The Selvage of Incoherence: Metamodernism in Padgett Powell’s The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?

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Introduction

The edge of incoherence is a strong position . . . Not incoherence outright, but the selvage as it were, affords a bi-directional movement between dissolution and precipitation, liquid and solid, that can absorb about any assault, any direction, gross or subtle, acid, base, land, sea, or air.

—Padgett Powell
You & Me: A Novel

Every sentence in Padgett Powell’s The Interrogative Mood: A Novel? is a question; 164 pages of interrogation. The title even questions itself, its own status as a novel. This questioning of itself, of its own validity along with the juxtaposition of serious questions to trivial ones etc. has an arguably Postmodern resonance, yet The Interrogative Mood also contains elements that resonate with a more Modernist ideology, namely in the area of subjectivity. The Interrogative Mood therefore is neither Postmodern nor Modern, yet it contains attributes of both. It could, then, be said to belong to what Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker have termed “Metamodern.” Vermeulen and van den Akker coined the term as an alternative to the redundant “Post-Postmodern,” but it is not only an exercise in nomenclature. Vermeulen and van den Akker utilize the term to house a concept, which they have made great attempts to define and explain and it is, in fact, an ongoing investigation1. At this point in time there is very little research concerning Metamodernist literature
and none at all suggesting that *The Interrogative Mood* is a Metamodern text.

The intention of this essay, therefore, is to examine how Padgett Powell’s treatment of literary devices in *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* situates the text in the realm of Metamodernism. This examination will be carried out in three chapters. The first will consider Powell’s treatment of subjectivity, the second, will examine the intertextual possibilities which *The Interrogative Mood* opens up, and, the third, will analyze motifs and themes in the text. Before delving into Powell’s text, however, a brief section will be devoted to summarizing the tenets of Metamodernism.

**A Note on Metamodernism**

We propose a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage. Thus, metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition that lies between, beyond and in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!

—Luke Turner

Although Post-Postmodernism remains a controversial subject, more and more writers, literary critics, and scholars, since the turn of the century, have come to agree that the reign of Postmodernism is over, that contemporary literature has entered a state beyond Postmodernism. Katrin Amian opens her text *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)* with the words “Postmodernism, it seems, is history” (1). In his article “Postmodernism is Dead” Edward Docx refers to an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum with a rather informative title: “Postmodernism— Style and
Subversion 1970-1990” (1), that is to say, a title that marks the year in which Postmodernism “died.” Examples such as these are many. In their article “Notes on Metamodernism” Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that even “if these commentators agree the postmodern condition has been abandoned, they appear less in accord as to what to make of the state it has been abandoned for” (1). The concept of Metamodernism, at this point, makes its entrance.

Metamodernism, simply put, is a reaction to Postmodernism, just as Postmodernism is, in turn, a reaction to Modernism. Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that “both metamodernism and the postmodern turn to pluralism, irony, and deconstruction in order to counter a modernist fanaticism. However, in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out” (10). Metamodernism, then, seeks to negotiate between Modernism and Postmodernism, to assume the deconstruction of Grand Narratives while not completely denying them, to assume the blending of high and low culture, but to leave pastiche behind. Metamodernism assumes the space that lies both beyond and (in)between Modernism and Postmodernism; it is not only a negotiated space, but a space that is entirely its own as well; it is “at once modern and postmodern and neither of them” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5). According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Metamodernism oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (4), and so on. This oscillation lies at the foundation of Metamodernism, and its effects can be observed in the literary devices employed by Powell in *The Interrogative Mood*. 
The Question of Subjectivity

Is there anything you’d like to ask me? Are you curious to know what I’ll do with the answers you’ve given me? Do you think I can make some kind of meaningful ‘profile’ of you? Could you or someone, do you think, make such a profile of me from the questions I have asked you?

—Padgett Powell

The Interrogative Mood

Metamodernism’s most marked influence in literature is, arguably, on the subject. In The Interrogative Mood there are no characters, no protagonists, no family crises, no love affairs, no wars, no plot to follow the protagonist through or to find oneself absorbed in, no conflict or resolution, no setting, and no time or place to speak of. There is, however, subjectivity in The Interrogative Mood. The lack of characters, plot, and setting is not what distinguishes The Interrogative Mood as a Metamodern text – both Modernism and Postmodernism contain texts that lack one or more of these elements – it is, rather, Powell’s treatment of the subject that does.

In Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism, Raoul Eshelman outlines Metamodernist subjectivity in terms of what he refers to as “Performatism.” Eshelman argues that his particular concept of Performatism is expressed in literature by “narrative closure in double frames” (55), which “ensure obligatory reader identification with the subjects trapped in those frames – devices that are at loggerheads with prevailing postmodern notions of how texts work” (55). This
double-framing of the subjects which Eshelman describes occurs both within and without *The Interrogative Mood*. Eshelman claims that a “successful performance depends on the unforced will of an authorially framed subject and not on the author himself” (“Performatism” 11). In *The Interrogative Mood*, however the author frames himself as the subject within the text, yet the author is also outside the text. In keeping with Performatism, within the parameters of *The Interrogative Mood*, the reader is forced to identify with the novel’s narrative voice, which, in this case, is the subject as well, and to associate that voice, that character with the ideas and thoughts which are expressed by it. However, the reader is lead to believe that the views, longings, experiences, observations etc. are Powell’s own. This is achieved by the first person point of view and intimacy that is conveyed to the reader through narrative elements in *The Interrogative Mood*. In his blog post, “Padgett Powell: *The Interrogative Mood, A Novel?”* Shigekuni discusses the effect of this intimacy on the reader:

As you read on, engrossed by the entertaining surface, you enter into a kind of intimacy with the narrator, listening for his voice, for personal issues even in perfectly innocent questions. This is a work that the book expects you to do. It relies firmly upon our instincts to look for and draw connections even between seemingly unconnected events and statements. (1)

There are several narrative elements that help foster this intimacy. For example, the continual use of “we” in the text: “How did we go so wrong?” (Powell 18), “Can we say with certainty that we are free?” (Powell 142), and “Did we have things to do?” (Powell 12). Moreover, there is a distinct feeling of being confided in, for
example, “If I told you that I am made depressed by a completely still tree but that I am relatively cheered by a tree with a little wind in it whose leaves flutter or whose branches sway, even a little, would you think me strange?” (Powell 33). Furthermore, there is an unavoidable notion of conspiracy between the reader and the narrator, for example, “Are you with me here?” (Powell 14), and “If we heard the ice-cream man right now dinging down the street and we scrambled for some change, maybe even from within the sofa, and went out there breathlessly and caught him, what would you order?” (Powell 93). These elements are prevalent throughout *The Interrogative Mood* and they provide the raw materials for the construction of this first framed subject, the author/subject.

In “Strategies of the Metamodern,” Metamodernist subjectivity is described as “the enactment of a truth that cannot be true, the establishment of a holistic, coherent identity that cannot exist” (2). *The Interrogative Mood’s* subjects accomplish this contradictory coherence through an agreement of sorts, which is made between the reader and the author/subject; an agreement in which all parties are complicit in the performance of “willful self-deceit” (Strategies 2). The narrator plays with this consciousness of paradox and contradiction that is his or her own identity: “May I tell you that the author of that sentence . . . is not me and I don’t know who the author is?” (Powell 127). This contradiction, this “posing” on the part of the author/subject fits precisely with Eshelman’s discussion of Metamodernist subjectivity:

As in many postmodernist narratives, it first causes us to identify with a central character and then abruptly undercuts the terms of that identification. One thing about it, however, is odd. Rather than leaving us in an attitude of skeptical undecidability regarding the hero, as postmodernist texts tend to do,
it encourages us to revise our skepticism and identify with his story even though we know it to be false. (69)

The reader accepts that *The Interrogative Mood*’s narrator is posing as Padgett Powell and the reader continues to identify with the author/subject in spite of the contradiction, in spite of the false identity that is presented.

In her article on Metamodernist subjectivity, “Notes on the State of the Subject,” Simone Sterner echoes Eshelman’s argument when she suggests that we, the (Metamodern) audience, are presented with “characters who masquerade as coherent subjects” (2-3). Sterner further argues that these subjects “are innovative figures who step into the scene with a quirkiness that, perhaps precisely because of their idiosyncratic authenticity, renders possible a new relation between literary hero and recipient” (2-3). This new relationship between subject and reader is apparent in *The Interrogative Mood*, not only because of the “idiosyncratic authenticity” (Sterner 2-3), of the author/subject, but also due to the nature of the text’s subjectivity. The second “authorially framed subject” (Eshelman 11), is the reader and like the author/subject, the reader/subject is at once subject, author, and recipient. The reader is presented with and bound to the ideas, thoughts etc. of the author/subject within the text, framed by said author/subject’s questions, as well as their own responses. The dialogue between the subject within *The Interrogative Mood* and the one without creates a multi-dimensional world where authorial intention, the reader, and the text are all, simultaneously, centers and structures, in the Derridean sense. The author/subject’s questions and the reader/subject’s answers to the questions posed create a multi-dimensional space, where Metamodernism’s oscillating energy thrives.
Some questions in the *The Interrogative Mood* are of a more (seemingly) frivolous nature such as, “Do you favor the toad over the frog?” (Powell 56), or “Are you bothered by socks not matching up in subtler respects than color?” (Powell 4), while others inspire deeper contemplation, such as, “Are your emotions pure?” (Powell 1), or “Are you prepared for the end?” (Powell 27). Furthermore, the reader/subject is allowed the space to alter their answers to reposed questions, for example, “What is the best meal you have ever had (and forgive me if I have asked this before; if I have, do not feel compelled to give me the same answer)?” (Powell 75), which allows the reader/subject to reinvent themselves, or to simply answer based on their current mood. Therefore, *The Interrogative Mood* does create a “profile” of sorts of the reader/subject as well as the author/subject, but this profile is a fluid rather than static one. The questions posed and their subsequent answers, collectively paint a portrait of both the reader and the author, but these portraits contain inconsistent images, “coherent identit[ies] that cannot exist” (Strategies 2). Therefore, authorial intention in *The Interrogative Mood* is not dead, in the Barthian sense where all literary interpretation lies within the faculties of the reader, but the author and authorial intention become a layer within the multi-dimensional world that is created by the text. The author’s portrait, therefore is inextricable from and imbedded in the reader’s. In “The Death of the Author” Barthes argues the contrary:

Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance of writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance of saying *I*: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’ and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together,’ suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it. (Barthes 145)
In keeping with Metamodernism’s oscillating energy, however, Barthes’ notion that the author and the “I” (145), of the text must die because there is no “voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (143), is countered, rather than cancelled out, by maintaining this belief and the belief in the author/subject, which is framed in *The Interrogative Mood*. Perhaps then, the narration device of questioning the reader in *The Interrogative Mood* goes a step beyond the death of the author into a reincarnation of sorts where the author’s intention, voice, individuality etc. matter as much as the reader’s, and as much as the text.

The Metamodernist subject, in general, is different from both that of Modernist and Postmodernist subjects, in its demand of faith in a coherent identity, in truth and the simultaneous deconstruction of that same identity, of that same truth. In *The Interrogative Mood*, specifically, Metamodernist subjectivity opens the barriers between author, text, and reader which, in turn, creates a boundless relationship between the three elements. This open, boundless relationship leads to the subject of intertextuality, the possibilities of which *The Interrogative Mood* creates.

**An Intertextual Mood**

Does it change things a bit for you to perceive that these questions want you bad? And that they are perhaps independent of me, to some degree? That they are somewhat akin to, say, zombies of the interrogative mood?

—Padgett Powell

*The Interrogative Mood*
The Interrogative Mood creates unique intertextual possibilities; it is designed to elicit responses, generate questions, and, in doing so, it creates endless layers of both, on the part of the author/subject as well as the reader/subject. Georgetown University’s “Intertextuality” describes intertextuality in general terms:

On its most basic level, intertextuality is the concept of texts' borrowing of each others' words and concepts. This could mean as much as an entire ideological concept and as little as a word or phrase. As authors borrow proactively from previous texts, their work gains layers of meaning. Also, another feature of intertextuality reveals itself when a text is read in light of another text, in which case all of the assumptions and implications surrounding the other text shed light on and shape the way a text is interpreted. (1)

The intertextuality associated with The Interrogative Mood is decidedly devoid of pastiche and conscious references to or plays on other texts; instead, it seeks, in an arguably Metamodern fashion, to counter and to embrace, “unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 4), in its intertextuality. The questions posed in the text can be perceived as both fragmented and fragmenting, in their lack of cohesion and in the multiplicity of responses, respectively. However, at the moment The Interrogative Mood is written, read, and responded to it becomes an intertext, and the author, the reader, and the text are tantamount to one another, moving together in an endless oscillating cycle of death and rebirth. Furthermore, texts that use The Interrogative Mood in an intertextual sense do not necessarily borrow from it, but rather respond to it.
In Susan Stanford Friedman’s article, “Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author” she poses the following questions: “Does the ‘birth’ of intertextuality as a critical term insist upon the ‘death’ of influence as its conceptual precursor? Is the ‘death’ of the author as writer the precondition for the ‘birth’ of the critic as reader?” (146). Friedman argues that since Kristeva’s coinage of the term intertextuality, and since Barthes “proclaimed the ‘death of the author’ in 1968, these two questions have been entwined, indeed knotted together” (146). The Metamodern intertextuality in *The Interrogative Mood* seeks to answer these questions or to, at least, loosen the knots that bind these questions together, allowing space for oscillation.

The act of questioning the reader in *The Interrogative Mood* is the text’s most fundamental intertextual element. Each reader creates their own text, their own catalogue of responses to *The Interrogative Mood*’s questions. In doing so, the reader contradicts Barthes’ theory concerning the role of the reader. Not only does he declare the author’s death, but Barthes also declares the reader a blank slate:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal; the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which written text is constituted. (148)

In keeping with Barthes theory, no individual holds total authority over *The Interrogative Mood*. However, each reader is also an author and each reader applies
their own meaning to the questions posed, each question is interpreted and, thus, answered based on the individual’s associations with the questions’ contents. For example, the interpretation of the word “bonds” in the following sentence, “Do you comprehend with complete certainty how bonds work?” (Powell 18), could be vastly different: an emotional bond, a chemical bond, or a bond in the financial sense, depending on the background and knowledge of the reader (and the author). However, the author/subject’s intent to question the reader still remains. Therefore, authorial intention constantly oscillates between death and (re)birth. Similarly, the reader’s responses to the author’s questions, are just that: responses; responses which are guided, not only by the reader, but by the author’s questions as well.

For example, in The Interrogative Mood Powell includes the reader in a step beyond questioning, by inviting the reader, not only to answer the questions, but to formulate them, to author them. For example, “I see ‘red feathers’ and ‘mud-caked face’ and possibly ‘red feathers on a mud-caked face’ but I cannot formulate the question- can you help me with this one?” (13), “I have a question for you involving ‘the velvet raiment of kings’- can you tell me what the question is?” (14) and “Have I forgotten the question that goes here? Was it ‘Is it raining?’” (Powell 9). Each reader is allowed the space to interpret the words and formulate the questions, but at the author’s request and the reader is not asked to formulate questions without the author’s specific phrases and ideas. In this sense, The Interrogative Mood equates a sort of call and response brand of intertextuality between the subjects and between the texts.

This idea is reflected in Catherine Baird’s novel, The Responsive Mood: A- Novel. In The Responsive Mood Baird answers each and every question posed in the The Interrogative Mood without the repetition of Powell’s questions, for example,
“Yes and no; in that order” (49), “Grass, naturally” (57), and “Purse, inhaler, bank card, lipstick, notebook, pen, all rolled up in two pairs of pajamas” (963). *The Responsive Mood*, when read as an isolated text, is a series of statements, observations, and, occasionally, questions, all of which reflect characteristics belonging to the Postmodernist branch of Metamodernism, that is to say, fragmentation, and ambiguity. However, the reading of the texts together does more than simply “shape the way the text is interpreted” (Intertextuality 1); it alters it completely; it unifies it. Friedman argues that, in both Barthes and Kristeva’s view, “Intertextuality is an ‘anonymous’ and ‘impersonal’ process of blending, clashing, and intersecting. Texts ‘blend and clash,’ not people. Supplanting the ‘he’ or ‘she’ of a preceding author, the ‘it’ of a text engages in intertextual play” (149). Similarly, Umberto Eco argues that “It is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intentions of their authors” (qtd. in Habere 57). The premise of this intertextuality relies on the death of the author, but if the author is reincarnated into the multi-dimensional folds of the text, as is the case in *The Interrogative Mood*, intertextuality, by Kristeva and Barthes’ definition is countered by Metamodernism. The role of intertextuality in *The Interrogative Mood*, therefore, experiences a paradigmatic shift, where the reader/ and author/subjects as well as the texts interact as opposed to, simply, the “it” of the texts (Friedman 149).

*The Responsive Mood* when read palimpsestically with *The Interrogative Mood* becomes a dialogue between the two texts, between the two author/subjects. There is a constant movement between ambiguity and clarity, between fragmentation and wholeness; the texts and the author/subjects “blend and clash” (Friedman 149). *The Responsive Mood*’s author/subject’s previously cited responses, when coupled
with *The Interrogative Mood*’s questions, are infused with entirely different meanings, for example, the statement, “Yes and no; in that order” (Baird 49), when viewed as a response to the question, “Did you love your mother and your father, and do Psalms do it for you?” (Powell 1), shifts from vague and ambiguous to highly specific. Similarly, “Grass, naturally” (Baird 57), is brought into sharper focus when framed by the following question: “If tennis courts could be of but one surface, which surface should that be?” (Powell 2), and “Purse, inhaler, bank card, lipstick, notebook, pen, all rolled up in two pairs of pajamas” (Baird 963), becomes a practical list rather than an abstract one when considered alongside the question: “If you lived in a little bunk on a big boat or barge and anything you had onboard had to be in the aggregate about the size of a toaster, what would you have onboard?” (Powell 103).

This unity between the two texts dissolves as soon as the texts are once again separated or as soon as the reader ceases to respond, which Vermeulen and van den Akker describe as a typical metamodern oscillation, “an unsuccessful negotiation, between two opposite poles (7). Furthermore, this intertextual unity is both constantly called into question by the reader’s own questioning, by their need to question the text and the author/subject, as Baird does in *The Responsive Mood*: “Fifty bags of what?” (123), “Does this reply have to be updated if I do (I don’t right now)?” (57), and “No, did you make that up?” (54), while, simultaneously, being constantly (re) confirmed by that same questioning.

In addition to *The Responsive Mood* there are also a number of blogs that seek to respond to *The Interrogative Mood* by answering one or more of the text’s questions. Rather than idolizing or analyzing characters or themes (or the author himself) in *The Interrogative Mood* these blogs respond to the questions posed, which creates more and more layers of intertextuality. The author of *The Interrogative*
Mood: A Blog? states that the purpose of the blog is to “broaden my horizons, sharpen my mind and reach out in some small way to the big wide world out there” (1). This conscious reaching out is what each of these blogs do and, in fact, what The Interrogative Mood does. These blog posts, taking their cue from The Interrogative Mood, create a domino effect: followers of the blogs answer and repost the questions on their own blogs and so on and so forth. For example, in The Interrogative Mood: A Blog? the question, “Could Mendeleyev place you correctly in a square on a chart of periodic identities, or would you resonate all over the board?” (1), is posed and subsequently responded to by the blog’s author. In this response the blogger includes a link to an online quiz entitled, “What Element Are You?” In addition to answering the posted question from Powell’s text, the blog’s followers are also lead to the quiz, which generates a new discussion, new layers in the multidimensional intertextuality of The Interrogative Mood.

On the blog, The Dizzying Highs & Many Lows of a Wannabe Writer the following question is singled out from The Interrogative Mood: “Would you like to have a modern house on a golf course –kitchen island, breakfast, counter– and live a golf lifestyle with golfing friends of a like mind? Would your terrors pursue you into such a house and life?” (1). The blogger, in turn, responds, in detail, to the questions posed:

So there was that. Personally, I would loathe the bland kind of lifestyle that Powell is describing here. But this kind of did make me wonder. After all, every single person on this planet is afraid, at least of something. Maybe that’s why so many people retreat into these picture-perfect ‘golf” lifestyles. They
can hide away from their deepest fears, and pretend that their lives are simply postcards to their uncertain pasts. (*Dizzying* 1)

However, not only does the blog post answer the question posed, it also generates new questions: “Does it work? Is their [sic] any escaping ‘terrors’?” (*Dizzying* 1). Similarly, by answering *The Interrogative Mood’s* opening question: “Are your emotions pure?” (1), more questions are created: “does it even matter whether the emotion is pure or not? What about a powerful emotion such as love? Can that be called pure? . . . surely we can’t help but infect even an emotion like love with some form of rationality?” (“Interrogative” 1). Furthermore, the author of the blog post, “Answering *The Interrogative Mood* by Padget Powell” poses at least a half a dozen new questions while answering questions from the first three pages of *The Interrogative Mood*. These questions generate new answers, more questions, more intertextual layers.

In Claire Dudman’s post “*The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* by Padgett Powell” on her blog, *Keeper of the Snails*, she responds to *The Interrogative Mood* in the format of interrogation:

Did you mean to infect my mind? I was just wondering: did you mean for me to become so overwhelmingly addicted to what comes next that I can't put it down? What will happen if I do? If I don't? Shall I tell you? Will you thank Profile books or shall I? And will you try to keep the sarcastic tone from your voice, because I really am grateful? Or should I add 'kinda'? Do you think this book of yours could be cuter if it tried? Shall I publish this before I reach the
end? What do you mean by maybe? Would you mind not turning away? Can you please just answer me? (1)

It could be argued that Dudman’s questions are aimed, exclusively, at Powell himself. However, when considered in the context of Metamodernism, where there is constant oscillation between the death and rebirth of the author, the questions are aimed towards both the reader of Dudman’s blog and the *The Interrogative Mood’s* author/subject. Again, more layers of intertextual possibles are created.

The intertextual paradigm that is created by Metamodernism, by *The Interrogative Mood* requires an acceptance of both the death of the author as well as the validity of authorial intention, it requires both the acceptance of a linear intertextuality, where texts rely on other texts for interpretation, and a multidimensional one, where meanings are derived from a multitude of spaces, including both the author and the readers’ historical, biographical, and psychological backgrounds. This paradigmatic shift requires the inclusion of both Modernist and Postmodernist ideologies; an inclusion that is also apparent in the themes, motifs, symbolism, and imagery within *The Interrogative Mood*.

**Meta-Motifs**

Is there a connection of any sort between life after death and the leavening of bread?

—Padgett Powell

*The Interrogative Mood*
The motifs, themes, symbolism, and imagery which are expressed in *The Interrogative Mood* are reflective of Metamodernism’s oscillating energy, its movement between differing states, modes, and concepts. This oscillation can be found in the structure of *The Interrogative Mood*, most notably in the juxtaposition of questions, as well as in the text’s contents, in the symbolism, ideas, and imagery. *The Interrogative Mood*’s themes and motifs claim a broad territory, ranging from, for example, the meaning of life to the various observations/situations concerning birds and feathers. However, it is neither the abundance, nor the diversity of thematic material that distinguishes *The Interrogative Mood* as Metamodern; it is, instead, the way in which these themes are treated in the text that does.

The most fundamental function of *The Interrogative Mood*’s themes and motifs lies in Powell’s treatment of conceptual dichotomies. The destabilization of such dichotomies is the premise of Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction. There is an interconnectedness between Deconstruction and Postmodernism, and, in drawing from the latter, Metamodernism also draws from the tenets of former. In “Deconstruction,” Benjamin Graves describes Deconstruction’s approach to dichotomous concepts: “Derrida examines a hierarchical binary opposition (in this example, speech/writing) in which one term is privileged over the other” (1), Derrida, then “reverses the binary opposition by re-privileging writing, but with the important caveat that this inversion is itself unstable and susceptible to continual displacement” (1). The idea of “continual displacement” (Graves 1), is at work in the Deconstruction of both Metamodernism and Postmodernism. In the Metamodern context, however, this movement is not viewed as unstable, insofar as oscillation lies at Metamodernism’s foundation. Furthermore, the difference between the respective Deconstructive forces of Metamodernism and Postmodernism lies in what they
achieve, respectively. A Metamodernist work “redirects the modern piece by drawing attention to what it cannot present in its language, what it cannot signify in its own terms” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 10). Alternatively, a Postmodernist work “deconstructs it by pointing exactly to what it presents, by exposing precisely what it signifies” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 10). Therefore, the Deconstruction of conceptual dichotomies in Metamodernist terms would be more aptly described through the additional terms of reconstruction and rerouting (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2). *The Interrogative Mood* achieves this reconstruction/rerouting not only by rendering obsolete the differences and oppositions between forces through Deconstruction, but also by redirecting the attention of said Deconstruction. However, Vermeulen and van den Akker argue that Metamodernism “should not merely be understood as re-appropriation” (12), but that it should be interpreted as the re-signification of “‘the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite’. Indeed, it should be interpreted as Novalis, as the opening up of new lands in situ of the old one” (12). Hence, the utilization of Deconstruction in tandem with reconstruction/rerouting.

In structural terms, Metamodernism’s reconstruction/rerouting is seen in the juxtaposition of questions. *The Interrogative Mood*'s juxtaposition reflects Metamodernism’s oscillating, “both-neither” tension as opposed to Postmodernism’s “neither-nor” tension (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker 9-10). The effect of this structural juxtaposition acts as a theme, or meta-motif, within itself and, as themes tend to do, it acts, to some degree, on a subconscious level until the reader is irked or haunted by the concept behind the theme. Individually these juxtapositional instances are small, but collectively they create a powerful idea or message and the message in
The Interrogative Mood is a distinctly Metamodern one. The creation of both-neither
tension is achieved through the blending, Deconstruction, and subsequent
reconstruction/rerouting of opposing or differing modes. For example, questions
containing thought provoking and/or bizarre ideas are juxtaposed with questions
containing elements that are comparatively frivolous and commonplace: “What
circumstances would you be required before you would attempt to garrote someone
with a piano wire? Have you ever eaten a candy flower of the sort used to decorate
commercial cakes?” (Powell 84), “If you contracted a disease that ate away your
eyelids, would you shoot yourself? Could you live on a boat?” (Powell 33), and “Do
you realize that people move on steadily, even arguably bravely, unto the end, stunned
and more stunned, and numbed and more numbed, by what has happened to them and
not happened to them? Have you ever heard the saying, Life is a sandwich of activity
between two periods of bed-wetting?” (Powell 28). By positioning differing or
opposing concepts side-by-side Powell Deconstructs the structure of the serious/
frivolous dichotomy, which, in turn reconstructs/reroutes the movement of the
concepts. In other words, concepts of the familiar, the commonplace oscillate together
with those of the unfamiliar, the bizarre, if not in unity then, at least, in some form of
equality. The message created by Metamodernism’s both-neither tension within the
text’s structure is echoed in the contents of The Interrogative Mood’s themes.

To begin with, some of The Interrogative Mood’s questions resonate with a
more Modernist ideology. For instance, the following question implies the belief in a
unified, knowable self: “At what age would you say your character was set – that is,
when do you think you were you?” (Powell 59). On the other hand, the following
question draws attention to the Postmodernist relationship between consumerism,
over-industrialization, and selfhood: “Is there anything you might do today that would
distinguish you from being just a vessel of consumption and pollution with a proper presence in the herd?” (Powell 28). In addition, the following sentence contains both Modernist and Postmodernist concepts concerning the self: "If we had these profiles, could we not relax and let them do the work of living for us and take our true selves on a long vacation? (Powell 69). The assertion here is that a unified, "true" self as well as a fragmented one exist. The dichotomy, then, of unity and fragmentation of the self is Deconstructed. Rather than assuming Postmodernism’s neither-nor tension, however, this dichotomy is reconstructed and rerouted through Metamodernism’s both-neither tension.

This reconstruction/rerouting also occurs within the dichotomy of hope and melancholy in *The Interrogative Mood*. For example, the following questions embody both sentiments: “Is there any hope?” (112), “Can we hope for a better tomorrow?” (143), and “Is there hope for peace in the world, all over it and at one time?” (64). Furthermore, in the following lines Powell does not advocate hope over despair, he allows for oscillation between the two:

If you were in a streaming crowd being pushed into what appears to be a bifurcated tunnel ahead, and over one entrance was the word HOPE and over the other NO HOPE, and you could just barely manage to maneuver yourself within the crush of the crowd into either entrance, and it looked like a preponderance of the crowd was entering HOPE, which entrance would you take? (53)

Powell also questions whether or not hope would be the right choice if it is also the road most traveled: “if you found yourself . . . being swept by the heavy crowd into
the Hope tunnel if you go with the flow, would you resist this default entry into Hope and maneuver . . . to get into the No Hope tunnel, which you can see has a lot fewer people going into it . . . ?” (86-7). Thus, *The Interrogative Mood* Deconstructs the dichotomy of hope and melancholy by destabilising their grounds for opposition and giving the reader a perpetually contrariwise point of view. Additionally, this dichotomy is reconstructed, rerouted; hope and melancholy occur simultaneously.

Similarly, the conceptual dichotomies, sentimentality/apathy, optimism/pessimism are reconstructed and rerouted in *The Interrogative Mood*. Early on in the text the author/subject foreshadows the reconstruction of the above-mentioned dichotomies with the following question: “When you hear the expression ‘Those were the days,’ or any equivalent allusion to the good ole days, are you inclined to dismiss the speaker as a sentimentalist or do you credit that there indeed were better days?” (Powell 8). This foreshadowing is fulfilled by the expression of a longing, an aspiration for a simpler, idyllic existence:

If you could live on top of a mountain and grow coffee and not be rich but not have any real economic worries either and once or twice a day bury your face in a big basket of coffee beans to assay the quality of the product and otherwise eat good fruit and slowly read a book or two and wear good locally spun cotton clothes and enjoy seeing the weather come in over the mountains and sleep right there on the porch in a hammock . . . and not be too bothered by your continuing to not speak Spanish very well, would you do it? (Powell 80)
Moreover, a sentimentality for the past, for things lost to the past is expressed in the following questions: “Have I carried on before you yet about how I miss the days of home milk delivery and drinking milk from those scoured heavy-lipped cold bottles . . . ?” (Powell 37), and “Can you say why there are no longer TV shows featuring the loyal heroics of dogs and horses?” (Powell 93). Alternately, there are questions that critique modern society and express irony, apathy, and pessimism for either the present or the future, or both, as is illustrated in the following questions: “is it not the kernel of the demise of the world as we knew it that you can no longer watch candy be made ‘for insurance reasons’?” (Powell 117), “Wasn’t there a day on earth when not every soul was possessed of his or her own petty political and personal-identity agenda?” (Powell 18), and “Would you have the slightest idea, if we somehow started over, how to reinvent the radio or even the telephone?” (Powell 3). Again, due to the simultaneous expression of opposing/differing concepts, the dichotomies, sentimentality/apathy and optimism/pessimism are Deconstructed, yet reconfigured in The Interrogative Mood.

Furthermore, Metamodernism’s both-neither tension Deconstructs and, in turn, reconstructs/reroutes the dichotomy that signifies, perhaps, the greatest chasm between Modernism and Postmodernism, that is to say, their respective views concerning Grand Narratives or, Metanarratives. A Grand Narrative/Metanarrative is the “abstract idea that claims to be a comprehensive explanation of all historical experience or knowledge” or as some philosophers argue, “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains all knowledge” (Slattery 303). In The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Jean-François Lyotard utilizes the term “Modern” to “designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as
the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (xxiii). Meanwhile, “Simplifying to the extreme,” Lyotard defines “postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv).

Postmodernism’s skepticism and disbelief concerning Grand Narratives is, however, paradoxical, self-contradictory:

> According to Lyotard, in the postmodern period, people no longer believe in grand narratives, and consequently, to the armies of postmodern pen-pushers, ipso facto, ‘grand narratives’ are old fashioned and oppressive – oppressive because one grand narrative excludes another and doesn’t my narrative have just as much right to truth as yours? The contradiction in all this is that this narrative about narratives is itself a grand narrative of the first order, as outlined above with the narrative of narratives from tribal to feudal to modern times and up to the present. (Blunden 1)

Again, Postmodernism seeks to cancel out Modernism, albeit, ineffectively. Meta-modernism, on the other hand, seeks to counter, to oscillate between the two, to simultaneously, accept and deny the validity of Grand Narratives.

> In The Interrogative Mood, Powell poses questions concerning themes such as, religion, evolution, the meaning of life, and the afterlife, all of which are inextricably associated with Grand Narratives. In the following sentence, Powell, rather comically, questions the validity of both Creationism⁶ and evolution and, in doing so, leaves space for the validity of both: “This business of the ears and nose allegedly continuing to grow throughout one’s life– can that be part of a great and benevolent creator’s design, part of a malevolent god’s design, or is it another
inscrutable facet of natural selection?” (10). Similarly, the ambiguity of the following question, “Do you believe?” (Powell 99), allows space for the validity of all possible answers; it could be a question concerning religious belief, scientific belief, or belief in a multitude of different things. Additionally, the following question, “Do you believe in lions and tigers and bears or do you believe in the lord Jesus?” (Powell 37), could be viewed as a choice between belief in tangible things or belief in the supernatural. On the other hand, “lions and tigers and bears” could be viewed as a fear of the unknown, of the Other, if considered either alongside its cultural reference (the line is used verbatim in the film, *The Wizard of Oz*) or, simply, in terms of the predatorial nature of the three animals. In this case, the question becomes something more like the following, “Do you believe in what is intangible (fear) or in what is intangible (the supernatural)?” These questions do not deny or cancel out the existence of a supreme being or the validity of evolution, instead, they counter these ideas through the reconstruction/rerouting of the science/religion dichotomy. It is possible, therefore, to believe in both a supreme being, in a creator of all things as well as in the tenets of evolution or in nothing at all.

Similarly, the following questions explore the meaning of life: “Will you be saddened that your life has been minor if in fact it has been minor?” (Powell 28), and “Is your life and what you are doing with it important?” (Powell 34). The words “minor” and “important” are open for interpretation and, with them, life’s meaning (or lack thereof). In other words, the dichotomy of meaning and meaninglessness, existentially speaking, is Deconstructed. Moreover, the following series of questions Deconstruct the dichotomy of life and death: “Is there in your opinion life after death? Is there death then before life? Wouldn’t it be possible to get life and death mixed up and not be exactly clear what is what and when when?” (Powell 81). With these lines
the Grand Narrative concerning life after death is not only deconstructed, but reconstructed, reincarnated, even; life after death could simply be life and vice versa.

_The Interrogative Mood_’s treatment of motifs and themes seeks to Deconstruct conceptual dichotomies through the destabilization of opposing poles and differing concepts through “continual displacement” (Graves 1). However, this treatment also seeks to reconstruct and reroute which emphasizes Metamodernism’s both-neither tension and re-signifies “the commonplace with significance . . . the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 12), and so on.

**Conclusion**

Is it time to go? Are we done here? Have you had as good a time as I?

—Padgett Powell

_The Interrogative Mood_

To summarize, the analysis of _The Interrogative Mood_’s literary devices and the argument for its position as a Metamodernist text have been conducted in three chapters: “Metamodernist Subjectivity,” “An Intertextual Mood,” and “Meta-Motifs.”

The first chapter, “Metamodernist Subjectivity” argues that the Metamodern subject differs from both Modernist and Postmodernist notions of subjectivity, while, simultaneously, containing elements of both. Eshelman’s concept of Performatism, of enclosing the subject(s) in “double frames” (55), is utilized to examine _The Interrogative Mood_’s subjects, the author/subject and the reader/subject, which illustrates the uniqueness of Metamodern subjectivity. It is argued that authorial intention, reader interpretation, and the text are tantamount to one another and, as a result, Barthes’ death of the author theory is called into question. The questioning of
Barthes’ theory continues into this essay’s discussion of intertextuality, in the second body chapter.

“An Intertextual Mood” argues that *The Interrogative Mood* creates a unique intertextual paradigm. In support of this argument, texts that respond to *The Interrogative Mood*, Baird’s, *The Responsive Mood* as well as several blogs are analyzed. In this paradigm, both Barthes’ and Kristeva’s concepts of intertextuality, which rely, heavily, on the death of the author, are countered by *The Interrogative Mood*’s acceptance of both linear intertextuality and a more multidimensional one that allows both the author and the reader to have historical, biographical, and psychological backgrounds. This notion of countering, of both-neither tension in this chapter is further utilized in the analysis of *The Interrogative Mood*’s themes in the third chapter.

“Meta-Motifs” asserts that through both structural juxtaposition and thematic material themes and motifs are created. It is argued that the main function of these themes is to Deconstruct such conceptual dichotomies as sentimentality/apathy, hope/melancholy, and science/religion. It is argued that Metamodernist Deconstruction is differentiated from Postmodernist Deconstruction through the utilization of the additional concepts of reconstruction and rerouting. The concepts of reconstruction and rerouting evoke Metamodernism’s both-neither tension as opposed to Postmodernism’s neither-nor tension.

In conclusion, the elements of the *The Interrogative Mood* which are analyzed in this essay resonate with the Metamodernist characteristics of both-neither tension and oscillation between Modernism and Postmodernism. Therefore, Powell’s treatment of literary devices in *The Interrogative Mood* does, indeed, position the text
within the realm of Metamodernism, which is to say, it is both Modernist and Postmodernist, and neither of them.
Notes

1. See Notes on Metamodernism: http://www.metamodernism.com/

2. Simone Sterner is a contributing writer/researcher for Notes on Metamodernism.

3. In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in Jacques Derrida argues that “the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere” (Derrida 352).

4. The theory that Barthes proposes in “The Death of the Author,” originally published in French under the title, “La Mort de l’auteur,” argues that no individual can claim authority or an absolute interpretation of a text; that the author and authorial intention must metaphorically die in order for the reader to become the interpreter of the text. Barthes argues that: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147).

5. The term “intertextuality” was coined in 1966 by theorist, Julia Kristeva in "Word, Dialogue and Novel." The appearance of the term coincides roughly with the appearance, of both Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” and Postmodernism of which intertextuality is, indeed, a key characteristic, especially when employed through the medium of pastiche. Kristeva’s argument is heavily based on Saussure and Bakhtin’s theories.

6. The theory or belief that Earth, all its inhabitants, and the universe itself were created by a supernatural entity.
Works Cited


