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ABSTRACT

"New Sincerity", a renewed attention to sincerity, has been connected to metamodernism, a periodizing term that marks a tension between irony and sincerity and an extension of modernism and postmodernism. While both New Sincerity and metamodernism have been discussed in relation to fiction and the other arts, they have not been widely considered in poetry. The article considers the associations of the term New Sincerity in US poet Dorothea Lasky's work, placing her work in the context of metamodernism. With reference to metarepresentation, a cognitive science term that refers to conceptualising what others think, I argue that in Lasky's poems, New Sincerity functions as a persuasive tonal orientation that exhibits sincerity's vexed position as both seemingly naïve and necessary. Lasky's poems make use of the human mind's metarepresentational capacity as they fluctuate between sincerity and irony.

American poet Dorothea Lasky (b. 1978) has been associated with "New Sincerity", a renewed attention to sincerity in poetry and in other arts. Her writing is emotional, often naively sincere in tone, as is evident in her poem "Why Is a Mouse Sad?", which addresses emotional power relations, juggling between a commitment to a sincere emotional confession and a distanced, ironised tone. The poem begins as follows:

> Why are mice so sad, with their crying faces
>
> And why do they perform a shard of sadness in me
>
> To see them
>
> To create a mood of their scurrying
>
> I don't know I don't know
>
> I feel safe without them
>
> With them, it is all horrible

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Like anything could happen

. . . .[1]

The poem's speaker begins from the not-so-obvious assumption that mice are sad, proceeding to discuss the transference of sadness from the mice to her as a performance of emotion. The mice are a liability that could cause something unsafe or horrible to happen. The poem circulates around these negative emotions, the beginning of the poem registering a melancholic mood that is not, as the poem proceeds, resolved. Later, towards the end of the poem, the speaker wants to become one with the sad mice. As the mice pass their sadness on to the speaker, the poem presents the sense that to perform an emotion for others is to penetrate something in the other, to make the other vulnerable, in this case to sadness. This is consistent with the prevalent notion that emotions are "contagious", meaning that "it is the emotion itself that passes: I feel sad, because you feel sad".[2] The notion of contagion also connects this passage to empathy, which has been described as "sharing" of emotion.[3] The absurdity of the notion of crying mice, on the other hand, suggests that some kind of irony may be at play here. An unresolved tension between sincerity and irony, or commitment and distance, characterises Lasky's poetry.

As I mentioned, Lasky has been associated with "New Sincerity", a broad term referring to a phenomenon which in the field of American poetry has been traced back to online discussions in 2005, particularly a manifesto blog post by Joseph Massey, which is no longer available on the internet.[4] At the time, New Sincerity was discussed by Andy Mister, Anthony Robinson and Massey; yet, for poets, it was not a large or coherent movement.[5] Lasky has trickled in later, as critics have found New Sincerity a useful term to describe her work. Jennifer Ashton, who discussed New Sincerity poetry in a 2009 article, branded Lasky's and a few other poets' work not as New Sincerity per se but as "an extension of that development", involving "poems written in the mode of a certain childlike artlessness or undefendedness".[6] New Sincerity presents the self as unmediated: banal, naïve and emotional, exploring these stances as oppositions to ironic hyper-awareness and cynicism, while not fully diverging from them. Sincerity is viewed as a performance of deliberate naiveté that indicates *commitment* to emotion. New Sincerity has been described as a response to "postmodernism and self-referentiality" and as a counterpoint to irony.[7] Indeed, as I discuss below, New Sincerity moves beyond postmodernism as it has been linked to what is known as "metamodernism".[8]

Lasky's New Sincerity poetry, as I argue in this article, exhibits sincerity's vexed position as a naïve attitude banished in the throes of postmodernism and as an indispensable orientation to human communication. I consider the role of sincerity and emotion

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[1]Lasky, *Rome*, Kindle loc. 811–816 of 1406. Reprinted from ROME: Poems copyright (c) 2014 by Dorothea Lasky. Used with permission of the publisher, Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved.

[2]Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10. Ahmed gives some of the credit for this common understanding of emotion to Silvan S. Tomkins, but the view of emotion she constructs in her book does not align with this prevalent view.

[3]Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, 83.

[4]See Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 134; Ashton, "Sincerity and the Second Person," 95.

[5]Abramson, "On Literary Metamodernism"; Morris, "Time Between Time".

[6]Ashton, "Sincerity and the Second Person," 95.

[7]Jameson, AD, "I am drinking gin"; Morris, "Time Between Time"; Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 134.

[8]See van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 5.

particularly in *Rome* (2014) and *Thunderbird* (2012), Lasky's third and fourth full-length poetry collections. Lasky has been prolific: her first collection *AWE* was published in 2007, the latest *Milk* in 2018, and in addition, she has published chapbooks and essays. Sincerity, in her poems, is a persuasive tonal orientation that is utilised to examine emotional power relations.

I begin by discussing the notions of sincerity and irony and their effects on readers and situate the re-emerging focus on sincerity in literature within the larger framework of *metamodernism*. Metamodernism has often been linked to the demarcation or, in Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's words, "oscillation" between sincerity and irony.[9] The concept of metamodernism has various competing definitions, the breadth of which was explored in 2018 in an *English Studies* special issue, where Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers pointed out the vagueness of the concept.[10] The issue, like many other discussions of metamodernism, did not consider poetry in detail. In one of the articles in the special issue, Nick Lavery argues "that the scope of metamodernism can be widened by taking the oscillation it reads into some contemporary art as an expression of a more fundamental dynamic within human consciousness".[11] Lavery's discussion focuses on novels by Ali Smith and Will Self, and he argues that the "oscillation" he observes in their work "is partly a result of their working through of influences from philosophy of mind and cognitive science".[12] In a similar vein, I contend that the oscillation between sincerity and irony in Lasky's poems discloses a familiar discrepancy evident in contemporary consciousness. This can be illuminated by a consideration of the cognitive science term *metarepresentation* which, according to Lisa Zunshine, is central to readers' "attribution of mental states to literary characters".[13] Lasky's poems direct attention to the mental states of the author, speaker, and reader.

As Deirdre Wilson explains, "[a] metarepresentation is a representation of a representation: a higher-order representation with a lower-order representation embedded within it".[14] In order to begin to read Lasky's "Why Is a Mouse Sad?", we have to form the metarepresentation that "the speaker believes that mice are sad" or "the speaker wants us to believe that mice are sad", which involves being conscious of whose mental states are under consideration. Considering metarepresentation, as I show in later examples, illuminates the shifts of perspective and emotional power relations represented in Lasky's poems. This does not mean, however, that Lasky herself or her readers would need to be familiar with the term metarepresentation.

Like metamodernism, metarepresentation has rarely been discussed in relation to poetry. Zunshine, who has studied it extensively in fiction, notes of the related concept Theory of Mind that she has had reservations about considering it in poetry, because she tends to view poetry as more direct than prose or "inimical to propositionally expressed mental states".[15] Nevertheless, she finds that precisely the fact that "style brings in mental states" makes consideration of poetry in this context possible.[16] It

[9]Van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 11.
[10]Kersten and Wilbers, "Introduction: Metamodernism," 720–721.
[11]Lavery, "Consciousness and the Extended Mind," 764.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, section 1 of Part I.
[14]Wilson, "Metarepresentation in Linguistic Communication," 411.
[15]Zunshine, "Style Brings in Mental States," 354.
[16]Ibid.

seems to me that a reluctance to consider poetry in this context is based on a limited conception of what forms poetry can take. Lasky, for one, is certainly interested in "propositionally expressed mental states", as my later examples show. Style and tone, which in her poems are prominently connected to metarepresentation, are central to her poems' treatment of irony and sincerity as metamodernist tenets.

New sincerity and metamodernism

Interest in sincerity has fluctuated over the past few decades, and its presence or absence has been taken as one of the defining features of different periods and of poetic styles. Tracing some of these fluctuations will help untangle the implications of the term "New" Sincerity. In general, sincerity has been described as "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling", as Lionel Trilling wrote, adding that with reference to art, sincerity came to be viewed as less than desirable in the modern period.[17] Sincerity is about speaking truthful words and impressions, and it is seemingly unmediated, but can be viewed as performative. For Trilling, it differs from authenticity in that authenticity is about being true to the self and can be traced back to identity.[18] We might recall that for J. L. Austin, sincerity was a prime condition for a "performative utterance".[19] Performativity comes to us through Austin but also, of course, Judith Butler who described it as "reiterative and citational", an effect that produces what it names.[20] Performativity works by repetition. In a poem, sincerity is performed and repeated as an impression that defies our inability to conclude whether, for example, the sadness associated with mice is genuine.

In discussions of poetry, sincerity was long reviled. It was, for example, a central feature of the kind of poetry Ron Silliman, himself associated with the experimental American poetry community known as Language Writing, criticised in his famous opposition between "the school of quietude" and the avant-garde.[21] Language Writing originated in the 1970s and 1980s and continues to affect poetry today, including its conception of sincerity.[22] Even so, sincerity never quite took a leave of absence from poetry, but has persisted through postmodernism into the present times. Sincerity was central in the work of confessional poets, whom Christopher Grobe has described as "performers" who use a "blend of sincerity and irony".[23] For Grobe, this "blend" "is arguably the defining affect of American culture since modernism".[24] An interest in confessionalism has also been part and parcel of a variety of modes of recent American poetry, for example New Narrative poetry.[25]

Among recent poets, an interest in sincerity is a part of a larger tendency to bring back a focus on affect and the self, as for instance Felix Bernstein has discussed in his treatise of what he calls "post-conceptual poetry".[26] Bernstein's *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*

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[17]Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 2, 6.
[18]Ibid., 11.
[19]See Austin, *How to Do Things*, 9.
[20]Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 2.
[21]See Finch, *Body of Poetry*, 25; Silliman, "December 3, 2002"; Siltanen, *Experimentalism as Reciprocal Communication*, 42–49; 95, n. 8.
[22]See Ashton, "Sincerity and the Second Person," 96.
[23]Grobe, *Art of Confession*, 35.
[24]Ibid., 35–6.
[25]See Killian and Bellamy, "New Narrative Beginnings," xi-xii.
[26]Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 22; see also Ashton, "Sincerity and the Second Person," 94.

includes an essay on Lasky, whom he praises as someone who strikes "a golden mean between radical and formal, romantic, and classical".[27] Bernstein reads Lasky's poems as "sincere and ironic, confessional and ambiguous".[28] He describes Lasky as a mediator, as someone who works with sincerity and self-expression while she is also aware that American poetry is still frequently discussed in terms of divisions into opposing camps, like Silliman's division into the school of quietude and the avant-garde exemplifies. Lasky's writing, I argue, has a complicated relationship with sincerity, as it extends earlier poets' efforts in teasing out the intricacies of the concept.

As this discussion has already implied, sincerity is frequently contrasted with irony. Nicholas Manning has identified in contemporary American poetry "a new divide not between sincerity and manipulative lying, but between the emotional *engagement* of sincere discourse, and the affective *distancing* of ironic or disengaged speech".[29] Understood this way, sincerity is a mediated performance that requires commitment and engagement, and irony is its permanent other. Manning acknowledges the difficulty of separating "actual feeling" from "artificial affect" in reading poetry, suggesting that sincerity might cover "not only expression but also perception".[30] Like sincerity, irony, too, is about performance, or even has "a performative function".[31] Indeed, according to Lee Konstantinou, irony entails lack of commitment, a kind of disengagement from what is being discussed, which can also serve as a way to "affirm [one's] status" through lack of engagement.[32] In Lasky's "Why Is a Mouse Sad?", the notion of sad mice appears like a sincere utterance in its commitment to exploring sadness, but its exaggerated emotionality could also lead readers to suspect it to be ironic. Overt commitment to emotion is, thus, potentially ironic here. Irony, in Lasky's poems, is an elusive forbidden fruit, at once embraced and intensely condemned, for example when in *Black Life* (2010), a poem entitled "I Hate Irony" condemns irony already in its title and proceeds to address its relation to humour and elitism.[33] A tension between commitment and disengagement characterises Lasky's work.

Like irony for Konstantinou, naïve sincerity can also be seen as a matter of status: the speaker demotes herself.[34] When the opposition between irony and sincerity is understood as a matter of status, it is easy to imagine what might have been at stake in the devaluation of sincerity in much recent poetry: sincerity gets to be viewed as an uncritical, almost fetishistic engagement with a singular person's emotions and experiences. This focus on power relations, on the idea of sincerity as a demotion of one's own position, as opposed to elevating oneself through irony, is at the core of Lasky's approach to New Sincerity. I maintain that the expression of sincerity, to the extent that it is performative, is rarely completely uncritical and unacknowledged, even if for example the Language writers were, in their time, reluctant to acknowledge this as they were trying to sort out its problematic associations.[35]

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[27]Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 133.

[28]Bernstein, *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, 134.

[29]Manning, "Rhetoric of the Rearguard," 8.

[30]Ibid., 2. Manning's "actual feeling" is a reference to Trilling (*Sincerity and Authenticity*, 2). A similar claim about sincerity as a performance in poetry is made by Paul Hetherington, see Hetherington, "Poetic Self-Inventions," 25.

[31]de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 165.

[32]Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 38.

[33]See Lasky, *Black Life*, 56–7.

[34]See Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 30–1.

[35]I have discussed Language Writing and sincerity in Siltanen, *Experimentalism as Reciprocal Communication,* 42–5.

Outside poetry, many arguments have been made that sincerity has passed over irony as a contemporary ethos. For example in a 2009 anthology entitled *Rhetoric of Sincerity*, Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal describe the prevalence of sincerity and the condemnation of "postmodern irony" in contemporary times.[36] New Sincerity has received comparably less attention in poetry than in fiction, where it has been associated with writers like David Foster Wallace. His essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" is often viewed as a central text in discussions of a renewed attention to sincerity.[37] In discussions of fiction, sincerity's revival often also intertwines with discussions of post-postmodernism. Konstantinou, who discusses fiction in his 2016 monograph *Cool Characters*, identifies "a transition from irony to postirony", where he "offer[s] *postirony* as a contribution to the critical project of naming what comes after postmodernism".[38] In a later article on postirony, Konstantinou notes that New Sincerity is inadequate as it takes insufficient stock of irony and posits sincerity too easily as its counterpart.[39] I contend that the version of New Sincerity espoused in Lasky's poetry avoids such a facile contrast of sincerity and irony. Instead, it calls for recognising the power relations inherent in the intertwined tones of sincerity and irony.

In literary and cultural criticism at large, the fluctuation between irony and sincerity as a contemporary phenomenon is captured in the term *metamodernism* which, like Konstantinou's postirony, seeks to understand what happens beyond postmodernism. Metamodernism has been discussed as an umbrella term for New Sincerity, among other "developments" and "social registers".[40] A particularly pivotal definition of metamodernism is offered by Van den Akker and Vermeulen, who describe it as "a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today's stage of global capitalism."[41] According to Van den Akker and Vermeulen,

> [m]etamodernism oscillates between what we may call – but what of course cannot be reduced to – postmodern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predilections: between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction and so forth.[42]

The focus of the concept, then, is constantly in motion, without settling in one end or the other. In this understanding, metamodernism is a periodizing term, but it also points to particular tonal tensions, like those between the related term pairs of irony/enthusiasm and sarcasm/sincerity.

Metamodernism, Van den Akker and Vermeulen propose, focuses on cultivating "a sense of earnestness and hope" as opposed to the "cynical attitude towards reality" that dominated the 1990s.[43] They situate metamodernism between modernism and postmodernism instead of positing it as a direct descendant of these periods.[44] More recently,

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[36]Van Alphen and Bal, "Introduction," 2.
[37]Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, ix.
[38]Ibid., 36–7.
[39]Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony," 89.
[40]Van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 5.
[41]Ibid., 5.
[42]Ibid., 11.
[43]Ibid., 8, 11.
[44]Ibid., 11. Other critics, e.g. David James and Urmila Seshagiri have emphasized metamodernism's connection to modernism (James and Seshagiri, "Metamodernism," 87). Nick Bentley notes that metamodernism as James and Seshagiri understand it is not "significantly different from postmodernism" (Bentley, "Trailing Postmodernism," 729).

in a conference keynote delivered at the AHRC Metamodernism Network Conference in 2019, Van den Akker pointed out the need to keep reconsidering the concept of meta-modernism, instead of treating existing definitions as fixed.[45] Metamodernism is, indeed, a fluid term. Nick Bentley, for his part, argues that metamodernism as many critics have discussed it is not so much a fully-fledged "literary category" that could stake claim on a post-postmodernism that differs significantly from postmodernism.[46] Rather, according to Bentley, metamodernism can be associated with literary works that take a step away from the "fragmentation and deconstruction and the implied dis-association and factional disruptions" that have burdened postmodernism, although it does not fully denounce these aspects.[47] Several accounts of metamodernism agree in maintaining that postmodernism involved a disillusionment which easily manifested in irony, and that we are now, in a certain sense, past this, turning instead towards exploring earnestness amidst lingering irony.[48] Building on Bentley's argument, then, I take metamodernism as a concept that does not quite show a radical break with postmo-dernist uncertainty,[49] but flirts with such a move, prone to sincerity while compelled to live with an awareness of irony's pervasiveness.

In a poetry context, Seth Abramson has addressed metamodernism in a text called "T.C. Boyle: 'On So-Called Metamodernism'", a piece of experimental prose that appears in Abramson's 2015 poetry collection *Metamericana*.[50] In the voice of a creative writing student who is talking to a fictitious professor named "T.C. Boyle" about her poems, Abramson's text presents arguments that are similar to those made about meta-modernism elsewhere: opting for deliberate "badness", focussing not on "craft" but on causing emotional reactions in readers, presenting an "I" that is both personal and anon-ymous at the same time, fluctuating between sincerity and "dishonesty" and reflecting, through all this, the contemporary experience of living in the mediatised world of the internet and television.[51] Abramson discusses similar aspects in a review of Andy Mister's poetry collection *Liner Notes*, writing about metamodernism and New Sincer-ity.[52] In the review, Abramson affixes the label "metamodernism" to his own writing as well as to that of Mister and a few others.[53] In Abramson's version of metamodernism, "reflexivity in art can be achieved without irony or conventional artifice".[54] This differs somewhat from those accounts of metamodernism that describe it as "oscillating" between sincerity and irony.[55] As I have discussed, such an undecidedness also captures Lasky's version of New Sincerity.

New Sincerity has often been viewed as a subcategory of metamodernism, and its relation to modernism/postmodernism is a contentious issue, like that of metamodern-ism itself. In line with accounts that associate metamodernism with modernism, Robin

[45]Van den Akker, "Forget Metamodernism".
[46]Bentley, "Trailing Postmodernism," 740.
[47]Ibid.
[48]See e.g. Van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 8, 11; James and Seshagiri, "Metamodernism," 87; Vogelzang, "Likeness of Modernism," 748.
[49]Bentley, "Trailing Postmodernism," 740.
[50]Abramson, *Metamericana*, 58–71.
[51]Abramson, *Metamericana*, 60–61.
[52]Abramson, "On Literary Metamodernism".
[53]Ibid.
[54]Ibid.
[55]Van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 11.

Vogelzang suggests that "we might read the New Sincerity as a new take on modernism".[56] For Konstantinou, New Sincerity is a subcategory of "relational art" which, in turn, is a subcategory of the aforementioned metamodernist concept "postirony".[57] Relational art, he argues, "draws attention to the gap between reader and writer, showing the difficulty of deciding whether an utterance is ironic or sincere in the absence of tonal or affective cues, staging the author's failure to communicate".[58] Indeed, as Lasky's poems fluctuate between sincerity and irony, they emphasise the gap between reader and writer, along with the poem's speaker, through focussing on the power relations between them. Lasky's poems also explicitly address failures to communicate, as I discuss later.

The periodisation of the era beyond the postmodernist "waning of affect" has been described through several interlacing terms that have relevance for an understanding of sincerity.[59] Another related term, also presented under the auspices of Van den Akker and Vermeulen's essay collection on metamodernism,[60] is Raoul Eshelman's "performatism", where "you're practically forced … to *believe* in spite of yourself" instead of falling back on postmodernist incoherence and "undecidability".[61] In performatism, readers can be "made to identify with some person, act or situation in a way that is plausible only within the confines of the work as a whole" because the "coercive frame" of the work encourages this.[62] Postmodernism, for Eshelman, is thus followed by a period in which *performance* is central. Janien Linde's recent conference paper discussion of "relational performatism" as a metamodernist concept in South African poet Marlene van Niekerk's work points to a similar direction.[63] With reference to Eshelman, Linde describes a poem as an "experimental space", where seemingly unattainable moods like sincerity can be consciously performed through the relations (between author, reader, text and characters) staged by the poem.[64] A similar performatism is, I suggest, true of Lasky's work, but the way it stages relations is complex as it emphasises power relations, as I show later.

Eshelman's distinction between postmodernism and performatism highlights the difference between, for example, Language Writing, which was decidedly postmodernist as it did its utmost to avoid fixed meanings, and poetry like Lasky's, which begins with sincerity or more generally with committing to emotion, without fully banishing irony.[65] Lasky's poetry, as the examples in the next section reveal in more detail, treats commitment to emotion and sincerity as a performance of explicit naiveté. The approach the

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[56]Vogelzang, "Likeness of Modernism," 748.

[57]Konstantinou, "Four Faces of Postirony," 87, 89.

[58]Ibid., 98. Konstantinou's examples of relational art include AD Jameson's article on New Sincerity in poetry, which I also cited above, but mainly his discussion revolves around novels, where narratives and characters are central. A similar focus on novels is true of performatism as discussed by Eshelman (*Performatism*) and metamodernism as discussed by Van den Akker and Vermeulen ("Periodising the 2000s"), James and Seshagiri ("Metamodernism") and Kersten and Wilbers ("Introduction: Metamodernism"). My inquiry, however, considers poetry, which capitalizes on the relation between a speaker and a reader.

[59]See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16 on the "waning of affect".

[60]Eshelman, "Notes on Performatist Photography," 184–5

[61]Eshelman, *Performatism*, 2.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Linde, "Relational Performatism".

[64]Ibid.

[65]On Language Writing's avoidance of fixed meanings, performance and sincerity, see Siltanen, *Experimentalism as Reciprocal Communication*, 5–6; 42–49.

poetry takes towards mental states, then, is characterised by imbalances and uncertainties.

New sincerity and metarepresentation

Lasky's poems often deal with intense emotions like depression, sadness and anger felt in the face of, for instance, a break-up. Her sincerity involves feelings of rage and intense determination as well as violent thoughts towards the self and others, as when Lasky writes in the poem "You Are Beautiful" in *Thunderbird* that "I want to be an ugly, wretched, bleeding thing" instead of "beautiful with you".[66] This disposition to sincerity as deliberate naiveté places emotions under scrutiny, focussing attention on the speaker's, readers' and the author's mental states, as my discussion below will show. Cognitively and affectively, mental states are connected to the concept of "metarepresentation", which refers to our ability to represent, in our minds, others' mental states.[67] In reading literature, Zunshine argues, our metarepresentational ability ensures we understand which character's or speaker's mental state the text depicts.[68] Metarepresentation involves "decoupling", which happens, according to Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, for instance when we attribute a fictional narrative with the label "fictional".[69] Along with this information, we need "source tags", which tell us who the source of a fictional representation is.[70] Moreover, understanding tropes like irony necessitates considering, as Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. has shown, "second-order metarepresentations (a thought about an attributed thought)" and because of this, Gibbs notes, irony takes some more "processing effort" than understanding, for example, a metaphor.[71] Lasky's poetry might, then, require more mental effort than more straightforward texts as it negotiates between sincerity and irony and represents various mental states.

As we read Lasky's "I Feel Pity" from *Rome*, our metarepresentational ability helps us understand the representation of "pity", which is a complexly layered feeling that invites questions about sincerity and power relations:

> I feel pity for my sister who is dying somewhere
>
>> in a lonely house
>
> I feel pity for my dog who had to die without me
>
>> on a table after months of pain
>
> I feel pity for the stranger in the hospital bed who is never touched
>
>> but sleeps there nonetheless
>
> What love for me
>
> What love for them I feel

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[66]Lasky, *Thunderbird*, Kindle loc. 390–394 of 1039.
[67]Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, section 1 of Part II.
[68]Ibid.
[69]Cosmides and Tooby, "Consider the Source," 91.
[70]Ibid.
[71]Gibbs, "Metarepresentation in Staged Communicative Acts," 400, 408.

Absolute pity, tenderness

. . . .

But I don't feel pity for you

I don't pity you

You big hot thing

I don't feel pity for your arms

Which could hold for me a thousand hours

. . . .

I don't feel pity

You have this poem, this book

I don't feel pity

They will talk of you for a thousand years

You gorgeous spirit you

You crazy nothing

. . . .[72]

The poem begins with the speaker's expression of feelings of pity for the speaker's sister, her dog, a stranger, and others, even for inanimate objects later on in the poem. Pity, by itself, is about power relations; it entails that the one being pitied is in a lesser situation than the person who feels pity or, as Patrick Colm Hogan puts it, "[p]ity … is a form of empathy in which the inferiority condition holds".[73] Hogan continues that the degree of pity depends on the perceived qualities of the other.[74] In "I Feel Pity", the speaker's subjective pitiful attitude prevails over what is specific about the sister, the dog or "you". As readers, we are not invited to feel pity, or otherwise to empathise with the speaker's feeling. Rather, the poem draws attention to the power relations between the speaker, the others she discusses, and readers. Pity and love are aligned here as if they were not very far removed from each other, which further complicates the power relations.

Pity does not extend to "you", who is ambiguously both indefinite and specific, at first defined as someone who might be able to concretely "hold" the speaker, then undefined as a "crazy nothing", and later described as "A truly million dollar man / In greenish suit".[75] "You" is of course a deictic pronoun, and as an apostrophic gesture, "you" has a special place in the context of poetry, as it generates assumptions about animating those who are absent and addressing the reader. As readers, we obviously do not know the sister or the dog, but we might know "you". The line about how "You have this poem, this book" underscores the sense that the "you" can stand in for the reader

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[72]Lasky, *Rome*, Kindle loc. 895–898, 889–891 and 867–871 of 1406.
[73]Hogan, *What Literature Teaches Us*, 279.
[74]Ibid., 280.
[75]Lasky, *Rome*, Kindle loc. 883–895 of 1406.

who does not need the speaker's pity because as someone who is unidentified and unrecognised to the speaker the "you" can be anyone, capable of existing for "a thousand years".[76] An individual reader, of course, might disagree, having to acknowledge her own ephemerality. In the world of the poem, the emphasis is on the power that the speaker has to proclaim others as pitiful and to declare the tone of the poem. Once the speaker refers to the world outside the poem, she has to acknowledge her powerlessness which manifests in envy or admiration towards the "gorgeous spirit" of the "you".

The repeated introductory sentence "I feel" encourages readers to consider the sentiments "under advisement", as Zunshine would say, limiting its scope to the speaker's mind.[77] Indeed, Lasky often uses sentences that explicitly draw attention to the person whose emotion is being represented. Metarepresentation in literature, Zunshine argues, "could be used by … authors wishing to tease their readers by making them unsure of what is really going on in the story and which representations originating in the characters' minds they could trust".[78] Zunshine later frames this in terms of a distinction between "history" and "fiction" and in relation to the notion of "truth".[79] In the poem, Lasky as the author is a source of representations, and the speaker of the poem is another. Zunshine notes that the mental work involved in having to adjust "metarepresentational tagging" can take a toll on the mind and cause emotional reactions, even irritation.[80] Readers of "I Feel Pity" have to keep reconsidering their metarepresentational thinking as they consider sincerity and irony. Sincerity can be attributed to the speaker of the poem as she represents pity or admires the "you". We might also view Lasky as the writer as the source of irony towards the speaker of the poem. Another alternative would be to associate her more closely with the speaker in sincerity, and to attribute irony to the reader's mind as a constructed representation.

In reading "I Feel Pity", we cannot share the speaker's pitiful view, because we are given limited information. The sister and the dog are not fully-fledged characters on whom we, as readers, could have an opinion. We must take the speaker's word for the pity that they deserve. In another context, Zunshine discusses Edith Wharton's short story "Xingu", noting that "a narrator with a strong ironic attitude brings forth an implied reader, that is, a reader who appreciates the thrust of the narrator's irony because she shares in the narrator's view of its targets".[81] Instead of characters, critics generally discuss poetry in terms of "voices" or "speakers", but a similar statement could be made of the speaker of a poem. "I Feel Pity" is ambiguous as to whether we are really supposed to read this sincerely. The poem provides no narrative context to help us determine how the speaker's attitude towards the sister, the dog, and others is to be interpreted. We cannot conclude that the speaker should be assigned a "very strong source tag" as Zunshine states readers are wont to do with unreliable narrators in fictional texts who give us reason to assume that their remarks are to be taken with a dose of scepticism.[82] Instead, we are left with several choices: accepting or rejecting either sincerity or irony or drifting between various possibilities. The purpose of

[76]Lasky, *Rome*, Kindle loc. 867–871 of 1406.
[77]See Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, Section 1 of Part II.
[78]Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, Section 2 of Part II.
[79]Ibid., Section 5 of Part II.
[80]Ibid.
[81]Zunshine, "Theory of Mind," 94.
[82]Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, Section 11 of Part II.

representing pity towards fictional others, then, seems to be to compel readers to accept pity wholesale.[83]

Considering metarepresentation allows us to discuss the power relations evident in Lasky's poem and then direct our attention to the author herself whose motives we can question.[84] We can conclude that by emphasising the speaker as a source of sincere emotion the poem intends to trap us inside a "coercive frame", in Eshelman's terms, where we should accept the poem as a sincere lamentation of pity, envy and love towards fictional others.[85] The poem invites readers who are, if not quite willing to swallow sincere proclamations about pity, envy and love hook, line, and sinker, at least to entertain the possibility of wholesale belief, "oscillat[ing] between" different possibilities in a true metamodernist fashion.[86] The coercive frame cuts off emotional contagion, so that empathy and other forms of "sharing" emotion are not straightforward.[87] Instead, readers can experience a variety of emotions. They are directed to considering the process through which they form metarepresentations of the thoughts and emotions of the poem in their minds.

Whereas in "I Feel Pity" the speaker describes the "you" as a "crazy nothing", in another poem, "Ugly Feelings – after Sianne Ngai" from the earlier book *Thunderbird*, the "I" is "nothing" instead, described as

A dense infinity of nothing

That holds no power

And if I hold no power

Then what ugliness could I truly hold

To make you so mad at me

To make you so cruel

And to extend that cruelty elsewhere

. . . . [88]

"Nothingness" unites the *you* and *I* in Lasky's poems, as if they were mere vessels that are "nothing" without the emotions, like naïve affinity, cruelty and ugly feelings they can contain. *You* and *I* do not matter without their capacity for emotion, not necessarily emotion *for* each other but *because of* each other. Transference of emotions is an explicit topic here, as is address to an unspecified "you", who can be read as a reader or as a specific other. The speaker attempts to represent readers' mental states, as she describes the addressee as cruel and mad at the speaker. The speaker is ambiguous as to whether or

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[83]Elsewhere, I discuss the ways Trisha Low's book *The Compleat Purge* (2013) beckons readers to feel for the speaker of the text, manipulating them to accept a "confessional identification" along with e.g. pity and empathy for the speaker (Siltanen, "Conceptual Confession"). While I would not characterize Low's book as explicitly metamodernist, something similar and yet different is underway there as in Lasky's "I Feel Pity," where readers are compelled not so much to feel pity for the speaker of the poem, but to acknowledge the emotions that she feels.

[84]Cf. Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, Section 4 of Part II.

[85]Eshelman, *Performatism*, 2.

[86]See Van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 11.

[87]On "sharing" of emotion, see e.g. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, 83.

[88]Lasky, *Thunderbird*, Kindle loc. 440–443 of 1039.

not she has the power to "hold ugliness" and to make others cruel. Her statement is contingent on the conjunction "if" which opens a conditional thought.

The title "Ugly Feelings", of course, refers to Ngai's 2005 book where she discusses feelings like anxiety or paranoia.[89] "Ugly feelings" are "situations of passivity" where people, alone or as a part of larger communities, are deferred from action.[90] "Ugly feelings" thus relate to imbalances of power. Lasky's "Ugly Feelings" explicitly names a variety of feelings towards other people: cruelty, hate, fear, paranoia, worry, compulsion, repulsion, and so on. The speaker of Lasky's "Ugly Feelings", who proclaims to be "A dense infinity of nothing / That holds no power",[91] suggests that any ugliness in the text might not really originate in her mind; it is rather a more general "tone", a "perceived feeling", like Ngai writes about ugly feelings.[92] As readers, we need to represent this feeling in our minds, as the poem, through making use of our metarepresentational capacity, presents it to us. Moreover, Ngai proposes that ugly feelings are characterised by a sense of aversion on the part of the person having that feeling.[93] In this sense, they turn the negativity of the feeling back on to the subject by suggesting that we should not feel the way we feel.

Sara Ahmed argues that negative feelings like disgust are "performative" because the "speech act" of proclaiming something as disgusting "generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event".[94] Lasky's speaker, however, challenges her power to create a community of "ugly feelings" by calling attention to her "nothingness", or to her lack of a "mind" that we could then read. Instead of asking for empathy or validation for her sincerely expressed emotions like sadness, hate or fear, the poem turns emotions back on readers, asking them to be responsible for their own emotions. *You* and *I* do not have to *share* emotion, but they are still affected by it. Poems can, according to the view the poem tacitly endorses, contain and release emotion, but this relies on our ability of representing others' mental states in our minds, instead of any tangible power that the speaker might have over us.

Considering metarepresentation also brings with it a focus on *tone*. As Zunshine remarks in an article entitled "Style Brings in Mental States", stylistic aspects like figures of speech evoke mental states in texts.[95] Tone can be understood as a combination of style and the mental states that it evokes. In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai calls for critics discussing emotion to focus on tone, which she describes as "a literary or cultural artifact's … general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world", instead of merely revolving around "a reader's sympathetic identification with the feelings of characters".[96] According to Ngai, tone is "'objectified emotion,' or unfelt but perceived feeling".[97] As Lasky's poems deal with various emotions, both positive and negative affective experiences, tone is a central aspect of the poems' approach to emotional power relations.

[89]Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 1–2.
[90]Ibid., 3.
[91]Lasky, *Thunderbird*, Kindle loc. 433 of 1039.
[92]See Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 28.
[93]Ibid., 10.
[94]Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 94.
[95]Zunshine, "Style Brings in Mental States," 354.
[96]Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 28.
[97]Ibid.

Lasky's "Ugly Feelings" opens with the lines "Why are people so cruel? / I mean that as a very serious question".[98] The assertion of the second line functions as a performative speech act that attempts to underscore the sincerity of the question. The speaker who laments cruelty in others remains passive in relation to the people described as cruel, expressing a resigned dissatisfaction, a kind of ugly feeling in itself. Ngai writes that "[u]gly feelings can be described as conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions, or even the moral emotions associated with sentimental literature, do not".[99] An ironic reading where we would conclude that the speaker is not being serious in asking about cruelty is possible too. In these lines, the poem suggests that metarepresentational tagging is irrelevant, as we cannot really assign "a dense infinity of nothing" with a state of mind. When "ugly feelings", or negative emotions that can render their experiencers passive in Ngai's sense,[100] are spread out over a poem and their locus is dispersed, our metarepresentational ability is presented with a challenge that requires us to keep readjusting our metarepresentational tags.[101] Sincerity is an incremental, "coercive" tone in Lasky's poems, less a property of the poetic speaker than a performative device that reinforces the weight of emotions and invites belief in itself in the face of lingering irony, much as in Eshelman's notion of "coercive" "performatism".[102]

In yet other poems, Lasky challenges readers' power to assign states of mind or to decide on a tone, thus assuming authority with regard to the poem. "I Like Weird Ass Hippies" from *Thunderbird* is, again, concerned with sincerity and power relations:

I like weird ass hippies

And men with hairy backs

And small green animals

And organic milk

And chickens that hatch

Out of farms in Vermont

. . . .[103]

The content of the poem's opening proposition is the agreeability of weird hippies, and the sentence "I like" specifies the source, which is obvious enough. The speaker reveres small, ordinary things, engaging with the sincerely naïve and kitschy. The overall tone of naïve sincerity builds up as the poem progresses, replacing an innocent affinity for "small green animals" with a mix of strange desires, anger and agitation. The naïve sincerities of the poem turn more grotesque as the "I" declares that "I like the lamb's blood you throw on my face" and suggests that she might go "to Rome" and "[m]urder [her] daughter in front of the gods".[104] The tone is unmediated, and feelings are not held back. Kitschy

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[98]Lasky, *Thunderbird*, Kindle loc. 399 of 1039.
[99]Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 10.
[100]Ibid., 3.
[101]See Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, Part II of Section II.
[102]Eshelman, *Performatism*, 1–2.
[103]Lasky, *Thunderbird*, Kindle loc. 352 of 1039.
[104]Lasky, *Thunderbird*, Kindle loc. 358–359 and 369 of 1039.

emotionality turns into violent fantasies which, surely, must not be a truthful representation of anyone's feelings: they are only too preposterous for that. The exaggerated emotionality of the poem again suggests the close proximity of irony.

After the introduction of grotesque events like throwing blood and murder, the tone shifts from a valorisation of quirky people and animals to an over-the-top tirade where the "you", the addressee of the poem, is lambasted for assuming a superior position of knowing:

> When I die I will be a strange fucking hippie
>
> And so will you
>
> So will you
>
> So get your cut-up heart away from
>
> What you think you know
>
> You know, we are all going away from here
>
> At least have some human patience
>
> For what lies on the other side[105]

Knowing is the culprit in the poem, the final lines serving as an unsettling quip that can also be read as directed to readers, who might assume to "know" something, even though, according to the speaker, everything is ultimately ephemeral and unknown. The poem, again, draws attention to metarepresentation, questioning the metarepresentational ability of the "you". In its simplicity, the sentiment about unknowability is, again, deliberately naïve, which may raise questions about sincerity and irony.

In *Rome*, a poem titled "Porn" frames an imbalance of power and knowing in terms of surrendering and love:

> I watch porn
>
> Cause I'll never be in love
>
> Except with you dear reader
>
> Who thinks I surrender
>
> But who's to say this stanza is not porn
>
> Calculated and hurtful
>
> . . . .[106]

The speaker assigns a thought to the reader – a metarepresentational act in itself – and attempts to flip around the accusation of surrendering that the speaker assumes the reader attributes to her. The speaker suggests that the stanza of the poem itself might be "porn / Calculated and hurtful" which would make the reader vulnerable to surrendering through a carefully calculated act that might inflict emotional pain on her. In "Porn",

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[105]Lasky, *Thunderbird*, Kindle loc. 369 of 1039.
[106]Lasky, *Rome*, Kindle loc. 136 of 1406.

pornography is viewed not so much in pleasurable terms than as "horrific", as the first line of the poem asserts.[107] Power (im)balances are, again, prominent here. In "Porn", Lasky is after similar considerations as Canadian poet Margaret Christakos in a poem in *What Stirs* (2008), a conceptually inclined poetry collection that Heather Milne discusses as a work where "the reader's affective bond (real or perceived) to the lyric subject is constantly called into question", a questioning that, according to Milne, is directed at the contemporary neoliberal, "technocapitalist" world.[108] Milne discusses Christakos's poem "Compared to Poetry", where the object of comparison is pornography, as follows:

> Pornography and poetry may be viewed as starkly divergent modes of expression, yet consumers of each genre often come to the material with an expectation that they will gain something from it, whether that "something" comes in the form of arousal, knowledge, reflection, release, or some other experience. How, Christakos seems to ask, is the affective experience that readers seek from poetry similar to or different from the affective experience they seek from pornography?[109]

Milne continues that "both [Christakos's poems and pornography] offer the promise of attachment and connection but both also withhold, frustrate, and alienate".[110] In Lasky's poem, too, poetry and porn share certain characteristics in their penchant for attachment and connection and in their alienating effects, but the speaker frames porn, and along with it poetry, more specifically in terms of surrender and calculation. Poetry, the speaker seems to say, can fail to go beyond satisfying our desire to gain an affective experience. The resigned tone of the poem does not suggest an unfaltering faith in poetry's communicative possibilities. Instead, the poem's speaker takes pleasure in admitting defeat as she faces the impossibility of establishing an equitable connection, noting towards the end of the poem that "I've got you in my grasp".[111] Lasky's poetry operates with impasses and contrasts. Sincerity can fail to secure a connection, but this does not stop Lasky's speaker from embracing it as a counterpoint to irony.

Conclusion

In *Rome* and *Thunderbird*, Lasky engages with sincerity and irony as tonal tensions that compete with each other. Sincerity appears in a range of declarations of love and affection along with "ugly feelings" like pity, cruelty, envy and hate. As these feelings are dispersed through poems that call into question the emotional power relations between the speaker and readers, the feelings, just like the tension between sincerity and irony, are never resolved. Speakers of the poems in *Rome* and *Thunderbird* often question either their own ability to impart emotion on to readers, or readers' ability to represent the speakers' states of mind in their own minds. Poems like "I Feel Pity" and "I Like Weird Ass Hippies" invite readers to consider their metarepresentational thinking and their decisions about assigning tones like irony or sincerity to the lines and speaker positions of poems. Sincerity is a kind of "coercive frame", in Eshelman's terms, that attempts to persuade readers to make a choice between sincerity and irony.[112] Lasky's New Sincerity

[107]Lasky, *Rome*, Kindle loc. 122 of 1406.
[108]Milne, *Poetry Matters*, 54, 48.
[109]Milne, *Poetry Matters*, 58.
[110]Milne, *Poetry Matters*, 60.
[111]Lasky, *Rome*, Kindle loc. 140 of 1406.
[112]Eshelman, *Performatism*, 2.

is "performatist" and metamodernist in nature.[113] A consideration of metarepresentation helps us understand how this works. This does not mean that individual readers would have to be aware of the term metarepresentation in order to understand the poems. Metarepresentational inferences, after all, are everyday abilities that happen more or less automatically. Lasky's poetry thematizes the term in tangible ways.

In Lasky's poetry, New Sincerity is not a return to a time before a prelapsarian fall from sincerity to irony, but neither is it a postmodernist take on contemporary emotions that requires mere ironic jest and disdain. Manning, in his article on sincerity, writes: "In truth, poetic sincerity never ceases to form and perform a willfully utopian, ideational and impossible gesture: that of the escape from language, all the while demonstrating that such an escape is fundamentally unattainable".[114] Lasky's version of New Sincerity poetry explores this "willfully utopian, ideational and impossible gesture" through the power relations that her poetry sets forth between a speaker and readers and by challenging readers' metarepresentational capacity. In its interest in "escape from language", it is exemplary post-Language poetry, aware of the impossibility of escape but open to the potentiality nonetheless. It is also exemplary metamodernist poetry, in its insistence on holding both belief and disbelief in view simultaneously.

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[113]See Eshelman, *Performatism*, 1–12; van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Periodising the 2000s," 5.
[114]Manning, "Rhetoric of the Rearguard," 8.

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