the race.

The moral of the fable is that one can be more successful by doing things slowly and steadily than by acting hastily and carelessly. In this poem, the hare continues his speedy joinery nonstop, but the tortoise “stops by the roadside to “nibble a bit of sweet grass”. Nevertheless, this time, the hare seems to have paradoxically won the race, but the moral is different. The moral of the story is that enjoying the journey is as important as winning the race or the arrival to destination. Looked at from a modernist perspective, a modern hero lives in a rule-bound world guided by universal truths and moral standards. However, this view can be undermined by a postmodern irony which would render him as anti-hero, a protagonist lacking conventional heroic attributes. As *A Handbook to Literature* indicates, the anti-hero, so well-recognized in modern literature, now completely dominates the literary landscape” (qtd. in Madison, 2004:4). Compared with these two types of hero, the metamodern hero would include both a modernist optimism and sincerity and a postmodern doubt and knowingness, an oscillation between a naïve faith to create new mythic heroes and a skeptical attitude about mythic systems, thus inducing a sense of greater depth and sublimity. This is in line with Dumitrescu’s argument that “metamodernism is in many ways an attempt to interrogate the modernist/postmodernist inheritance – and to go beyond it. One consequence concerns the costs of investing too heavily in rationality – i.e., the limitations of rationalist judgements devoid of emotional or spiritual content” (2014:178).

The definition of a hero has changed throughout time. For the sake of a brief discussion, I propose dividing heroes into five main categories: Classical/epic hero who is celebrated for his military conquests and superhuman characteristics; romantic hero who is a revolutionary and alienated figure; modern hero who is usually an average person involved in internal conflicts, realistic problems, philosophical quests for knowledge, and regarded as a role model; postmodern hero who is more of an anti-hero than a heroic one; and metamodern hero who oscillates between the modern and the postmodern positions. Within each of these divisions there can occur any number of variations. In her study, Madison (2004) highlights “the presence of ethical and sentimental contemporary heroes—heroes who resemble their romantic predecessors more closely than they resemble the anti-hero of the [prescient] modernists”. She also concludes that “many critics believe that postmodern fiction is dominated by the anti-hero that developed under [prescient] modernism” (Madison, 2004:4). Both heroes appear in 21st century literature with equal frequency and popularity. The metamodern hero as portrayed in Collins’s poem could be someone who oscillates between the modern and postmodern notions of the hero, a “modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony” (Vermeulen and Akker:5-6, 8). Transformed into human terms, Collins’s hero is someone who may be involved in modern personal or internal conflicts as well as quests for knowledge or self-discovery leading toward self-fulfillment, but is simultaneously characterized by postmodern cynicism and the notion of the anti-hero. In one sense, it is a modernist sentiment coloured by postmodernist reality, resulting in a constant negotiation between the two. As Vermeulen and Akker observe: “The metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all” (2010: 6). The ultimate goal is to achieve a sense of universalism informed by individualism and empathy.

Despite its use of intertextuality, pastiche, and irony which are characteristic of postmodernism, fragmentariness is not a primary feature of “My Hero”. Unity is found in the totality of the poem and its coherent subject where the metamodernist pendulum keeps swinging back and forth between some opposing forces as aforementioned. In the poem, the metamodern “reconstruction of the subject” is realized through the retelling of an old fable in a new way with new protagonists and antagonists.

The reader is aware of the poet’s rendering of the subject as being apparently authentic as much as he is constantly reminded that the subject is merely a recreation of the original tale. The very moment he gets carried away by the fable, he is reminded of his own existence as a reader in the present time. One may first find the poem confusing due to its deviation from the original, but on reading it in light of metamodern theory, may realize it is coherent and unified. This is achieved when we construe the oscillation as one between naivety and knowingness, irony and sincerity, and when we see the interaction between the reader and the text. The reader feels connected on an emotional and epistemological level and disconnected on a spatial and ontological level, but neither is prevalent.

Metamodernism tends to go beyond the irony and fragmentation that defined postmodernism. In this poem, we witness oscillation between irony and detachment on one hand and a combination of sincerity and enthusiasm on the other. Hutcheon (1988) considers irony, skepticism, parody and intertextuality, the things that define the era of postmodern literature. Metamodernism makes use of such devices but it also considers the revival of certain modern concepts such as authenticity, sincerity, and unity as essential components of its most remarkable aspects. As Vermeulen and Akker explain: “Both metamodernism and the postmodern turn to pluralism, irony, and deconstruction in order to counter a modernist fanaticism.

However, in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out" (2010:7). Metamodern irony (i.e. "post-irony") as Vermeulen and Akker maintain, has a specific set of traits that distinguish it from the skeptic postmodern irony: "Metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy". Whereas metamodern irony describes an art work "by pointing exactly to what it presents, by exposing precisely what it signifies", metamodern irony draws attention to "what is often called the sublime, the uncanny, the ethereal, the mysterious, and so forth" (10). The intermingling of the two types results in a state in which earnest and ironic intents become intermixed producing a kind of new sincerity. In the poem, the difference between postmodern and metamodern irony is one between cynicism and seriousness, mockery and earnestness.

Van Ooteghem (2015: 73) notes that metamodern writers have great regard for their readers in contrast with "typical postmodern writers [who] have little regard for their audience's appreciation of their work". This is true of Billy Collins, whose poetry is concerned with reader engagement; much of Collins's work depends on the collaboration between the poet and the reader. Collins's poems have been described as reader-friendly and reviewers have consistently indicated how they reveal a real concern for the reader. Describing himself as reader conscious, Collins writes: "I have one reader in mind, someone who is in the room with me, and who I'm talking to, and I want to make sure I don't talk too fast, or too glibly. Usually I try to create a hospitable tone at the beginning of a poem. (qtd. in Watson, 2015:271). In "My Hero", the poet secures the participation of the reader by envisaging a close and cooperative relationship between the text and the reader. In "Introduction to Poetry" (1988), Collins intimates that readers should be patient and open minded when reading poems and should not over-analyze. The reader must get inside the poem and see what it means but without "beating" the meaning out of the poem, or tying "the poem to a chair" and torturing a "confession out of it". Collins's metamodern view of reading poetry ranges between a gentle treatment and an academic lemon-squeezing analysis. He wants the reader to have fun, feel free and ready to go deep but remain attached to the surface.

Finally, it is worth noting that apart from Billy Collins's works, metamodernism can be easily recognized in the poetry of many representative poets such as the English poet Geoffrey Hill, the New Zealand poet Jillian Sullivan and the American poets Seth Abramson and Kay Ryan, to give only a few examples. Though none of these writers set out self-consciously to write a metamodern work, each was responding to the paradigm shifts that were occurring following the demise of postmodernism. These poets and several others try to foster a mixture of globalization and localization, to transcend the modernist-postmodernist paradigms sublimating them into a new form and perhaps transcending them, thus reflecting a true progression rather than mere vacillation.

4. Conclusion:

As a cultural movement and a new critical approach to literature, metamodernism is quickly superseding postmodernism era in literature, an era that defined itself through fragmentation, irony and lack of genuine emotions. The metamodernist oscillation between modernist and postmodernist sentiments creates a new spectrum of literature and culture. Interpreting the metamodern always takes the postmodern into account, thus providing a better understanding and greater appreciation of contemporary literary texts. It would be more appropriate to say that modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism coexist, and that metamodernism's main achievement is its synthesis of the best features of its predecessors.

Though metamodernists do not agree on how to define the new sentiments, Vermeulen and Akker's interpretation of metamodernism has set the stage for further debate. Oscillation between modern and postmodern elements is easily detectable in Collins's "My Hero". The poem is neither modern nor postmodern, nor both nor either at the same time. Examined in light of metamodern theory, it becomes obvious that it steers a middle course between modernism and postmodernism, clearly exhibiting the transformed return of sincerity and the emergence of post-irony, which are key elements in metamodernist theory. It marks evolution from the postmodern cold irony and skepticism to the metamodern hopeful yet deliberately delusional post-irony. Collins' poem moves between postmodern indecisiveness and a modern trust and can be seen as a journey of discovery that has the potential for a transformative experience.

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