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# Millennial Poetics: A Study of Contemporary Poetry and Its Developing Trends

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As a field of creative practice, poetry evolves constantly, resulting in new poetic forms that stand in stark contrast to those produced even a few decades ago. Nonetheless, due to the prevalent fixation on standards of the past, little to no research has been undertaken to explore and support the latest and most innovative voices in the literary community, leading to the stagnation poetry's development. By examining the various approaches to defining the current poetic movement, this essay seeks to develop an understanding of the state of the genre and stimulate the momentum of poetry's evolution. In the essay, I explore contemporary anthologies and digital texts, including those influenced by the internet age, written through twitter, popularized by social media, or constructed through search engines. Further, by viewing the tendencies of contemporary poetry alongside generational studies, my essay culminates in the conclusion that the most innovative digital poetry written today reflects the particular sensibilities of the millennial generation.

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At present, the literary landscape of the 21st century remains clouded and unclear, a jungle of new and sometimes bizarre formats. Study of postmodernism and modernism abounds, but academia has struggled to reach a consensus on a new theoretical approach to the various poetic forms of the last two decades. Many journalists even claim that poetry is dead. Nonetheless, current U.S. President Barack Obama— a published poet himself— celebrated National Poetry Month at the White House last April, when he announced that "Poetry matters," and that without it, "this would be a pretty barren world[1]." If one accepts this as truth, then the main question becomes this: In what way does poetry matter in the contemporary social landscape? Famous cultural theorist Kenneth Goldsmith claims poetry in the present age must be curated rather than created. On the other hand, young poets like Steve Roggenbuck claim that poetry and the activity of "being a poet" mean much more than words on a page at all, instead laying claim to relevance in society at large. These assertions merely begin to exemplify the different directions in which the genre of poetry has divided and subdivided. Nonetheless, closer inspection reveals that the newest and most innovative poetry produced over the last decade shares traits that belie a common source.

In order to understand the complexity of contemporary poetry, one must first delve into both the great range of poetic forms in current production and the various ways literary critics have attempted to qualify the newest trends. People express poetry today much differently than they did even a few decades ago. Some poetry emerges in tweets, a new form called "micropoetry," which draws appeal from the challenge of writing within the 140 character limit. Other poems mix with visual formatting, layering lines of poetry over pictures to create image macros. Some members of the literary community even proclaim the dynamic YouTube vlogs of Steve Roggenbuck as poems in their own right. At the very least, many recognize that the era of postmodernism has faded out, that its tendencies "are taking another shape, and, more importantly, a new sense, a new meaning and direction." [2] The interest no longer lies with "making the machines jump"[3] or even continuing to prove the relevance of conceptualism— rather, "the real race has been to claim naming rights for the edifice that comes after."[4] Many have tried to provide the name, but a subject as complex and multi-faceted as contemporary poetry balks at corralling.

For a while, critics titled the new poetry scene 'Alt Lit,' but members of the literary community now only refer to that term under hyper-aware scare quotes. Kenneth Goldsmith describes 'Alt Lit' as "an online writing community that emerged in 2011 and harnesses the casual affect and jagged stylistics of social media as the basis of their works… Its members have produced a body of distinctive literature marked by direct speech, expressions of aching desire, and wide-eyed sincerity."[5] But, as critic Seth Abramson points out, "The term 'Alt Lit' has gradually devolved into meaninglessness, much like the term 'indie music,'" and can no longer serve as a relevant label. [6] Many poets now reject the title, as the editors of the contemporary anthology The YOLO Pages explain: "even as the tumblr tag 'alt lit' gains widespread use by young poets, almost everyone seriously associated with the term has questioned it or distanced… from it at some time." [7] The objectionable quality of the term owes partly to several negative allegations directed toward big names in the scene, as well as a general feeling that artists under 'Alt Lit' had begun to form into the usual "old boys club" of almost exclusively male figureheads. [8] The term can no longer serve to describe the state of the genre even in the most basic way, as an alternative literature to the regular or the mainstream. According to poet Sam Riviere, poetry takes a naturally subversive form and the best and most effective poetry of any period is an alternative poetry to that which came before it— in this case, postmodernism. [9] If one accepts this definition, 'Alt Lit' only poorly aids in the understanding of poetry at this particular moment in time, and even Goldsmith's definition hardly covers the various forms that fit in the contemporary group.

The term "internet poetry" doesn't quite work either, though a greater range may fit under its umbrella. When the poetry of the day breaks into such differing sects as micropoetry, google-based centos, image macros, and poems that simply make use of internet stylistics, one finds difficulty in identifying any common ground besides the fact that they are all in some way

related to the internet. The phrase "post-internet poetry" might correlate more with this thinking, as it implies that these forms of poetry could not exist before the internet's invention. The tools of the internet and the network culture that emerged from the internet age define certain aspects of poetic movement at hand. Yet, this speaks for little of the thematic tendencies that have appeared alongside these stylistic processes and formats.

Other names for the current trends include "the New Sincerity; aftermodernism; post-postmodernism; hypermodernism; automodernism [and] digimodernism."[10] Beyond all of these, at least in reference to specific aesthetic and thematic tendencies, the term "metamodernism" has endured best. Coined by Timotheus Vermulen and Robin van den Akker in their essay "Notes on metamodernism" in the 2010 volume of the Journal of Aesthetics and Culture, the name derives from metaxis, a Platonic term describing the oscillation of an object between two opposite poles.[11] According to the two scholars, 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."[12] The concept also corresponds with the return to romantic notions implied in 'The New Sincerity' of literature. Vermulen explained his perception of 'The New Sincerity' as "someone temporarily [suspending] irony. It does not mean that, say, someone is so naïve to believe that his or her love song is the only true love song… It merely means that for the time being, that person pretends it is so as to convey as much "truth" as possible… To be sincere, at least today, is not a natural quality but a choice."[13] This term connects back to the "wide-eyed sincerity" of 'Alt-Lit' while qualifying it as a trait of a larger schema.

Since its release, "Notes on metamodernism" has acquired a lot of buzz, resulting in a website of the same name that compiles articles on the term in various art forms, as well as a manifesto by the artist Luke Turner. Vermulen points out that "metamodernism is not so much a philosophy – which implies a closed ontology – as it is an attempt at a vernacular… that might contextualize and explain what is going on around us,"[14] and as such, the term 'metamodernism' falls in line with the obscurity of 'modernism' and 'post-modernism,' which mostly perform as "heuristic labels"[15] and buzzwords. The term latches onto some of the trends already observed, while leaving space for more research and observation as the current literature further evolves. Even before Vermulen and Akker pieced their theory together in its most coherent state, critics began to latch onto these tendencies: Kenneth Goldsmith states that what he called "The New Aesthetic… is concerned with the expansive fusing of opposites: ephemeral and permanent, digital and analog, becoming multidimensional, flexible, and radically distributive."[16] This oscillation between poles represents one of the first thematic elements of contemporary poetry that critics have clearly observed and documented as well as one of the first steps toward a better understanding of the current state of the genre.

By examining the different approaches toward naming and developing a comprehension of the latest movement in literature, the complicated nature of contemporary poetry may begin to reveal itself. While the truest name for this current movement remains elusive, one can find some greater understanding of contemporary poetry by viewing it through a particular lens: as poetry in line with the abilities and tendencies of the millennial generation. Whether called post-internet poetry, 'Alt Lit,' or metamodernism, the current trends in poetry correlate quite closely with the predispositions of Generation Y. The thematics of metamodernism correspond with the outlooks of millennials; the current post-internet creations reflect a casual and unconcerned use of the internet that only millennials have; the new poems accept the political, express ideas through new textual linguistic patterns, and flourish outside the print industry's market— all traits connected to millennials and their burgeoning adulthood.

Through generational studies, one may see the various ways in which different generations respond to life in American culture. They each have different ways of approaching the workplace, home life, and civic engagement. This remains equally true in the realm of artistic participation. Just as postmodernism is mostly a child of Generation X and their tendencies, contemporary

poetry may be best understood as a development of Generation Y. The poetry of today intimately intertwines with the outlooks and abilities of the millennial generation, as they possess both the knowledge of the internet that derives from growing up with it, as well as the desire to reach past the postmodern poetics. Further, according to the editors of what was claimed as "The First Metamodern Anthology to Hit U.S. Bookshelves," The YOLO Pages, "having inherited a tradition of open formal experimentation from the postmodern era, and now inheriting an ongoing stream of additional new forms from the internet, poetry is far more exciting today than most people have been letting on."[17] Much of this excitement— and innovation— can be found in the works of poets under the age of 35.

To begin with, the concepts of metamodernism correspond with the attitudes recently shown by millennials. According to statistics, more millennials cynically claim people should not generally be trusted, but at the same time, more convey a positive outlook for both their individual futures and the future of America.[18] Their particular outlook reflects the world they grew up with, which handed them both the power and voice of the internet age and the economic instability of the Great Recession.  They are a generation defined by their paradoxical characteristics. In "Notes on Metamodernism," Vermulen and Akker refer to "the metamodern generation"[19] specifically, implying that these artistic tendencies are fueled by Generation Y (emphasis mine). In the same vein, they claim, "The current generation's attitude—for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation— can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism."[20] For instance, in the poem "U Are Like An Oat to Me, I Love You," Catalina Gallaher writes, "sometimes i fantasize about placing ur hand on a patch of soil in such a way the bean sprouts that i previously planted in the soil would sprout up between ur fingers." She then contrasts this sincere, expressive phrase of delicate imagery, with the flirtatious and tongue-in-cheek query, "does this seem/ hot to u."[21] In Carina Finn's, "I Am A Gothic Heroine and I Will Never Be Happy," the tone oscillates between a cold, depressive acceptance and boisterous, impish satire. The poem switches from a moment in which the speaker is called a "defect" to the speaker splashing dishwater on her offenders; it contrasts the holy and solemn reference to Peter denying Jesus Christ three times with a moment both mundane and bawdy in which the speaker is denied sex from her sleeping partner.[22] These moments of oscillation, which guide and shape contemporary texts, reflect the especially paradoxical attitude of millennials and the ways in which they interact with the world around them.

Current poetry also demonstrates an undaunted attitude toward bringing the political into poetry— specifically liberal politics. Many use this as a critique for contemporary works, as if political poetry never existed or succeeded before. To use such a critique, though, would necessarily also demote the environmentalist work of Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsburg's stirring commentary in "Howl," or even William Blake's socially conscious "London," a poem often exemplified in introduction poetry classes across America. Most millennials either identify as democratic or independents with a democratic lean and demonstrate more liberal ideas in many social arenas, such as homosexuality and gender roles.[23] This political lean appears in much of the work they produce. Further, millennials approach politics more holistically; while on par with other generations in terms of volunteering and boycotting, they are significantly more likely to participate in "buycotting" or purchasing only from companies that fall in line with their particular moral and political ideals.[24] Such a holistic approach to politics also affects the kinds of works they produce and publish, as Steve Roggenbuck confirms: "I don't care about individual poems… as much… I care about culture broadly. I care about the attitude and personality that is behind a book."[25] This shines through in The YOLO Pages, which he helped edit; while not all the poems contain obvious politics, the editors include in the introduction that all poems and poets were chosen with care to this concern. They state that "to create beautiful or funny poetry that is merely compatible with anti-oppression politics may even contribute to the well-being of fellow activists."[26] While a number of contemporary poets follow this trend of holistic politics, still many poems betray a much more straightforward approach. For instance, in a poem by Anthony Peregrine, a train carrying natural

gas derails and spills, ultimately causing the end of the world: "it mixes with the radiation from fukushima and the/ coal slurry from Appalachia and the oil from bp and the plastic in the/ pacific ocean, the world takes its last deep breath, and drowns under the/ heavy weight of it all."[27] Or Gabby Bess's poem "Whopper, Jr." in which she toys with the issues of body-shaming through lines like, "it is belligerent/ to walk around/ as if you are not apologetic/ for something."[28] These openly sociopolitical poems, in line with millennial trends, follow almost exclusively democratic and liberal politics, and do not hide their true intent behind shadowy metaphor or complex conceptual design.

The political lean of millennials also corresponds to their regard for diversity. Poets today push for inclusivity that affects not only the diversity of poets celebrated but also the diversity of what is considered poetry. According to the collection of reports put together by the Pew Research Center, the millennial generation is more diverse than previous generations as well as more "racially tolerant."[29] This kind of openness translates into diversity in the kinds of works produced and accepted by the Y Generation, as well as a greater interest in supporting poets of different racial/ethnic backgrounds and gender/sexuality. An avid supporter of diverse approaches to poetry, Roggenbuck proclaims in his "Internet Poetry Manifesto," video, "Jay-Z just posted a video saying he thinks rap should be considered as poetry. I agree. I also think poetry should be considered as rap."[30] The editors of The YOLO Pages suggest a "spirit of looking outside 'poetry' to find poetry," and point out that "the avant-gardes of the 20th century pushed poetry so far in so many directions. Our inheritance now and forever is the ongoing uncertainty of what 'poetry' is."[31] The ability of new poetry to take such diverse forms and allow a more equal playing field for poets of different backgrounds stems from the relevance of the internet in the lives of millennials. With the globalizing effect of the internet exerting its influence, more and more poets from around the world can publish work online.

Furthermore, the internet allows for diverse formats specifically because of its inherent tendencies; it "[encourages] eclecticism by the breadth of writing it makes available, taking poetry out of its tradition and theoretical/political context, expanding or breaking open coteries."[32] Meanwhile, the invention of the internet has affected not only the mindset of the contemporary generation of poets but also the publication and circulation of poetry. When one can both publish and read poetry without needing to print a single page, the world of printed literature naturally takes a blow. Though many mourn this change, some argue that the impact on poetry as a whole has been a positive one. Sam Riviere adeptly describes the tendencies of contemporary poetry by its distinct internet distribution as follows: "The lack of financial imperatives to remain within a traditional publishing format suggests that poetry is not only at liberty to define itself outside such structures, it is obliged to do so."[33] Meanwhile, rather than working with the economy of financial success, "the 'price' and the 'product'" in the online network "are the viewer's time and engagement with the work."[34] By developing outside existing structures, contemporary poetry opens itself for more diverse works and stylistic extremes. The millennial generation demonstrates tendencies of working outside conventional structures, such as those of religion and politics, and similarly, the innovative poetry of today often exists best— and most naturally— outside the existing structure of the print industry.[35]

Some of the most stylistically extreme poetry recently produced exemplifies exactly that which could not be performed by any prior generation, simply because prior generations did not grow up with the internet. Poets can now craft pieces from the malleable and accessible treasure chest that is the World Wide Web. They use it deftly, fashioning search-based centos and google-found poetry with ease. According to the report made by the U.S. President's Council of Economic Advisors in late 2014, "Because... this period of innovation coincided with Millennials' childhoods, it has shaped the ways that Millennials interact with technology... Millennials are more connected to technology than previous generations and a quarter of Millennials believe that their relationship to technology is what makes their generation unique."[36] Prior generations demonstrate obsession with the charms and abilities of the internet in their artistic works, rather than an adept and

unconcerned use of it as a tool. The intro to anthology I Love Roses When They're Past Their Best focuses on Sophie Collins' works as examples of this because she uses search engines to create internet-based centos.[37] Steven Zultanski released a book in 2014 titled Bribery, a long form poem in which he compiles lines from crime websites to create a speaker who sounds "the way one might imagine a serial killer's inner voice to be."[38] Last year, Sam Riviere published his poetry collection Kim Kardashian's Marriage with company Faber & Faber. To create this work, Riviere copied pages upon pages of text based on internet searches of chapter titles from his previous books, sifted through it all, and narrowed it to form the 72 pages of found poetry that composes the book.[39] In response to these kinds of works, Goldsmith points out, "Earlier Web-based poetries tended to either exploit the technical side of the Web or underscore the weirdness of it," but the new poetics "attempts to look beyond fetishising the digital age and it's 'revolution,' instead seeing what's occurring now as a careful and important negotiation with what has gone before; a reworking rather than a rupture."[40] Confirming this change in the treatment of internet-influenced poetry, critic Charles Whalley proclaims, "We are almost in a future where to talk about poetry 'influenced by the digital age' is as redundant as talking about poetry 'influenced by print.'"[41] As generations grow up with this technology, it will increasingly shape poetic work, the millennial generation merely representing the first to treat poet-internet poetry in this fashion.

Similarly, the new poets work with a certain linguistic and textual style that simply did not exist before the internet age. Whereas, on the one side of the scale, performance poetics take pride in pushing the oral tradition of poetry, the latest written poetry revels in the textual linguistics developed for use only on the page. This new pattern, titled Internet Linguistics and pushed by linguist David Crystal, uses certain textual schema to replicate emotion that one normally cannot derive from regular grammar.[42] For example, users of this linguistic evolution often will type a series of jumbled letters and numbers to express excitement or emotion. Or, when questioning the actuality of a practice or the existence of a particular phenomenon, Internet Linguistics users with ask, "Is that a thing?" meaning "Is that something that happens normally or is accepted in normal discourse?" The main school of thought claims these new linguistic practices have evolved in order to compensate for the lack of vocal tone available when communicating through text, which has increasingly become the main way people interact.[43] As opposed to the ages in which people wrote letters, the constant and swift transmittal of text messages requires the ability to actively converse back and forth, relating ideas quickly and without long, drawn-out explanation. By way of these new textual tools, people can emote through text more easily and avoid miscommunication, an ability highly valuable in the often expressive art of poetry. In reference to the stylistic choices of new poetry, Sam Riviere highlights the usage of new Internet Linguistics: "Constant ambivalence, anxiety about how 'serious' someone intends to be, is experienced through the continuous use of qualifiers, non-sequiturs, and other non-literary traits, such as misspellings and scare quotes."[44] Even literary critics recognize that "[the poems] replicate a 'current vernacular,' but, unlike in the past, it is a textual vernacular more than a spoken one."[45] Internet Linguistics opens up a new tonal quality of poetry, and allows for poems that emote in an evolutionary manner. While the new linguistic pattern does not only apply to millennials— older generations can and do participate in the social media forms that facilitated these linguistic changes— Generation Y is more likely to interact in textual formats than older generations and more likely to adopt new linguistic patterns to meet their communication needs.

Not only do millennials perceive language differently, but they also understand branding in a way that previous generations did not— or chose not— to conceive: a use of branding in a positive and personal way, outside of the corporate world of commercialism. In one of his YouTube videos, Roggenbuck—sounding like a mixture between a door-to-door salesman and a college business student— proclaims, "I'm interested in marketing, but I'm mainly interesting in marketing the moon. Do you love the light of the moon, sir? And if you don't, can I convince you?"[46] Such vlogs, which some call poetry of its own sort and others call "meticulously crafted infomercials for poetry," exemplify the inherent understanding of commercialism bred into the

current generation.[47] Riviere argues that "these strategies of… internalization of commercial culture orientate the poems as both antagonists of the dominant tradition (in poetry), and as self-aware artistic 'brands' within culture more generally." This understanding of poetry as taking on its own branding and commercialism sets it both in line with the trends of art today and against the supposed "art for art's sake" implications of previous generations. Roggenbuck explains, "I have been interested in branding because it is about creating holistic culture around something. Of course corporate branding is often just an empty shell used to sell products, but the most effective branding is not just a catchy slogan… it's about capturing the essence of some core values in the external presentation."[48] This stylistic branding of poets and poems establishes a culture for poetry that allows revelry in a way that previous generations of poetry did not.

Nonetheless, the new generation of poetics has not abandoned all sense of tradition and the writers from which they came. Steve Roggenbuck often proclaims the influences of writers like Walt Whitman in his works.[49] Kenneth Goldsmith proclaims of the new style that it "has deep roots, extending back to the cosmological visions of William Blake, through the direct observation poems of the Imagists, the anti-art absurdities of Dada, and the nutty playfulness of Surrealism… [A] major touchstone is the Beats, particularly Allen Ginsburg's spontaneous mind poems, Jack Kerouac's unfiltered spew, and Gary Snyder's environmental consciousness."[50] The current poetry acts not as a brand-new, clear-cut genre, but as an evolution of the works of the past, an amalgamation of modernism and postmodernism, a child born of a rich literary history. No avant-garde art can exist without a previous standard against which it rebels.

Additionally, generational statistics by nature lack the specificity to cover all cases. This paper has strived to only incorporate statistics from well known and reputable resources, but statistics rarely do justice to the wide chasm of human behavior, particularly in terms of literature, a highly subjective art. Just as the statistics regarding the lowered Google searches for the term "poetry" fail to account for all the ways in which poetry can be consumed, these statistics can only shed light on thin strands of the great web of literature.[51]

Nonetheless, these corresponding trends allow for a particular framing of the texts poets produce today, specifically poets born in the 1980's and later. These new artists brings the possibilities of personal branding, internet linguistics, and digital search engines all together to create poetry peculiar from that of the past. New attitudes and themes define contemporary literature and mark it as distinctive from modernism and postmodernism. It appears, from the comparisons considered above, that the innovative movements in poetry at this moment belong to an all new generation, and those who would imply that "poetry is dead" would be surprised to gaze upon its beaming and youthful face.

## Notes

1. Obama, Barak. "Remarks by the President."
2. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermulen, "Notes on metamodernism." Page 4.
3. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Writing's Crisis v1.0."
4. Gary Forrester, "Cultural Paradigm."
5. Kenneth Goldsmith, "If Walt Whitman Vlogged."
6. Seth Abramson, "First Anthology of Metamodern Literature Hits U.S. Bookshelves."
7. Joseph Kendrick, Steve Roggenbuck, E.E. Scott, and Rachel Younghans, eds. The YOLO Pages. Page 6
8. Allie Jones, "Alt Lit Is Dead."
9. Sam Riviere. "'Unlike': Forms of Refusal."
10. Ibid., 4.
11. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermulen, "Notes on metamodernism." Page 6
12. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermulen, "Notes on metamodernism" Pages 5-6
13. Timotheus Vermulen, "Timotheus Vermulen Talks."
14. Ibid., 13.
15. Ibid., 4.
16. Kenneth Goldsmith, "The New Aesthetic."
17. Joseph Kendrick, Steve Roggenbuck, E.E. Scott, and Rachel Younghans, eds. The YOLO Pages. Page 5
18. Pew Research Center, "Millennials in Adulthood." Page 7.
19. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermulen, "Notes on metamodernism." Page 5
20. Ibid., 19.
21. Joseph Kendrick, Steve Roggenbuck, E.E. Scott, and Rachel Younghans, eds. The YOLO Pages. Page 52.
22. Harry Burke, ed. "I Love Roses" Page 45.
23. Pew Research Center, "Millennials in Adulthood." Pages 18-21, 31, 38.
24. Pew Research Center, "Millennials: A Portrait." Page 84.
25. Steve Roggenbuck, "Interview with Steve Roggenbuck."
26. Joseph Kendrick, Steve Roggenbuck, E.E. Scott, and Rachel Younghans, eds. The YOLO Pages. Page 8
27. Joseph Kendrick, Steve Roggenbuck, E.E. Scott, and Rachel Younghans, eds. The YOLO Pages. Page 142.
28. Harry Burke, ed. "I Love Roses" Page 87.
29. Pew Research Center, "Millennials: A Portrait." Page 6.
30. Steve Roggenbuck, "Internet Poetry Manifesto."
31. Joseph Kendrick, Steve Roggenbuck, E.E. Scott, and Rachel Younghans, eds. The YOLO Pages. Page 5.
32. Charles Whalley, "I Love Roses."
33. Ibid., 9.
34. Ibid., 9.
35. Pew Research Center, "Millennials in Adulthood. Pages 13, 18.
36. The Council of Economic Advisers, "15 Economic Facts."
37. Harry Burke, ed. "I Love Roses." Pages 7-8
38. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Post-Internet Comes of Age."
39. Ibid., 38.
40. Ibid., 38.
41. Ibid., 32.
42. David Crystal, Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide. Page 2.
43. Tina Baheri. "A Defense of Internet Linguistics."
44. Ibid., 9.
45. Ibid., 32.
46. Steve Roggenbuck, "An Internet Bard."
47. Ibid., 5.
48. Ibid., 25.

49.    Ibid., 25.
50.    Ibid., 5.
51.    Ibid., 30.

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