Ambivalent Laughter: Conceptual Poetry's Humor and Metamodernism

Elina Siltanen*
University of Eastern Finland

Abstract: Conceptual poetry can easily be viewed as a postmodern phenomenon, but in this essay, I argue that the way some conceptual poems relate to humor suggests a metamodern sensibility. Metamodernism operates between tonal ambiguities like "irony and enthusiasm" which are key elements in Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's (2017) definition of the term. I consider poems from three writers, Alexandra Nemerov's "First My Motorola", Lawrence Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics", and Marcella Durand's "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2". These poems can be read as being critical of capitalism through humor. The poems do not merely propose an ironic reading but, instead, can be read as evoking ambivalent laughter as affect (see Hennefeld 2021). These kinds of poems recycle seemingly infinite material from contemporary everyday life and invite the reader to consider this infinite material through ambivalent laughter.

Keywords: conceptual poetry, metamodernism, irony, affect

Resumo: A poesia conceptual pode ser facilmente vista como um fenómeno pós-moderno, mas, neste ensaio, defendo que a forma como alguns poemas conceptuais se relacionam com o humor sugere uma sensibilidade metamoderna. O metamodernismo opera entre ambiguidades tonais como "ironia e entusiasmo", que são elementos-chave na definição do termo de Robin van den Akker e Timotheus Vermeulen (2017). Considero poemas de três escritores: "First My Motorola", de Alexandra Nemerov, "Spinoza's Ethics", de Lawrence Giffin, e "Pastoral" e "Pastoral 2", de Marcella Durand. Estes poemas podem ser lidos como uma crítica ao capitalismo através do humor. Os poemas não se limitam a propor uma leitura irónica, podendo ser lidos enquanto evocação do riso ambivalente como afeto (ver Hennefeld 2021). Este tipo de poemas recicla material aparentemente infinito da vida quotidiana contemporânea e convida o leitor a considerar este material infinito através do riso ambivalente.

Palavras-chave: poesia conceptual, metamodernismo, ironia, afeto

First, my Motorola
Then my Frette
Then my Sonia Rykiel
Then my Bulgari
Then my Asprey
Then my Cartier
Then my Kohler
Then my Brightsmile
(Nemerov 2011: 457)

Conceptual poetry has often been discussed as a serious exercise that is concerned with how we use language and texts. Alexandra Nemerov's "First My Motorola" illustrates how subtly humor often works in conceptual poetry. The poem is a listing of every product brand that the poet touched during an ordinary day (2011: 457). The very concept is humorous: the idea of listing everything that one touches might elicit a chuckle, as the idea of framing an ordinary day through only brand names is surprising. On the surface, of course, the poem may not seem funny, but the concept is nevertheless incongruous with what would be expected of a poem, and surprise and incongruity are key components in many basic definitions of humor (see e.g. Attardo 2020: 19; Martin 2007: 6). As the poem proceeds, humorous effects ensue from the sudden transitions from one product to another: Motorola reappears throughout the day and toothpaste is followed by fruit brands and an expensive item of clothing or baggage (Nemerov 2011: 457-458). The poem is playful.

Since conceptual writing engages with playful experimentation, recycling, and repurposing, it has easily been viewed as a quintessentially postmodern form of writing (see e.g. Kaufmann 2017: 13). I propose, however, that some conceptual poems engage with humor and laughter through a metamodern sensibility that veers away from postmodern irony towards ambivalent laughter. According to Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen (2017: 11), metamodernism "points to a sensibility that should be situated beyond the postmodern, one that is related to recent metamorphoses or qualitative changes in Western capitalist societies", and it "oscillates [...] between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity" and between the modern and the postmodern. Indeed, metamodernism has been viewed as engaging with the "resurfacing of Modernism" (Kersten/Wilbers 2018: 719) while it is also "beyond the postmodern" (Van den Akker/Vermeulen 2017: 11).

Metamodernism is a complex concept and there is little consensus on its definition (see Kersten/Wilbers 2018: 721) or, indeed, whether it is a useful way to think about what happens after postmodernism. In this essay, I use it in a somewhat restricted way: as a concept that, most centrally, engages with tonal ambiguities like

the distinctions between irony and enthusiasm or sarcasm and sincerity, as mentioned by Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 11). Elsewhere, I have discussed how Dorothea Lasky's "New Sincerity" poetry can be read as a sub-phenomenon of metamodernism (Siltanen 2020a: 981-985), and my focus here is informed by the research done for the earlier article. The tonal ambiguity within metamodernism entails scaling at least partly back from postmodern irony, which is often associated with cynicism (see *idem*: 985). While this is not the only significant aspect of metamodernism, it is what I focus on here. In my earlier article, the emphasis was on sincerity as a performance which cannot entirely ward off irony as seen in the work of a non-conceptual poet (Siltanen 2020a: 983-984), but here I focus on the scaling back of irony as observed through zooming in on humor in conceptual poetry.

Irony, too, is complex to define, but according to linguist Joana Garmendia (2018: 17, 130, 133), it involves "saying something and meaning the opposite", overtones of negativity like mockery, and someone or something at whom the irony is targeted. Irony can be connected to the superiority theory of humor, so that "irony is often funny because irony often expresses a negative attitude that places the speaker in a superior position, and it is this feeling of superiority that creates the humour" (idem: 140). As Garmendia (*idem*: 9-10) notes, the terms irony and sarcasm are frequently used in overlapping ways. For my purposes, the distinction between the two terms itself is less important than the point that metamodernism involves this ambivalence between pervasive irony and sarcastic mockery and more sincere or authentic positions (Van den Akker/Vermeulen 2017: 11).

To be clear, I am not proposing that conceptual poetry itself is a wholly metamodern phenomenon, but that some conceptual poems use humor in a metamodern way. In making this argument, I consider conceptual poems that attempt to do something serious by critiquing capitalism while they might be humorous and elicit laughter. Nemerov's poem, for example, has been read as "a chronicle of product usage as well as a chronicle of information consumption" (Stephens 2013: 764). Given the poem's focus on targeting information consumption, it can be read as having a serious agenda in critiquing capitalism, but the simplicity of the poem's concept means that its mode of doing criticism is primarily humorous and it can also elicit laughter. In addition to Nemerov's "First My Motorola", I discuss how Lawrence Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" (2011) and Marcella Durand's "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2" (2012) engage with consumption as they rely on appropriation, repetition, and recycling of seemingly infinite materials. To make this argument, I first consider the position of irony in metamodernism and how capitalism is related to both. Then, I discuss how laughter can be seen as an ambivalent affective response, and in the last section, I elaborate on this through considering the poems in more detail.

In postmodern literature, prevalent irony was frequently used for criticizing capitalism (Matthews 2023: 808). Moving partly beyond irony often surfaces in

discussions of metamodernism, as evidenced by the inclusion of Lee Konstantinou's (2017: 87) article on what he has termed "postirony" in Van den Akker and Vermeulen's edited book (see also Siltanen 2020a: 982-985). Konstantinou (2017: 87-88) writes about how many recent writers have come to view postmodern irony as a negative phenomenon, "a corrosive practice of symptomatic, sceptical or paranoid reading". Postmodern irony has been discussed as distanced and cynical, and hence inadequate for a criticism of late capitalism, as Edward Matthews (2023: 808, 810) has argued with reference to Brett Easton Ellis's postmodernism and David Foster Wallace's criticism of Ellis's work, where Wallace called for more sincerity. This does not mean completely doing away with irony, but it needs to be kept in check by sincerity (Matthews 2023: 812).

Conceptual poetry has had a bad rap in recent years, not least because of accusations of racism (see e.g. Luger 2020: 50; Chen 2015; Hong 2014). Another point of contention has been conceptual poetry's relation to capitalism. For Amy King, for example, conceptual poets "purport to block capitalism while intentionally employing capitalist techniques [...] to achieve and secure status within the capitalist structure" (2013). Trevor A. Strunk (2018: 195-196) has noted of a work by Vanessa Place that "it ultimately falls short of a poetic break from the market" even though it attempts such a move. Nevertheless, other critics like Heather Milne (2018: 6-7; 9) have viewed conceptual tactics in the work of poets such as Rachel Zolf, Evelyn Reilly and Durand as beneficial in responding to capitalism. I concur with Milne that conceptual poetry, despite its problems, offers possibilities for considering contemporary challenges like capitalism, and one of the ways it can do this is by engaging with metamodern sensibilities.

Metamodernism has also been discussed in relation to capitalism. Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 11-12) associate metamodernism with social and cultural developments in the 2000s, and most relevantly for my purposes, with the rise of digital technologies and financial crises that led to more neoliberalization and ecological challenges (see also Bentley 2018: 741). For Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 4), metamodernism "has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies". They discuss, for example, the Occupy movement and Tea Party, both of which "originated in a growing group of people disaffected with neoliberal globalisation, disenfranchised with representative democracy and at ease with the Internet as a means to discuss, cultivate and rally around shared frustrations" (*idem*: 13). Metamodern literature, then, has arguably attempted to respond to similar conditions and challenges as some conceptual poetry through its appropriation and the repurposing of, for instance, internet texts, into poetry. The internet and the Occupy movement have similarly been observed to have a relation to conceptually oriented poetry and its use as "a dynamic space of political engagement" (Milne 2018: 4).

The metamodern breaking away from full-blown irony has frequently been discussed in relation to television. In writing about metamodern sitcoms, Gry C. Rustad and Kai Hanno Schwind (2017: 131-132) argue that "mediatised forms of humour now seem to be more interested in 'laughing with' rather than 'laughing at' the butt of the joke" than for example sitcoms from the 1990s. "Laughing with" refers to a shared experience, which is distinguished from laughing at, for example, jokes directed against other people, or from parody and cynicism (*idem*: 131-132). As examples, Rustad and Hanno Schwind (ibidem) discuss sitcoms like *Community* and *Parks and Recreation* which, as they say, present "a sincere yearning for meaning" which nevertheless does not preclude parody. For Rustad and Hanno Schwind (*idem*: 140), postmodern humor in sitcoms like Seinfeld is "observationally distanced, highly judgmental and very often serves as an end in itself", while to metamodern sitcoms like *Parks and Recreation* they read an "oscillation between naïveté and skepticism" (*idem*: 143). Metamodern works can be said to be seeking a deeper relationship with meaning than mere cynical irony or mockery ("laughing at" someone) on a surface level. This culminates in a tone that "lies in a [...] sitcom's address and how it communicates with its viewers" (Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 132).

Address has also been acknowledged as significant to the power dynamics of reading conceptual poetry. These considerations are one of the few occasions when humor and laughter have been highlighted as significant to conceptual poetry's mode of operation. David Kaufmann (2017: 60) discusses how conceptual poetry like Ara Shirinyan's *Your Country Is Great* (2008) that uses appropriated language to recycle superficial views of people writing online might suggest a sense of superiority for its readers. For Eric Rettberg (2014: 60), Shirinyan's work "provokes the reader's laughter amid a series of imagined transnational encounters—encounters that scholars have usually treated as occasions for seriousness". Rettberg (*idem*: 66, 70), like Kaufmann (2017: 62-63), asserts that readers may be tempted to view themselves as superior to the voices of the poem, but such a view is, Rettberg states, too simple as the poems also ask "readers to recognize their own complicity in [...] exoticizing assumptions and postcolonial appropriation".[1] The focus here is on deciding who is being made fun of and who gets to feel superior, or to feel they have more "cultural capital" than the internet voices, but ultimately, for example the feeling of superiority might invite the reader to consider their own position (Kaufmann 2017: 59-60, see also Rettberg 2014: 68-70; Siltanen 2020b: 110).

Again, then, we are dealing with the superiority theory of humor, and the possibility of ridicule or mockery (see Garmendia 2018: 140; Attardo 2020: 67). A conceptual poem can propose a sense of superiority for readers and thus address them by calling on them to engage with the text ironically. If we were to read conceptual poetry's humor exclusively through mockery of particular cultural positions, those of others or our own, conceptual poetry would arguably have a postmodern sensibility. In

other words, we would be laughing at rather than laughing *with* someone (see Rustad/ Hanno Schwind 2017: 131). My argument is, however, that in reading some conceptual poems, the humor is more multifaceted. Of course, the point in Kauffmann's and Rettberg's readings, too, is not that conceptual poetry would merely invite mockery of those deemed inferior, but that it invites us to consider what happens if we adopt that position.

My focus here is particularly on *laughing with* conceptual poetry along similar lines as those suggested by Rustad and Hanno Schwind (*ibidem*) about sitcoms. I propose that in some of the most effective conceptual writing, the appropriation of existing text materials allows us to examine "laughing with" contemporary discourse in a way that does not necessitate adopting an ironic attitude, which can have a political payoff in ways that align with metamodern sensibilities. To understand how this might work, we need to, next, turn to examining how humor is connected to the notion of laughter as an affect.

Humor, laughter, and unease

In a simplified definition, Salvatore Attardo (2020: 17) has defined humor as "the cognitive stimulus", while "the emotional effect" of humor can be called mirth, and laughter is "the physical manifestation of the emotion" (see also Martin 2007: 8-9). Attardo (2020: 42, 44) remarks that laughter can exist without humor and vice versa, and that smiling is often a manifestation of humor instead of laughter. He uses the term "mirthful laughter" for laughter that coincides with humor (*idem*: 43). For Attardo (*idem*: 46), "the recognition of an incongruity" can lead to identifying a text as humorous, though he notes that researchers can use triangulation, such as looking at empirical data. My focus is on readings of literary texts, and an example of how humor manifests in incongruities was already briefly identified in the earlier discussion of Nemerov's poem. Laughter is discussed as an associated concept that might occur in the face of incongruities, like humor.

Laughter also has a darker side. Maggie Hennefeld (2021: 111) discusses laughter as an affect and emphasizes its political potential. For Hennefeld, who works with feminist affect theory, laughter as an affect is involved in nuances such as "the rogue insight that tickles you, that flight of fancy that alights in your limbic system and then convulses your diaphragm, and the vanishing interim between spontaneous incitement and explicit recognition". Hennefeld (*idem*: 110) emphasizes the "unfinished, nomadic potentiality of affect—its Spinozan inheritance". She is interested in "disproportionate, off-cue, and unstable instances of laughter, wherein nervous excess consumes the laughing subject and threatens to transform into something else entirely" (*idem*: 112). Laughter, in this sense, is an uneasy experience more than a positive one in uncomplicated ways, and its potential lies in its unfinished

quality, in something that is not yet fully identifiable. Moreover, late capitalism tends to expect people to be happy all the time, which further underlines the dark side of laughter (*idem*: 131).

Based on Hennefeld's approach, laughter can be seen as a physical experience involving moments of recognition that border on turning into something unpredictable.[2] I propose that unpredictable laughter as affect – as something unfinished – can be a useful way to view a potential response to some conceptual poems. Of course, since my focus is on poems that do not specifically mention laughter, or there are no laughing characters as such, the discussion of laughter as affect is premised on the theoretical possibility of laughter being the response to, for example, incongruities. Like Hennefeld (*idem*: 110, 112), I am more interested in what is "unfinished" than what is "already extant". Laughter as affect is evoked between the lines in the poems and ultimately behooves the reader. Laughter can be viewed as an affect that can risk being excessive rather than merely joyful. This is also distinguished from laughter in response to cynical, distanced irony.

As mentioned, Hennefeld (*idem*: 112) writes that "nervous excess consumes the laughing subject". Conceptual poetry has often been discussed in terms of a lack of identity or subjectivity, where copying threatens to consume everything. This issue surfaces for example in discussions of its relationship to racism (see e.g. Kaufmann 2017: 71-76; Siltanen 2020c: 123n3). While racism is not my focus here, referencing this discussion illuminates conceptual poetry's regard of identity and subjectivity. Kaufmann (2017: 74) has discussed Cathy Park Hong's (2014) criticism of conceptual writing's inherent racism and her idea that it regards identity as irrelevant, which cannot work for writers who are racialized or otherwise categorized by their identity. Hong's criticism of the difficulty of being "post-identity" for those whose identity is repeatedly attacked is certainly relevant. Yet, according to Kaufmann, when conceptual poetry's biggest proponent Kenneth Goldsmith writes about identity, he really means subjectivity and the idea that "there is no stable psychological core underwriting his 'I'"; in other words, something different from what Hong means by identity, though Kaufmann (2017: 75) points out that Goldsmith (2009) makes his points in an unclear way. Thus, when conceptual writing foregoes subjectivity in the sense that Goldsmith discusses we are dealing with commonplace "postmodern critique of subjectivity" that does allow for considering how identities are "constructed and experienced" (Kaufmann 2017: 76). In making this argument, Kaufmann also implies that Goldsmith's notion of subjectivity is that of a consumer's, someone whose subjectivity is defined by what he consumes.

Once we consider conceptual writing through the lens of humor, the absence of subjectivity that Kaufmann (ibidem) writes about becomes intriguing when juxtaposed with Hennefeld's (2021: 112) comments on the laughing subject that is consumed. Lack of individual subjectivity in this sense can be observed in Nemerov's

"First My Motorola", which I cited in the beginning of this essay. As is clear, the poem's speaker defines themself through the items that they consume. Ordinariness, generality, and seemingly never-ending repetition punctuate the poem because of its concept, even though the items touched and the order in which they appear are singular. The poem seems to reflect the repetitions of contemporary life. In line with his earlier comments on the lack of subjectivity, Goldsmith (2011: 93) writes in his book *Uncreative Writing* that "Nemerov is a cipher, a shell, a pure robotic consumer". Indeed, the poem does not focus on individual subjectivity or explore the inner world of a subject, even though the products listed are specific.

For Goldsmith, Nemerov's poem seems to operate on the surface level and therefore, it risks being merely ironic. Yet, Nemerov's poem has a speaker, an I who engages with the products encountered. The repetition of the word "my" and of the various products inscribe a subject whose mode of being is to consume potentially infinitely. Many of the brands listed are known as expensive, which gives further indication of the subjectivity encountered in this poem: the poem's speaker defines themself through expensive brands. These considerations can be taken further if we think of readers being invited to see humor in and to laugh with the poem. Readers are likely to feel a sense of recognition in the face of frequent, never-ending encounters with brands, an ordinary experience that is surely familiar to many. This can be seen as commensurate with the recognition and ambivalent unease that Hennefeld (2021: 111-112) identifies as central to laughter as affect. Thus, the reader is invited to "laugh with" the poem rather than merely to adopt an ironic distance towards contemporary consumption and those who consume (see Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 131-132). An ironic reading is perhaps possible, but the straightforward presentation of the text, the fact that it operates on a repetitive concept and gives no indication of tone, suggests an unfinished experience that is vulnerable to ambiguities and uncertainty of how to react (see Kaufmann 2017: 59-60; Siltanen 2020b: 110). Laughter, thus, can be seen as an unfinished response rather than something that is merely mirthful in response to explicit humor. Next, a discussion of further examples of conceptual poetry will clarify further what this means.

Laughing in the face of endless consumption

A similar example of a conceptual poem that targets consumption is Lawrence Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics". The text appropriates language that is familiar from descriptions of female clothing in catalogues (Giffin 2011: 233). This means that the text is sleek, supple, and rich in detail. The poem begins:

> Black stretch velvet of rayon, silk, and spandex (not shown) cropped to let the sequined scoopneck sleeveless shell of pure silk georgette peek out beneath the hem of black

stretch silk and cheetah-print, ruffle-detailed fitted spandex of rose and tan French taffeta, beautifully hued russet. (Giffin 2011: 233)

The two-page text consists of a single sentence that launches forward in excruciating attention to the details of the materials of clothes, their colors, shapes, and forms. While it can conceivably seem exhausting from the point of view of the reader, the unexpected attention to detail and the way the poem proceeds in a single sentence are incongruously humorous. For example, the parenthetical additions that instruct the reader to choose their preferred color through phrasings like "(specify *Chocolate* or *Black*)" (Giffin 2011: 234) are unexpected in a literary text, as they place readers in the role of a customer, inviting them to choose. The concept itself and the presentation of the text thus create humorous effects. Seeing language from clothing catalogues in a poetry context, where all its carefully considered detail is reduced to a mass of text, is incongruous, not least because poetic language has traditionally attempted to resist such polished advertising language. Like many conceptual poems, the text presents the sense that there is, at least potentially, an infinite amount of such text available somewhere out there, of which this poem is simply an example. There is even less of a sense of individual subjectivity here than in Nemerov's poem where, at least, the items listed are prefaced with the possessive determiner "my".

Giffin's text resembles Robert Fitterman's *Sprawl*, which consists of online reviews of stores in an American mall. Sprawl has been read as casting a critical eye on the "difficulty of making choices in the neoliberal world where money determines choices" and as inviting readers "to examine our own connections to and implications in such material" (Siltanen 2020b: 109). This, my own earlier reading, is an example of the kinds of serious readings that have often been done of conceptual poetry. Skirting around mentioning humor in readings of conceptual poetry is perhaps indicative of a wish to legitimate such writing because, after all, conceptual writing is easily viewed as "bullshit" which, as Kaufmann (2017: 39) remarks with reference to an essay by Doug Nufer (2011), is an assumption to be reckoned with for people writing about conceptual poetry. In addition, as mentioned, being complicit in capitalism is another accusation often leveled at conceptual writing.

The title of Giffin's poem points to Spinoza's theory of ethics, the point of which is "to demonstrate the way to human happiness in a deterministic world filled with obstacles to our well-being, obstacles to which we are naturally prone to react in not entirely beneficial ways" (Nadler 2006: x). Fully considering how Spinoza's ethics might be related to Giffin's poem is outside the scope of this essay, but a couple of remarks will usefully illuminate the poem's relation to humor. For Dworkin and Goldsmith (2011: 233), who comment on the title of the poem very briefly while introducing Giffin's poem in their *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, a relevant aspect about Spinoza's ethics is a focus on "the relationship between bodies and

intellection", along with a method of arriving at propositions. They describe the poem as "leav[ing] only a sheer concatenation of exchange value, surplus ornament, and striptease distraction" (idem: 233). This seems to suggest that the poem presents a description of interlinked materials which are shot through with their relationship to capitalism, which is evident in the catalogue-style language. Based on Nadler's (2006: x) description of Spinoza's ethics, Giffin's seemingly never-ending description of items of clothing can be described as noise that is an obstacle to our happiness. Yet, the "surplus ornament" (Dworkin/Goldsmith 2011: 233) of the materials in the text can conceivably elicit laughter. The framing of this language as a poem invites readers to interrogate their response rather than merely repeats the capitalism-infused noise.

Since I have chosen to frame my reading of Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" in terms of laughter as affect, considering Spinoza's notion of affect here is hardly a stretch. Spinoza discusses "wills" and "appetites" which the body and mind strive for to achieve their preservation (2017: Part III, PIX). For Spinoza, "[t]he human body can be affected in many ways, whereby its power of activity is increased or diminished" (2017: Part III, PI). Spinoza's discussion of affect includes joy, which in Nadler's words is a "passage to a greater power of acting caused by something outside the individual", which links with pleasure (2006: 203). Pleasantly described items of clothing and their constituents, I propose, can affect such change. Pain and pleasure can also coincide in an object (Spinoza 2017: Part III, PXVII), and arguably the items of clothing described in Giffin's poem can achieve this by evoking both delight and consideration of, for example, the futility of consumption. Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" presents an excessive and oversaturated variety of details, colors, and materials. Like Nemerov's poem, it might be read as presenting an ironic tone towards contemporary consumption, but it can also be read as a description in which one may find pleasure or joy, or painful associations, for example upon consideration of the vacuity of caring for such items. For Spinoza, these kinds of situations are ethical problems when human beings are not in control of their emotions (*idem*: Part IV, Preface) and are distracted from the "true knowledge of good and evil" (*idem*: Part IV, PXV). People are not "acting at all but reacting" and can "fail to act appropriately" (Nadler 2006: 220, 224).

The poem's language is familiar, and it can elicit a sense of delight if it evokes images of clothing that are perceived as pleasant or enticing. The effect created is thus ambivalent, and it is not clear how it should be received: through an ironic reading, through sincere attention to the delightful details, or perhaps something in between. Thus, we can say that the poem operates between the kinds of ambivalent positions described by Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 11) or "between naïveté and skepticism" (Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 143). The poem's tone is ambiguous like in Spinoza's ethical problem. As noted, metamodernism is not about fully denouncing irony, but it goes some way towards acknowledging its limits. The poem can, I propose, generate the kind of "vanishing interim between spontaneous incitement and explicit

recognition" that Hennefeld (2021: 111) identifies as central to laughter as affect. While discussing "hysterical laughter", Hennefeld (*idem*: 119) writes that it can be read as a response "to unsolvable social dilemmas endemic to colonialism, patriarchy, and industrial capitalist modernity". Ambivalent laughter that operates between ironic and more sincere positions risks being excessive (see Hennefeld 2021: 112) in the face of repetitions of ordinary materials.

The unexpected effect of seeing sleek language from clothing catalogues as a poem invites uneasy laughter as an unfinished affect. For Rustad and Hanno Schwind (2017: 145), metamodern sitcoms are populated by "flawed and complex, but ultimately lovable characters". Obviously, none of the poems I focus on here have characters as such. Instead, the presentation of lists of everyday commercial objects like in Nemerov's "First My Motorola" or delightful clothing catalogue language like in Giffin's text place the reader in the position of a flawed but complex persona who lives in the contemporary capitalism-infused world, thus inviting us to laugh with ourselves (see Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 131) instead of adopting a cynical distance.

My third and final example, Marcella Durand's sequence of two poems "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2", also relies on excessive repetition. "Pastoral" begins as follows: "leaf and leaf and leaf and leaf and leaf and branch and leaf" (2012a: 144). In addition to leaves, the items mentioned include a "postcard of greenish sunset", "large bee and bottle of shampoo", "cellphone", potato chips", "yogurt", and "parking lot", among others (2012a: 144). Again, we are faced with a repetitive text that seems to be drawing from an infinite source of items or of text. The list of items is funny with its ceaseless repetition and the incongruous appearances of yogurt and parking lots in the middle of leaves.

In her note that accompanies the publication of the Pastoral poems in the anthology *I'll Drown My Book*, Durand writes that "I wanted to flatten the pastoral, and extract its classicism. To work against any **representation** of nature, instead atomizing and replicating nature's fractals, punctuated by the detritus of the human" (2012b: 146 - original emphasis). Durand implies that traditional pastoral poetry ignores human effects on nature and serves merely as an unreliable representation, and she proceeds to note that "[s]imulacra of nature takes nature's place" (2012b: 146). Her poem invites engagement with its variety of details. "Pastoral" focuses on details instead of impressions and expressions of human emotion that are felt in the face of nature, as in much of pastoral poetry. The poem's repetitions can be read as implying that nature and the environment are viewed from an anthropocentric point of view where nature is more often than not viewed as infinitely available for human use, as capitalism is wont to treat it. Like with Nemerov's and Giffin's poems, readers are invited to laugh with the incongruities of the poem, its endless repetitions of ordinary things like leaves and branches which collide with potato chips and parking lots (Durand 2012a: 144). At the same time, laughter risks becoming excessive and

ambivalent, if the problems with treating nature as non-finite are acknowledged.

Durand's "Pastoral 2" similarly works with repetition. The poem begins "I repeat myself very well then I repeat myself and replant myself" (2012c: 146), in an obvious allusion to Walt Whitman's self-contradictions (Whitman [1892] 2023). The recasting of Whitman's work as ceaseless repetition is the first sign of humor in this poem. Repetition is further viewed as "replanting", an act of rooting oneself, perhaps in nature or in the world on a larger scale. Further on, the text collapses into a stream of what are mostly nouns, punctuated by prepositions and the occasional verb and adjective which seem to be connected more by theme than by the logic of a grammatical sentence. The words mentioned include aluminum, gold and oil, all materials that are sourced by humans from nature and exploited for capitalist gains. Like Nemerov's "First My Motorola", which could conceivably describe all the days of the week, or even of several years, and Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" that relies on a seemingly infinite amount of marketing copy, "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2" appear to draw from a vaster excess, in this case of materials in nature. However, the materials mentioned in "Pastoral 2", such as oil and aluminum, are not infinitely available, even though capitalism treats them as such. Durand's play with repetition could be taken to suggest that the individual all but gets lost amidst constant repetition, but at the same time, the poem points to the notion of "replanting", thus suggesting that focusing on repetition can also be beneficial for one's sense of subjectivity. I maintain that these poems invite laughter as affect: ambivalent, uneasy, something unfinished (see Hennefeld 2021: 111-112; 119-120). Indeed, Hennefeld (*idem*: 136) also discusses forms of comedy that are humorless or "killjoy" and that provoke "affectively volatile laughter". Rife with senseless repetition, the Pastoral poems can evoke "laughter, wherein nervous excess consumes the laughing subject and threatens to transform into something else entirely" (idem: 112).

As I have argued, laughter as an ambivalent affect can be a reaction to Nemerov's "First My Motorola", Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" and Durand's "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2", as they invite the reader to laugh with (see Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 132) poems that present seemingly infinite material from contemporary ordinary life. As they rely on appropriation and repetition, these conceptual poems perform a sense of infinity through their very mode of operation, mimicking forms of capitalist consumption but inviting an ambivalent response that can risk turning into excessive laughter that mirrors the excess represented by the seemingly infinite materials in the poems. These poems do not merely suggest that we ironically laugh at the ills of capitalist consumption but, in a metamodern fashion, operate somewhere between irony and something else (cf. Van den Akker/Vermeulen 2017: 11), culminating in ambivalent laughter. Thus, while conceptual poetry can easily be regarded as a postmodern phenomenon, the way these poems treat humor suggests an ambivalent metamodern sensibility. Hennefeld's argument about laughter as affect was used

to show that laughter can operate as an unfinished affect that has potential due to its unfinishedness (2021: 111). When Hennefeld writes about "killjoys" and "hysterical laughter", she points out that it is precisely ambivalence that allows for their political potential (2021: 133). In these poems, ambivalence which can be construed as metamodern allows the poems to invite reactions against capitalist infinity through humor.

Notes

* Elina Siltanen is University Lecturer of English at the University of Eastern Finland. Her research focuses on contemporary American poetry and on the role of affect in reading complex literary texts. She has published, for example, an article on the connections between conceptualism and confessionalism in poetry in the Journal of Modern Literature and on metamodernism and New Sincerity in English Studies. She has a double doctoral degree from the University of Turku and Luleå University of Technology.

1 Elsewhere I have suggested in a reading of Robert Fitterman's *Sprawl*, with reference to Kaufmann's (2017: 62-63) discussion of the difficulty of reacting to poetry like Shirinyan's, that rather than take a position of superiority or inferiority, readers are "invited to become aware of the affective reactions associated with the banal, yet difficult choices we encounter in everyday life", a reading where humor is not explicitly acknowledged but, instead, banality takes its place, and readers are addressed in an ambivalent way that invites them to awareness (Siltanen 2020b: 111).

2 While Hennefeld (2021: 125-126, 132) discusses her conception of laughter as affect partly in the context of late 19th and early 20th century cultural products and contexts, the general conception is applicable more widely, and she herself makes a comparison to more contemporary phenomena, like the rise of 20th century capitalist entertainment and Sara Ahmed's "feminist killjoy".

Works cited

Akker, Robin van den / Timotheus Vermeulen (2017), “Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism”, in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen. London, Rowman & Littlefield: 1-19.

Attardo, Salvatore (2020), *The Linguistics of Humor: An Introduction.* Oxford, Oxford UP.

Bentley, Nick (2018), “Trailing Postmodernism: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, Zadie Smith’s *NW*, and the Metamodern”, *English Studies* vol. 99, n. 7, Taylor & Francis: 723-743, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2018.1510611> (last access 8/5/2024)

Chen, Ken (2015), “Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show”, *Asian American Writers’ Workshop*, <http://aaww.org/authenticity-obsession/> (last access 8/5/2024).

Durand, Marcella (2012a), “Pastoral”, in *I’ll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, edited by Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place. Los Angeles, Les Figues Press: 144.

-- (2012b), “I wanted to flatten the pastoral…”, in *I’ll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, edited by Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place. Los Angeles, Les Figues Press: 146.

-- (2012c), “Pastoral 2”, in *I’ll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, edited by Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place. Los Angeles, Les Figues Press: 145.

Dworkin, Craig / Kenneth Goldsmith (2011), “Lawrence Giffin: Spinoza’s Ethics”, in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston, IL, Northwestern UP: 233.

Garmendia, Joana (2018), *Irony.* Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge UP.

Giffin, Lawrence (2011), “Spinoza’s Ethics”, in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston, IL, Northwestern UP: 233-235.

Goldsmith, Kenneth (2009), “Conceptualism, Identity Politics & Globalization: A Response”. *Harriet Blog*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2009/07/conceptualism-identity-politics-globalization-a-response> (last access 8/5/2024).

-- (2011), *Uncreative Writing.* New York, University of Columbia Press.

Hennefeld, Maggie (2021), “Affect Theory in the Throat of Laughter: Feminist Killjoys, Humorless Capitalists, and Contagious Hysterics”, *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 7, n. 2: 110-144. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2021.7.2.110> (last access 8/5/2024).

Hong, Cathy Park (2014), "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde", *Lana Turner* <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/delusions-whiteness-avant-garde> (last access 8/5/2024).

Kaufmann, David (2017), *Reading Uncreative Writing: Conceptualism, Expression and the Lyric.* Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.

Kersten, Dennis / Usha Wilbers (2018), "Introduction: Metamodernism". *English Studies*, vol. 99, n. 7, Taylor & Francis: 719-722. doi:10.1080/0013838X.2018.1510657.

King, Amy (2013), "Beauty and the Beastly Po-Biz", *The Rumpus*, <https://therumpus.net/2013/07/16/beauty-and-the-beastly-po-biz-part-2/> (last access 8/5/2024).

Konstantinou, Lee (2017), "Four Faces of Postirony", in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen. London, Rowman & Littlefield: 87-102.

Martin, Rod A. (2007), *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach.* San Diego, Elsevier.

Matthews, Edward (2023), "Limitations of Postmodern Irony: How David Foster Wallace Writes a Superior Critique of American Consumerism in Infinite Jest Compared with Bret Easton Ellis's 'American Psycho'", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 64, n. 5, Taylor & Francis: 808-818, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00111619.2022.2105134 (last access 8/5/2024).

Milne, Heather (2018), *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics.* Iowa City, University of Iowa Press.

Nadler, Steven (2006), *Spinoza's 'Ethics': An Introduction.* Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

Nemerov, Alexandra (2011), "First My Motorola", in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston, IL, Northwestern UP: 233-235.

Nufer, Doug (2011), "Introduction to Focus: Uncreative Writing: What Are You Calling Art?", *American Book Review*, vol. 32, n. 4, University of Nebraska Press: 4. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/447504> (last access 8/5/2024).

Rettberg, Eric (2014), "Comic Poetics of Imaginative Travel in *Your Country Is Great*", *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 51, n. 1, Penn State UP: 55-77. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/542426> (last access 8/5/2024).

Rustad, Gry C. / Kai Hanno Schwind (2017), "The Joke that Wasn't Funny Anymore: Reflections on the Metamodern Sitcom", in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen. London, Rowman & Littlefield: 131-145.

Siltanen, Elina (2020a), "New Sincerity and Commitment to Emotion in Dorothea Lasky's Poetry", *English Studies* 101, n. 8, Taylor & Francis: 979-997. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2020.1847830> (last access 8/5/2024).

-- (2020b), "'Lapse of Happily': Consuming Everyday Banality in American Experimental Poetry", in *Out of the Ordinary: Thinking with the Familiar in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Joel Kuortti, Kaisa Ilmonen, Janne Korkka, and Elina Valovirta. Leiden, Brill/Rodopi: 99-118.

-- (2020c), "Conceptual Confession: Asymmetrical Emotion in Writer-Reader Relations in Trisha Low's The Compleat Purge", *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 43, n. 4, University of Indiana Press: 108-126. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.43.4.07> (last access 8/5/2024).

Spinoza, Benedict de (2017), *The Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata).* Translated from the Latin by R. H. M. Elwes. Urbana, IL, Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm> (last access 8/5/2024).

Stephens, Paul (2013), "Vanguard Total Index: Conceptual Writing, Information Asymmetry, and the Risk Society", *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 54, n. 4, University of Wisconsin Press: 752-784. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43297934> (last access 8/5/2024).

Strunk, Trevor A. (2018), "The Dollar at the End of the Book: Vanessa Place, Inc., and Allegory in Conceptual Poetry", *Criticism*, vol. 60 n. 2, Wayne State UP: 195-219. <https://doi.org/10.13110/criticism.60.2.0195> (last access 8/5/2024).

Whitman, Walt (2023), "Song of Myself 51", *Poets.org*, <https://poets.org/poem/song-myself-51> (last access 8/5/2024) [1892].