

“An Acquired Taste”:

The Internal and External Posture of Nicola Barker,
Metamodernist Author

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Abstract

Deze masterscriptie kijkt naar hoe het interne en externe posture van auteur Nicola Barker wordt geconstrueerd aan de hand van haar drie laatste boeken, *The Cauliflower*® (2016), *H(A)PPY* (2017), en *I Am Sovereign* (2019), hoe verschillende instituties op deze boeken reageren en of het gevormde posture beschouwd kan worden als metamodern. Het theoretisch kader en de methodologie borduren voort op Meizoz' begrip van *posture*, de singuliere manier van het innemen van een positie binnen het literaire veld, zoals dat door Bourdieu is geformuleerd. Voor het metamodernisme wordt er naar verschillende belangrijke bronnen gekeken, te beginnen met Vermeulen en Van den Akker. Het onderzoek bereikt de conclusie dat Nicola Barker inderdaad als een metamodernistische auteur kan worden beschreven en haar posture lijkt te zijn geconstrueerd als dat van een arbeidersauteur met een non-conformistische en anti-institutionele instelling, alsook een ongebruikelijke en transgressief intermediale aanpak die, ondanks haar veelgebruikte ironie, toch altijd een morele kern lijkt te bevatten.

Keywords: Nicola Barker, posture, Metamodernism, Meizoz, Bourdieu

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Introduction

When Pierre Bourdieu formulated his theory of the literary field, it forever changed the way scholars perceived all agents in the literary field; from the book shops in the rural countryside to the bustling bookstores in *metropoleis* across the world, literary agents, publishers, critics, authors of both small and great renown and many more. Each of these agents in the literary field are out to gain capital, be it economic, symbolic or other and are metaphorically in constant struggle to either gain more capital or retain what they already own. Despite being published in the 1980s, Bourdieu's theories have stood the test of time and are still being taught at universities today. One of Bourdieu's students, Jérôme Meizoz, published his theory of the literary *posture* in 2007. Different from Bourdieu's theory, but similarly sociological, Meizoz's theory is concerned solely with authors and the image they (sub)consciously construe and is projected onto them by e.g. media and academia. The example Meizoz gave in his 2007 book was that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, since, Meizoz argues, Rousseau is the first author who consciously made an effort to construe a public image of himself to profitably deploy.¹ He distinguishes between internal – what the literary text implies the author to be like – and external – what the author acts like in the public sphere posture.²

Status Quaestionis

Nicola Barker is a classic Bourdieusian example of an author who has accumulated considerable symbolic capital, but whose economic success seems wanting. Her thirteen novels have won multiple literary awards, were twice longlisted and once shortlisted for the

¹ Jérôme Meizoz, "Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau," in *Authorship Revisited: Conceptions of Authorship around 1900 and 2000*, eds. G.J. Dorleijn, R. Grüttemeier and L. Korthals Altes, (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 84.

² *Ibid.*, 93.

Booker Prize, yet her popularity does not match that of similarly accomplished authors and academic interest, although more considerable than the popular interest, could and should be expanded upon. She also seems interesting from a posture research point-of-view, since her lack of social media presence is conspicuous and the way she is framed by both the media and herself almost seems reminiscent of the stereotype scholars sometimes associate with modernist authors; she is called an “experimental novelist”³ and an “avant-garde writer”⁴. Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers also incorporate these labels in their list of terms that they associate with modernism.⁵ This reminiscence of modernism that can be observed when researching Nicola Barker’s posture can be linked to a wider structure of feeling experienced across multiple artistic media, including literature: metamodernism. This term was popularised by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s seminal 2010 article “Notes on Metamodernism”. Since postmodernism can no longer accurately describe what is happening in the arts, Vermeulen and Van den Akker suggested to name their structure of feeling metamodernism, after the Greek participle ‘μετά’ (meta), denoting that metamodernism can be interpreted as being between, going beyond and coming after modernism and postmodernism.⁶ In 2014 David James and Urmila Seshagiri published a paper that specifically delved into literary metamodernism, whereas Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s article was more focused on culture across all media. Missing from James and Seshagiri’s analysis was the influence postmodernism exuded on the authors they discuss, something Vermeulen and Van den Akker did acknowledge. Many books and articles since have contributed to the debate on metamodernism, although some scholars have used a

³ Patricia Nicol, “Nicola Barker interview: ‘I wanted to be a go-go dancer’,” *The Times*, July 14, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/nicola-barker-interview-i-wanted-to-be-a-go-go-dancer-rg5bkrp69>.

⁴ Brian Castleberry, “Nicola Barker is Our Great Post-Punk Novelist,” *Literary Hub*, February 22, 2021, <https://lithub.com/nicola-barker-is-our-great-post-punk-novelist/>.

⁵ Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers, “A Tale of Two Labels: The Use of “Modernism” and “Avant-Garde” in the Reception of Tom McCarthy’s *C*,” *Reception* 12 (2020): 26.

⁶ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Misunderstandings and Clarifications,” *Notes on Metamodernism*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/06/03/misunderstandings-and-clarifications/>.

different name than metamodernism or are simply stating their observations about contemporary literature. However, many of these observations coincide with what Vermeulen and Van den Akker discussed first in their article.

Research Question

Combining these three topics of research – posture, Nicola Barker and metamodernism – is then what composes my research question for this thesis: how are Nicola Barker’s internal and external posture construed in *The Cauliflower*[®] (2016), *H(A)PPY* (2017), and *I Am Sovereign* (2019) and other agents in the field regarding these books and can this posture be considered metamodernist? My first chapter will be concerned with constructing my theoretical framework and further explaining my methodology. Since the entire first chapter is devoted to the theoretical frame and methodology, only an introductory theoretical frame and methodology will be provided in the introduction. My second chapter will be concerned with discerning the internal posture from the novels addressed and my third chapter with distilling an external posture of Nicola Barker from the last ten years.

Hypothesis

It is my hypothesis that the research will yield that Barker frames and is in turn framed by other agents in the field as a metamodernist author, the specifics of which have yet to be explored. I hypothesise that – as the preliminary title of my thesis suggests, which is a quote from Barker about her own work⁷ – Barker is reminiscent of modernist authors, often associated with more high-brow literature. However, at the same time her 2019 novel *I Am Sovereign* is drenched in irony many would associate with postmodernism. This pairing of

⁷ Open Road Media, “Meet Nicola Barker,” *YouTube* video, 2:07, November 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sa6j3DSv0FQ>.

both modernist and postmodernist elements is what often drives scholars to label something as metamodernist.

Methodology

In order to research Barker's internal posture, I intend to research Barker's three latest novels as of 2021, *The Cauliflower*® (2016), *H(A)PPY* (2017) and *I Am Sovereign* (2019) since they should offer the greatest insight into her most current posture. Of course academic sources could also yield understanding of her internal posture. For her external posture I will look at published interviews in established papers or video interviews from the last ten years, since the last five years only encompass the books she has written and not the time in which the books were written. To make sure to include the time she was working on the three novels analysed for this research, the last ten years seems an adequate timeframe.

Theoretical Frame

The main theory that will be employed during this research is Meizoz's posture theory. In my view, Meizoz's theory cannot be understood on its own, but must be included in Bourdieu's theory of the field to compose a full view of what is going on. These sources include at least Bourdieu's "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed" and "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods" to provide a background for the literary field and for Meizoz "Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau" to define what posture is exactly and how the distinction between internal and external posture is made. Another large section of my thesis will comprise of a precise and complete overview of the concept of what metamodernism precisely entails, for without it, no clear similarities with other, more established metamodernist authors can be given. In order to come as close as possible to a definition of metamodernism, I will use

Vermeulen and Van den Akker's "Notes on Metamodernism", James & Seshagiri's "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution" and Bentley, Hubble and Wilson's "Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s" from *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* as a start, but hope to include more sources during research.

Relevance

One of the main concerns of this thesis is how Nicola Barker's internal and external posture is construed and how it ties in with metamodernism. What elements of an author's posture would link them to metamodernism? If the research discovers there to be a clear structure for it, that would open up a new door for the debate on metamodernism, since the debate is now mainly academic in nature; the vocabulary has barely yet cropped up in any other areas of the literary field. If authors and media are aware of metamodernist developments, then there can be a greater insight into what metamodernist literature precisely entails as well as matters of what of what it means to be an author in the 21st century.

A Note on Adjectives

Before moving on to introducing the novels, a quick, explanatory note on the grammatical usage of the labels of modernism, postmodernism and metamodernism, specifically their adjective forms. Since the adjective modern can be ambiguous at times, oftentimes in scholarly discussion when referring to something that has to do with (literary) modernism, people opt for the adjective modernist, to denote that it specifically has to do with modernism and is not just referring to contemporary times. By the power of analogy then, some scholars prefer to use the form postmodernist instead of postmodern. Since the forms ending on -ist denote a clearer demarcation of the subject matter, the adjectives modernist, postmodernist, and metamodernist will be used throughout this thesis.

Corpus

Before explaining my theoretical framework and methodology, the novels themselves are briefly introduced. They will be introduced chronologically.

The Cauliflower® (2016)

The Cauliflower® tells the story of Sri Ramakrishna, a 19th-century Hindu Mystic and his nephew Hriday, his caretaker. Although it teeters on the brink of being a biography, *The Cauliflower*® is considered a novel, because Barker fictionalises some accounts and tells Ramakrishna's story in a nonchronological, almost anecdotal order.

H(A)PPY (2017)

The protagonist of Barker's *H(A)PPY* is Mira A. Mira belongs to the cult-like community of The Young, in a dystopian future in which emotion needs to be suppressed at all times and your entire thought process is constantly under surveillance and out for the world to see. The novel shows what words or phrases purple The Graph, indicating a rise in dangerous thoughts, coloured in the novel as well. This gives the reader an insight into what dangerous words are and simultaneously communicates the feeling of being continuously supervised.

I Am Sovereign (2019)

I Am Sovereign covers a mere twenty-minute house viewing in Llandudno, Wales, and is told from the point of view of (mostly) Charles, teddy bear maker and seller of the house, Avigail, the estate agent trying to sell the house, and daughter Ying Yue, whose mother Wang Shu is on the phone for the entire twenty minutes, who is interested in buying the house. Not only does the narrative continually switch between these points of views, Barker herself becomes a character in the novel later as well.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

1.1 Theoretical Framework

1.1.1 Bourdieu

As discussed in the introduction, Pierre Bourdieu made a sizeable impact on the literary world with his new insights and his views are still being used in today's discussions about how contemporary literature is valued. The only way to properly understand the concept of posture, which was later introduced by Jérôme Meizoz, is to contextualise it inside of Bourdieu's most influential notion in literary theory: the concept of the cultural field, or *champs* in the original French. This theory sometimes feels reductive, because it assumes every actor in the field is only focused on one thing: occupying as much capital as they possibly can. Bourdieu took the theory of the field from institutional sociology and implemented it in cultural theory. The field theory can be superimposed on many different kinds of fields and subfields. For example, Bourdieu states that the field of literature and art is a subfield of the field of power, contained within the field of class relations.⁸ This model is excellent to work with, since fields can be subdivided into almost any size, from the literary field of poets solely pertaining to one organisation within the city of Nijmegen, to the actors with the greatest cultural capital within the continent of Europe.

To presume every actor in every field is only out for their own economic gain, would perhaps paint a too pessimistic picture. When Bourdieu describes capital, he divides it between economic (monetary) and symbolic capital. Bourdieu explains symbolic capital as “economic or political capital that is disavowed, mis-recognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a ‘credit’ which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run,

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” in *The Field of Cultural Production*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993): 37-8.

guarantees ‘economic’ profits.”⁹ This somewhat obscure definition makes symbolic capital almost out to be as a sort of long-term monetary investment, which is very reductive and not necessarily true for all cases. Bourdieu later explains that symbolic capital gives credit to consecrate certain – in the case of the literary field – texts. Those with a great deal of symbolic capital – be they authors, publishers, or critics – gain the credentials to say what is and is not considered literature or, in the case that they are authors themselves, have a higher chance to be consecrated by others, to be acknowledged as literary authors.

Oftentimes successful texts gain either a great deal of economic capital (e.g. *Fifty Shades of Grey*) or a great deal of symbolic capital, like the novels of obscure so-called ‘writer’s writers’, authors who are almost exclusively read by other authors – and therefore make almost no profit from their books. Seldom do novels gain both noticeable economic and symbolic capital, especially since the more economically successful a book is, the less symbolic capital it generally garners. This is usually due to accessible texts often being regarded as inferior to difficult ones. In the last decade the judges of the – formerly Man Booker, nowadays just Booker – Booker prize were sometimes criticised for their focus on “readability”.¹⁰ Literary prizes are often coveted among authors because they are usually indicative of both economic and symbolic capital.

Since its introduction by Bourdieu into the world of literature, many scholars have proposed new forms of capital, such as academic capital, cultural, and social. Since these forms of capital are sometimes debatable and not immediately relevant to this thesis, they will not be discussed here and symbolic and economic capital will be focused on mainly.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods,” *Media Culture Society* 2, (1980): 262.

¹⁰ Alison Flood, “Booker prize divides quality from readability, says Andrew Motion,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/16/booker-prize-criticism-andrew-motion>.

1.1.2 Meizoz

If one is to focus on gaining capital specifically as an author, there are many factors to consider. As Alain Viala puts it, one of these factors that make up “the *ethos* or (general) way of being (of a) writer”, is posture.¹¹ Viala was the first to define the term. However, Jérôme Meizoz is the scholar who is most often associated with its concept and he preferred to define posture as to include “one or several discursive ethos(es) which participate in its construction”.¹² He noted that writers can make a (conscious) effort to construe a certain image of their author persona. According to Jérôme Meizoz, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the author that should be accredited to “the invention of posture”.¹³ What then, does Meizoz consider the definition of this elusive notion to be exactly? In his 2007 book *Postures Littéraires*, he explains that posture is “la manière singulière d’occuper une ‘position’ dans le champ littéraire”¹⁴ or the singular way of occupying a position in the literary field. It is for this reason Bourdieu was first introduced in this thesis; for without a field, there is no way for anyone to occupy a place therein. Or, as Meizoz puts it: “Posture [...] only makes sense in relation to position in the literary field.”¹⁵ It is important to note that ‘to occupy’ here means both to conquer a position in the field as well as to hold down the position you are currently in.¹⁶ Posture can therefore be used as a tool to conquer a different position, but also to strengthen the position you are inhabiting now.

¹¹ Meizoz, “Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁴ Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures Littéraires: Mises en scène modernes de l’auteur*, (Genève: Slatkine Érudition, 2007), 18.

¹⁵ Meizoz, “Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

1.1.3 Posture

Now that a broad, working definition has been established, it can be further expanded upon and narrowed down. One of the elements that should perhaps be more clearly illustrated, is that posture is not solely construed by the author themselves, or even consciously so. Posture is created by the author's surrounding actors in the field as much as the author themselves and the process is interactive and is therefore never static. Posture can of course be used by the author to construe an image or persona they themselves choose, but are questionable or farfetched in reality. Meizoz's example of Rousseau, who construed a persona of himself as that of a working man, an image he chose himself, despite having the luxury to also convey an image of that of aristocracy, is a good example.¹⁷ Of course the author as a conniving and cunning mastermind, calculating their every move in order to sway the court of public opinion is also untrue and very reductive. Meizoz argues it also "barely makes sense" whether an author is honest or not about their posture in a biographical sense, since the posture that is construed by and for the author shapes their ultimate biography.¹⁸ Authors also make many choices subconsciously or they do not make choices at all and the end result of what is printed in the paper the following day can be due to their upbringing, because they had a bad day, or the journalist who wrote about them.

Every expression of an author can be categorised, whether that is what an author is wearing, what they respond during an interview or what authorial self-image a text from an author creates. In order to discuss and categorise these expressions effectively, it seems useful to divide these authorial expressions into categories, using the same vocabulary that Meizoz uses. However, Meizoz's vocabulary has not been consistent since he popularised the use of posture in academia. Emma Kustermans provides an excellent overview on how Meizoz's

¹⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁸ Ibid.

vocabulary evolves throughout the years.¹⁹ First in 2007, Meizoz used the distinction between the internal and the external: the internal encompasses everything that springs forth from the literary text of an author, the external everything outside of the literary text. He then also makes the important observation that expressions can be made by actors other than the author. He distinguishes auto-representative expressions – statements made by the author themselves – and hetero-representative expressions – statements made by actors who are not the author.²⁰ However, three years later, he only differentiates between expressions which are behavioural and which are linked to discourse.²¹ This means that Meizoz no longer makes a distinction between the literary text and the non-literary, but rather differentiates between those expressions that can be written down (discursive) and those that cannot (non-discursive). This distinction focuses more on columns, verbal answers at interviews and other things that can be verbally documented in favour of the literary text and gives an equally large focus on the non-verbal.

Internal expressions construe a self-image of the author within their literary texts, whereas external expressions deal with those outside of the literary.²² Although the discursive and the internal are similar, it is important to note they differ on the count that discursive expressions deal with all texts and verbal expressions by the author and the internal limits itself to an author's literary works, in the case of this thesis, only the novels by Nicola Barker.

Auto-representative expressions are made by the author themselves, which in this thesis means statements made by Nicola Barker. Hetero-representative statements deal with statements made by others *about* Nicola Barker; journalists in interviews, scholars in academic publications or critics in reviews.

¹⁹ Kustermans, Emma, "Wie haar hoort is verloren: Twintig jaar Antjie Krog in Nederland, de aspecten van haar literaire posture," (MA Thesis, Radboud University, 2019), 18-9.

²⁰ Meizoz, *Postures Littéraires: Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, 45.

²¹ Meizoz, "Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau," 85.

²² Meizoz, *Postures Littéraires: Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, 23.

Discursive expressions have to do with speech. These can be made verbally during an interview, in a book they have written themselves or in the weekly column they write. A discursive expression tends to be transcribable. Non-discursive are the expressions of the author that are not verbal or written down. They are more related to the public image of the author; the clothes they are wearing, how they manifest in media, if they appear in media. Non-discursive elements are nearly inexhaustible. Meizoz goes as far as to include certain gestures or even a look an author gives someone else.²³ All these things can be considered non-discursive.

Rather than discarding Meizoz's earlier work in favour of his later, the merging of both provided a clearer picture. When all are put together, the model looks like figure 1. An expression in this context can be understood to be an immense range of actions, from a small gesture at a televised interview to an entire novel and everything in between.

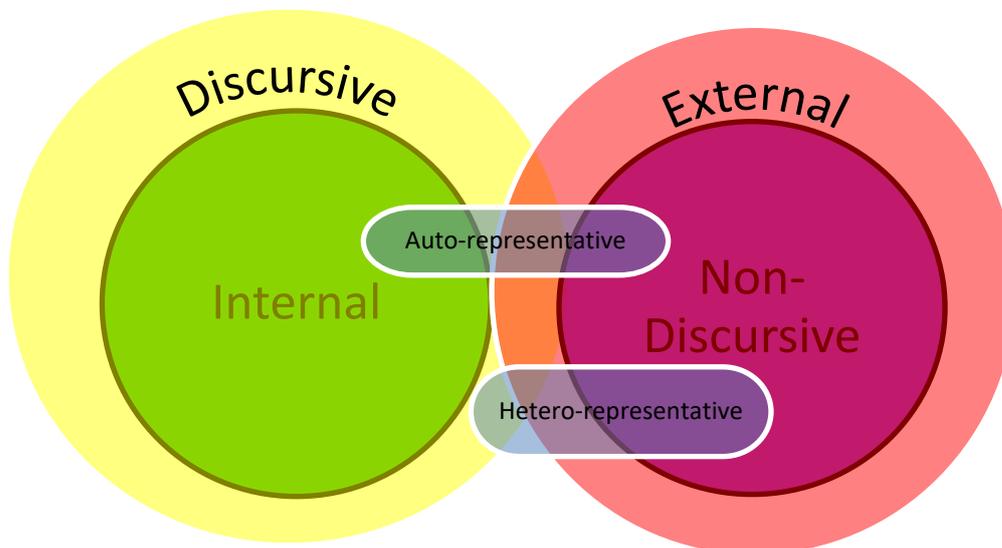


Figure 1. Categorising expressions surrounding posture.

²³ Meizoz, "Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau," 85.

Perhaps some clarifications about figure 1 are in place. Since the discursive – which are all expressions done in a transcribable way – always encompasses more than the internal – which only includes literary texts –, the internal is a sphere within the discursive. The same goes for the external: everything that lies outside of the literary text encompasses more than that which cannot be transcribed, since a weekly column written by the author is external, but discursive nonetheless. The ovals of auto-representation and hetero-representation are small for the sake of a clearer overview, but in actuality encompass nearly the entire field, since every expression is done either by the author themselves or another actor in the field. An important distinction is that of the hetero-representative and the internal, two fields that do not overlap in figure 1, for the obvious reason that other actors cannot express themselves in the literary work of the author, since the author is defined as the sole entity responsible for the novel and not necessarily the same as the person whose name appears on the cover of a novel. An example of this would be that the author of 2020 novel *House of Correction* would be Nicci French, whereas the writers who published it are Nicci Gerrard and Sean French who use the pseudonym Nicci French to publish their books.

This overview of posture, how it came to be and is utilised now provides how posture is to be interpreted in this thesis. Meizoz's definition of the singular way of occupying a position in the field stands at its centre and figure 1 provides a way to fruitfully categorise expressions in order to understand their origin.

1.1.4 Metamodernism

In 2010 Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker published their seminal article “Notes on Metamodernism”, which as of October 2021 had been cited at least 843 times. It was not meant as prescriptivist or an extending of a dogma or manifesto, but instead

“should be read as an invitation”.²⁴ In it they describe what they sometimes call an emergent sensibility, or, more commonly later on a “structure of feeling”.²⁵ They decided to call this structure of feeling metamodernism, since the Ancient Greek prefix *μετά* (“meta”) can be used to mean “with”, “between” and “beyond”. They intend this to mean that metamodernism therefore works with, between and beyond with both modernism and postmodernism.

Vermeulen and Van den Akker were not alone in this observation and will expectedly not be the last. Some scholars have noted that since Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s publication, the shift in structure of feeling they have observed for a longer time seems to coincide with what was written in “Notes on Metamodernism”. One such scholar is Berthold Schoene, who poignantly states that:

It is worth noting here that the larger part of the chapter was written long before I came across Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s definition of metamodernism, and consequently it now reads back to me a bit like an essay unwittingly in search of that definition.²⁶

Before a definition is given there are two essential side notes that need to be made. 1) It is important to mind that the term metamodernism has taken and probably will continue to take on a life of its own. Many different people and institutions have given a meaning to metamodernism, not all scholarly. Although a scholar (and an artist) himself, Luke Turner in 2011 wrote a metamodernist manifesto with eight tenets,²⁷ referring to Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s article, in which they specifically stated that it was meant as “an invitation for debate and rather than an extending of a dogma.”²⁸ 2) Although in this thesis the paradigmatic

²⁴ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010): 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Berthold Schoene, “The Barkeresque Mode: An Introduction,” in *Nicola Barker: Critical Essays*, ed. Berthold Schoene (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited, 2020), 21.

²⁷ Luke Turner, “Metamodernist Manifesto,” accessed 7 February 2022.
<http://www.metamodernism.org/>.

²⁸ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 2.

shift from postmodernism or the structure of feeling widely accepted by scholars to have deviated from postmodernism will be referred to as metamodernism, this choice is not excluding all the other excellent alternatives academics have provided. Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson summarise the ever-growing umbrella of terms for this structure splendidly:

Several terms have emerged in the literary/critical field in the last ten years or so that attempt to register this extension/rejection of the postmodern including post-postmodernism (Nealon), beyond postmodernism (Stierstorfer), after postmodernism (Potter and López), altermodernism (Bourriaud), metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker), digimodernism (Kirby), the new puritans (Blincoe and Thorne) and the new sincerity (Kelly), amongst others.²⁹

What is perhaps most striking about this extensive enumeration is that Bentley et al. suggest its incompleteness. Vermeulen and Van den Akker then, are not alone in their understanding of a change in structure of feeling. The choice to use metamodernism in this thesis is because it was the first term for the new shift of sensibility I encountered during my studies and it is the one seemingly still most in use.

Although metamodernism is notoriously difficult to define and, since it is used to describe the ongoing culture change, arguably still developing, Vermeulen and Van den Akker's definition comes closest to my own understanding of what metamodernism entails exactly. Their by far most often quoted paragraph that seemingly best captures their definition of the term is:

Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and

²⁹ Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson, "Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s," in *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 16.

melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.³⁰

In their article Vermeulen and Van den Akker mainly seem to define metamodernism by the spaces in between counterparts. Part of the reason metamodernism might have appealed to a large amount of people is that Vermeulen and Van den Akker define it so vaguely. In technical terms they describe metamodernism as exposing itself through atopic metaxy. Just as the definition offered in the quote, this rationale on its own is meaningless, but in the context of the metaphor of the modern as utopic syntaxis and the postmodern as dystopic parataxis it somewhat narrows down of what Vermeulen and Van den Akker are trying to communicate.

What is it then that Vermeulen and Van den Akker are trying to communicate and how does this change in structure of feeling manifest itself to us? What perhaps drove Vermeulen and Van den Akker to strive for a new term is Linda Hutcheon's call to arms. In 2002 she stated that the postmodern moment had passed and that "Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century."³¹ In defining what metamodernism precisely entails and what most other scholars agree on is that metamodernism differs from postmodernism, although it contains some similarities with its temporal predecessor. While ironic sincerity sounds paradoxical, it is not an oxymoron. Metamodernism seems like a logical answer to the eternal deconstruction of postmodernism. Looking back at the turn of the century it found techniques and a vocabulary with which to harness itself against the dead end postmodernism was bound to argue itself into at one point or another. When nothing is absolutely true and everything is deconstructed, there comes a point where there is nothing left but to start reconstruction.

³⁰ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 5-6.

³¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 181, quoted in Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010): 3.

Though Vermeulen and Van den Akker perhaps paint the clearest picture of metamodernism, they do so with all art in mind. In their article, they discuss film, architecture, photographs, painting, and more, but leave literature undiscussed.

David James and Urmila Seshagiri also published an article on metamodernism. Unlike Vermeulen and Van den Akker, James and Seshagiri mainly focus on the literary aspect of metamodernism. What is interesting to note here is that although James and Seshagiri's article was published after Vermeulen and Van den Akker's popularising of the term of metamodernism, it refers in no way to their publication. Furthermore, James and Seshagiri's definition of metamodernism is distinctly different from Vermeulen and Van den Akker in one key way: James and Seshagiri never discuss postmodernism in depth. Where Vermeulen and Van den Akker's definition hinges on the oscillation between modernist enthusiasm and postmodernist irony, James and Seshagiri's version is mainly concerned with literature's return to modernism. They state that an increasing amount of contemporary novelists focus on modernism, "styling their twenty-first-century literary innovations as explicit engagements with the innovations of early-twentieth-century writing."³² They do however, agree that postmodernism is no longer the dominant form in critical discourse.³³ James and Seshagiri thus propose a different definition of metamodernism:

We focus on contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-conscious relationships with modernist literature. The legacy inscribed in these relationships is an important but little-charted twenty-first-century aesthetic that we call metamodernism. Metamodernism regards modernism as an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁴

³² David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution," *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 87.

³³ *Ibid.*, 87-8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

This observation of a resurfacing of modernism is apt, but falls short in some ways. There are three main issues that seem to plague James and Seshagiri's definition. The first is that if one is to focus on contemporary fictions that have a relationship with modernist literature, then one is only going to find literature that has to do with modernism in some way or other. The next is that some of the contemporary fiction James and Seshagiri discuss, can hardly be considered contemporary, such as Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* from 1998 and John Berger's *G* from 1972. These novels are far earlier than most scholars would declare postmodernism exhausted, since the end of postmodernism is usually declared some time at the start of the millennium. The third and final issue is the notion that authors from 2000 onwards would use modernism as an archive and solely modernism. Postmodernism has had too big an influence on arts and culture, on literature alone to have not impacted authors in some way or other. The fact that James and Seshagiri seem to utterly ignore this influence seems bizarre. To quote Gary Potter and José López: "it is impossible to avoid considering postmodernism."³⁵

Apart from these issues, James and Seshagiri do bring up important points. The characteristics they discuss regarding literature are far more concrete than Vermeulen and Van den Akker's observations. They argue that metamodernist novels are characterised by experimentalism, shaped by discontinuity, nonlinearity, interiority, chronological play and plotted around the creation and reception of modernist art.³⁶ Although potentially some of these overlap with characteristics of both modernism and postmodernism, so do some of the elements referred to by Vermeulen and Van den Akker.

Another useful source in a search for metamodernism is Bentley et al.'s *The 2000s*. In it they observe three strands of British novelists that seem to diverge from postmodernism.

³⁵ Gary Potter and José López, *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, (London and New York: Athlone Press, 2001), 3, quoted in Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, "Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s," 17.

³⁶ James and Seshagiri, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution," 89.

The first are authors who still apply “narrative techniques associated with postmodernism but who have reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions.”³⁷ The narrative techniques intended here could well be the same as the ones proposed by James and Seshagiri, since modernism and postmodernism utilise a verisimilar set of tools, but mainly seem to diverge in how they apply them. Another thing that is striking is the use of the word reintroduce, which seems to suggest that this set of grounded ethical positions belong to modernism or perhaps an even earlier literary movement such as Romanticism. The second strand they note are authors who seem to reject postmodernism and therefore seem to re-engage with realist modes of writing.³⁸ This ‘return’ to realism can also engage with postmodernism in a way that it overworks and even exhausts the conventions of realism, resulting in what James Wood refers to as “hysterical realism”.³⁹ The third and final strand Bentley et al. observe, are those who consciously return to modernist ways of writing.⁴⁰ An important nuance here is that there are authors who could be categorised in all three these strands. One of the authors they discuss who qualifies for all three of these categories is Nicola Barker.⁴¹

Barker’s work has been categorised as metamodernist by more than just Bentley. Nancy Armstrong groups her with Kazuo Ishiguro, W.G. Sebald, David Mitchell and Jon McGregor as authors who utilise the novel as a form that speaks to “‘the paradigmatic shifts in science, politics and literature’ currently undergone by Anglophone culture”.⁴² Similarly, Hans Bertens and Ben Masters discuss Nicola Barker and her work in a way that distinctly

³⁷ Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, “Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s,” 17.

³⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁹ James Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman,” *The New Republic*, August 30, 2001, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman>, quoted in Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, “Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s,” 19.

⁴⁰ Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, “Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s,” 19.

⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

⁴² Nancy Armstrong, “The Future in and of the Novel,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 44, no. 1 (2011): 8, quoted in Eleanor Byrne, “The Pursuit of Happiness in *H(A)PPY*, or what a difference an (A) makes,” in *Nicola Barker: Critical Essays*, ed. Berthold Schoene (Canterbury: Glyphi Limited, 2020), 195-6.

bifurcates from the cultural hegemony of postmodernism that reigned supreme during the publishing of Barker's early work.

Bertens devoted an article on Barker's *Darkmans* (2007) in 2013. In it he questions how it is at all possible that scholars have not yet been able to name the new dominant literary movement, since postmodernism was so quickly recognised and acknowledged to be something that deviated enough for modernism to be accepted as something completely different.⁴³ Almost ten years later there is a plethora of names to choose from, although metamodernism seems to be the most prevalent, specifically in literary criticism. Bertens distinctly discusses *Darkmans*'s verisimilitude to Joyce and Eliot in the way characters in the novel experience reality. Bertens further provides examples of why Barker's writing can be considered modernist, although he also frequently compares her to Thomas Pynchon, who is an unequivocally considered postmodernist. Bertens toing and froing between providing postmodernist and modernist examples in Barker's text – although Bertens ultimately argues that *Darkmans* is to be considered a modernist novel, possibly lacking the vocabulary and insight proffered by Vermeulen and Van den Akker and James and Seshagiri – is a scene which he quotes wherein one of the protagonists from *Darkmans* refutes a decidedly postmodernist view on truth ("The truth [...] is that there is no truth"), a sentiment Kane arguably would have agreed with at the start of the novel.⁴⁴ This attitude of accepting the deconstruction of postmodernism, but ultimately deciding to pursue something more reconstructive and arguably more useful nonetheless is – to paraphrase Vermeulen and Van den Akker again – like a donkey chasing a carrot that is always just beyond its reach, but decides to chase it anyway and is considered in this thesis an exceptional example of

⁴³ J.W. Bertens, "Eenentwintigste-eeuws Modernisme: Nicola Barkers *Darkmans*," in *De erfenis van het Modernisme*, ed. J. Baetens, S. Houppermans, A. Langeveld and P. Liebrechts, (Amsterdam: Rozenberg, 2010), 38.

⁴⁴ Nicola Barker, *Darkmans*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2007), 824, quoted in Bertens, "Eenentwintigste-eeuws Modernisme: Nicola Barkers *Darkmans*," 53.

metamodernist writing.⁴⁵ It is perhaps best described as a ‘metamodernism avant la lettre’ – although the term metamodernism was already around in 2013 – when Bertens states that:

postmodernism leaves a trail in *Darkmans* and Barker is clearly well-acquainted with the ideology of postmodernism. However, [...] *Darkmans* resists these postmodernist views. [...] Emotion and pain are completely authentic [...]. The design that Barker chooses for this theme that is not especially new, is a modernism that does not eschew to wander off the beaten track from ‘historical’ modernism.⁴⁶

This is an expert description of what Vermeulen and Van den Akker would regard as quintessentially metamodernist. The link of contemporary novelists who are associated with modernism is also noted by Kersten and Wilbers who did research into the use of labels used in the reception of the novel *C* by Tom McCarthy. McCarthy is often quoted in the academic discussion of literary metamodernism. It is no great surprise then that the research by Kersten and Wilbers yielded that the labels used most often to describe *C* are modernism and avant-garde, since these are labels that are essentially synonyms of what is often associated with metamodernist literature.⁴⁷

The use of the label avant-garde to describe metamodernist literature is an important one. Since it is widely agreed upon by scholars that postmodernism has been exhausted to some extent – the extent to which it is exhausted is what seems to still be up for debate –, the reason it is exhausted is that has achieved its goal from being a criticism of popular culture to *being* the new cultural dominant. The reason postmodernism seems to be exhausted is that its critique of how there should not be a clear demarcation between so-called high and popular culture has been pervasive and successful, but therefore can no longer be considered

⁴⁵ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 5.

⁴⁶ Bertens, “Eenentwintigste-eeuws Modernisme: Nicola Barkers *Darkmans*,” 54. My translation.

⁴⁷ Kersten and Wilbers, “A Tale of Two Labels: The Use of “Modernism” and “Avant-Garde” in the Reception of Tom McCarthy’s *C*,” 28.

constructive criticism in academic discourse. The need for a new avant-garde is therefore an obvious one.

Ben Masters describes Barker's fiction and specifically her style with other words, although I believe they are meant in much the same spirit as scholars contributing to the metamodernism debate, which Masters joined himself in 2021, when he discussed Ali Smith's style as metamodernist.⁴⁸ The specific wording Masters uses in his 2020 article concerning Barker is 'indie style'. In it he refers to the aesthetic of the music genre of indie to describe Barker's literary style, a comparison that is very apt and is verisimilar to the comparison of Barker's style and metamodernist style. Master's article will be discussed in more depth in chapter three.

Summarising the metamodernism debate and discussing its process, it should be noted that these developments are best examined using an exemplary case study, such as Nicola Barker and her most recent novels. The goal of this thesis is to ultimately observe and explicate how Barker's posture is construed, but since Nicola Barker is part of the literary avant-garde and the metamodernism debate is simultaneously tied in with the avant-garde, it seemed only logical to combine observations on the two together.

1.2 Methodology

In order to construe the internal posture of Nicola Barker three of Barker's latest novels will be close read and examined to learn more about her internal posture. For her external posture, the last ten years of academia, interviews and reviews will be researched. To put it in Meizozian terms, the internal posture will be researched solely by looking at auto-representative, internal discursive expressions and the external posture will be researched through a combination of auto-representative and hetero-representative, external and both

⁴⁸ Ben Masters, "Adjustment-style: from H. G. Wells to Ali Smith and the metamodern novel," *Textual Practice* 35, no. 6 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1935750>.

discursive and non-discursive expressions, although a focus will be on the discursive. The relevant themes in the novels will be grouped and discussed together in chapter two. Barker's external posture will be examined using articles from academia, interviews and reviews. This thesis will only look at professional reviews published in newspapers.

It was explained in the theoretical frame that metamodernism, in some ways, deals with a resurgence of modernism, a legacy of postmodernism, and – truly in the spirit of modernism – a drive to make it all new. In this thesis I want to research whether a similar case can be made for posture. Of course no scholar in the past has referred to a posture as modernist, but a case can be made to support the view that there are certain elements that, especially the most famous modernists – Woolf, Joyce and Elliot –, share certain similarities within their posture. These similarities overlap with general elements of modernism: an emphasis on subjectivity, rather than objectivity, a moving away from established literary features, such as an omniscient external narrator and fixed points of view, experimentation and blurring of forms so that novels can be more lyrical or poetic and poems more like prose, a new preference for fragmented forms and discontinuous narratives and a tendency towards reflexivity, so that poems, plays, and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status, and role.⁴⁹ To make matters more complicated, some of these features, such as novels raising issues concerning their own nature, status and role, could also be used to refer to postmodernist characteristics.

When examining Nicola Barker's posture and whether this posture has similarities to metamodernism, during the close reading of Barker's novels, emphasis will be put on elements that have to do with modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism, as well as issues concerning authorship, which are numerous throughout Barker's oeuvre. The same topics will be analysed when researching Nicola Barker's external posture.

⁴⁹ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 79.

Chapter 2: Internal Posture

In this chapter, Nicola Barker's internal posture will be discussed, using her three latest novels. Chronologically, they will be *The Cauliflower*® (2016), *H(A)PPY* (2017) and *I Am Sovereign* (2019). Themes that stood out to have a particular impact on posture have been gleaned from the novels and will be examined each under their respective heading, rather than discussing the novels from start to finish.

2.1 *The Cauliflower*® (2016)

The Cauliflower® is a novel about the 19th-century Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna. It describes his life's events in a fictionalised and mosaic-like form. It is told nonchronologically and from many different viewpoints. Most of it is focalised through Hriday, Sri Ramakrishna's nephew and caretaker. It is written in prose, although the novel contains numerous haikus, letters and different texts within it. Despite its historical and religious material, the author takes a very fictionalised and sometimes comical approach to the serious genre of biography, which often permits less leeway than the novel. It is because of Barker's choices of how to tell the life story of Sri Ramakrishna that the book is considered a novel and not a biography. In the afterword she writes that the "novel (if I can call it that) [...] is a[n] [...] attempt to understand how faith works, how a legacy develops, how a spiritual history is written".⁵⁰ The name of the novel stems from Ramakrishna's love for the titular vegetable, which Hriday tries to keep away from him for the flatulence they cause Ramakrishna. The title also refers to a fictitious film that is being recorded during the novel with the name *The Cauliflower*®.⁵¹ The novel has no numbered or titled chapters but instead

⁵⁰ Nicola Barker, *The Cauliflower*®, (London: Penguin Random House, 2016), 325.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 321-2.

every new part bears an introductory time, place or comment. The ‘chapters’ differ in length from a few lines to several pages.

The plot of the novel surrounds the life of Sri Ramakrishna and the temple in which he becomes head priest, the Dakshineswar Kali temple in Calcutta. Rani Rashmona, who, despite being a woman and of the ‘wrong’ caste, ordered the construction of the temple, is also a minor character in the novel. Ramakrishna’s turbulent life ultimately ends when he dies of throat cancer and his disciples form a monastic order in his name.

2.1.1 Intertextuality and Intermediality

The Cauliflower[®] contains a multitude of different texts and is filled with intertextuality and intermediality. Intertextuality deals with references to other texts. Intermediality in this context is to be understood as one medium of art being intermedial, or to be containing multiple artistic media, thereby blurring the distinctions between traditional media. Or, in the words of Werner Wolf, intermediality deals with transgressions of boundaries between conventionally distinct media, which in the case of *The Cauliflower*[®] would be the media of literature and film.⁵² The novel also contains many haikus, but since poetry and prose both exist within the medium of written literary text, it would not necessarily be considered a transgression.

In the case of *The Cauliflower*[®] the intermedial perhaps has more to do with the author narrating about filming the fictitious film, but it nonetheless contains some ‘filmic shots’ within the confines of the novel. This already starts on the first page of the novel when the author expresses that the story of Rani Rashmoni “longs to be a film” and that Rashmoni is “the star of (the heroine) of her own movie.”⁵³ The longing of the author for the events that

⁵² Werner Wolf, “(Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2011): 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1789>.

⁵³ Barker, *The Cauliflower*[®], 1.

transpire in the novel to be made into a film manifest into an anachronistic film crew as well as some filmic commentary to sometimes make an appearance in the novel. These manifestations undercut the serious tone that usually accompany the genre of both historical novels and biographies, but do conform to the general tone and style of this novel, since the general style seems very whimsical and comical. An example of this is the adhortation of the author to celebrate one of the Rani's achievements: "God bless the Rani! Let's throw our hats into the air – *en masse*. Can we try that again, please, on the count of three (it's the sound man's fault – he'd nipped off for a quick fag)? OK, one . . . two . . ." ⁵⁴ This celebration is then followed by director's instructions to fix the Rani's hair and makeup for her next big close-up and some foreshadowing about her being slapped in the face while worshipping in the temple "by a lowly – and seemingly demented – temple priest (*gasp!*). Any ideas who? Go on. Go on. Take a guess." ⁵⁵

What does this then say about the author's posture? These paragraphs indicate a non-conformist and transgressive stance towards the traditional genres this novel supposedly should conform to. The author transgresses these boundaries by utilising playful tactics like fictionalising the real – e.g. by inserting a film crew in a historical novel – and breaking the fourth wall and speaking to the reader directly.

The intermediality of film within the novel becomes clearest during a scene in which the reader follows along a camera-mounted bird flying around the newly constructed Dakshineswar temple. During this scene the author uses the second person to ask the reader whether the screams of the swift are too loud and adjusts the volume, to slightly tilt their head because the camera was thwacked by a guard's fan and when the swift meets their untimely demise at the claws of a crow its body is thrown in the Ganges by Ramakrishna himself. ⁵⁶ All

⁵⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Original emphasis.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 66-74.

the while the author is incessantly emphasising that the bird is a “*circa* 1855 Indian swift” every time it is mentioned.⁵⁷ This persistent pedantry coupled with the comical filmic writing brings forth an interesting internal posture. It shows an author who is simultaneously capable of experimental, intermedial writing while supposedly not taking her role entirely seriously. It lends their writing an air of unapologetic sincerity. It is scenes like these that showcase the author is clearly writing a novel instead of a biography.

The subplot of the film crew is never made explicitly clear throughout the novel, but sometimes there are hints towards the 1955 Bengali film *Rani Rashmoni*, a historical film about the same character as the one in the novel. And although another such scene is headed with “*The Rani’s dream(s), 1847*” it is clear that the character playing the Rani in the fictitious film is not living in the time this chapter is headed by or in time to record the 1955 film, since there are numerous anachronisms brought up, like Rudyard Kipling’s (1865-1936) writing, a tepid saveloy from the local chippie responsible for giving the actor playing Ramakrishna food poisoning and an allusion to the 1963 film *Jason and the Argonauts*.⁵⁸ The unclear space of time in which the filming takes place problematises the relationship the novel has with time, especially considering the rest of the novel also takes place in a chaotic, nonchronological way. Perhaps the best way to describe their place of metaxy is found in the novel itself: a “liminal space, an air bubble within history.”⁵⁹

Kipling’s writing is referred to more than once. Beside the actress portraying the Rani quoting from Kipling’s *City of Dreadful Night* (1885), Ramakrishna is also referred to as an “artless Mowgli”, which alludes to Kipling’s *Jungle Book* series.⁶⁰ Along with Kipling, a paragraph from Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852-3) is quoted.⁶¹ Intertextual references

⁵⁷ Ibid., 73. Original emphasis.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 115-8.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

to these colonial authors are interesting, especially because in the time of Sri Ramakrishna, Bengal was still a British colony. Allusions to these authors can be considered controversial, since Barker is also English, writing about a culture that was once oppressed under British imperial rule. However, Barker also admits this fault in the afterword, where she states that she has not lived in the 19th century, has never met Sri Ramakrishna, is not a practising Hindu and has never visited Calcutta. If she had, she “probably could not have written this book. I wouldn’t have been stupid, arrogant, brave, naughty – and possibly even dispassionate – enough.”⁶²

2.1.2 Liberties with History

Despite *The Cauliflower*® being a novel and not a biography, it discusses some serious topics and themes, not to mention its protagonist and his (religious) teachings are still practised today. Nevertheless, the author incorporates some exceedingly generous liberties with the history that they writing about. On the other hand, the author gives a great deal of social, cultural and historical context, sometimes by breaking the fourth wall and engaging in dialogue with the reader. When the author says that Rani Rashmona is contemplating what the ramifications of her husband’s early death are, they immediately negate that by writing that of course she does not; the Rani does not have the luxury of not living in the present, “[b]ut we can. We can step outside 1836.”⁶³ They then continue to contextualise the precarious position of the Rani. By such a suspension of disbelief and disruption of the narrative the author shifts the focus from the biographical to the novelistic, opting to focus more on the subjective than the objective. A similar observation is made on page 40, where the author writes:

How can we possibly hope to look deep into the heart of a man like Prince

Dwarakanath Tagore [...]? We can’t. [...] We can only make a series of cack-handed

⁶² Ibid., 325.

⁶³ Ibid., 24.

assumptions and then cheerfully forge our equally fatuous, clumsy and superficial deductions from them.⁶⁴

By writing such observations in the first person plural instead of the second person, the author includes themselves into this in-group of supposed ignoramuses. They thereby make themselves known not as an omniscient narrator, but rather acknowledging their own naïveté regarding some socio-historic context.

Although the author at times acknowledges their own lack of knowledge, at other times, they plainly and playfully fictionalise some accounts. This is also true for the interaction between Prince Dwarakanath Tagore and Rani Rashmona, who are both in awkward positions towards one another: the Rani, who inherited significant belongings from her late husband, but as a woman is only a “temporary custodian of it, since all money and goods are passed on to the husband’s family upon her death”, whereas the Prince is a man, but he still owes a large debt to the deceased Rani’s husband.⁶⁵ The author opts to include some comical, at times almost theatrical elements to the scene. This is strengthened by the fact that the Prince and the Rani are separated by a curtain and not speaking directly to each other but rather through the Rani’s right hand, Mathur Baba. The author is also not subtle about their own inclusions, writing how they were meeting on a “pre-monsoon day (I’ve added this climactic detail myself [...])” and speculating whether the Prince and the Rani can hear each other: “My guess is that they can (if only because this quadruples the comedy potential of the scene).”⁶⁶ After condolences are conveyed, the Prince suggests that the Rani employ someone to manage her vast estate, an offer the author accompanies with “(just by the by – cue the arrival of a small flying formation of several large and mean-looking Indian vultures)”, simultaneously making social commentary as well as giving the scene a comical quality.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 42-3.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 42.

After the Rani suggests that instead of making the Prince the manager over her estate, he first pays back the loan to her husband, something that astonishes Mathur – again supplying social commentary – who goes back through the curtain to ask the Prince in a way that if it were performed on stage would have doubtlessly garnered laughter: “Perhaps he walks into the fabric at the wrong point and is to be seen floundering helplessly for a few moments among heavy and asphyxiating folds of drapery. Eventually his exit is accomplished.” It is mischievous interjections like these that give *The Cauliflower*® what would otherwise have been a biography, a novelistic, Barkeresque spin.

The author also utilises the form of the novel to fill in the gaps left by history to also sometimes comment on their position of author of this novel. This way Mathur Baba, who develops an abscess on his body has its position decided by the author: “creative license dictates that we imagine it pulsating, ominously, on the cheek of one buttock”.⁶⁸ The way the author opts to use the first person plural in these instances makes both the author and the reader in this situation spectators of sorts, since they suggest a similar position.

Near the end of the novel the author decides to comment on their own position through the focalisation of a different character who just wrote a letter detailing the peculiar anecdote that lead to the novel’s name in the letter’s post scriptum. In the anecdote a couple of visitors bring a cauliflower to Sri Ramakrishna before it is taken away by Hriday (misspelt “Harryday” in the letter), who argues that his uncle cannot digest cauliflower anymore, since it gives him terrible gas.⁶⁹ In the post scriptum the author ensures the reader:

for reasons of authenticity – that all the most important details of this curious little anecdote are absolutely true – the argument, the cauliflower etc. – but for some perverse reason (known only to herself) the author of *The Cauliflower*® (can we truly call her ‘the author’? The collagist . . . ? The vampire . . . ? The coloniser . . . ? The

⁶⁸ Ibid., 227.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 292.

architect . . . ? The plagiariser . . . ? The skid-mark . . . ?) has chosen to fictionalise this account.⁷⁰

This quote – although long – sheds an interesting light on how the author views herself regarding this novel and gives the reader plenty of alternatives. The way they comment on how they fictionalise this account and refuse to explicate why, bears similarities to the playful nature of her earlier interjections. The author seems to take liberties with history to comment on how we live in a completely different historical time and cultural place than the characters in the novel and lend the accounts a more comical nature. They do so in a way that can be called whimsical, zany or comical.

2.1.3 Different Texts

The Cauliflower® contains all sorts of text beside ‘regular’ prose. Its format of a new ‘chapter’ nearly every page lends itself well to the insertion of other texts than regular prose and complements the story’s nonchronological narrative. Each chapter starts off with a heading, usually indicating a time and a place, although there are numerous exceptions. These headings differ from the concrete (“1857, *The Kali Temple, Dakshineswar (six miles north of Calcutta)*”),⁷¹ to the less concrete (“1849, *approximately*”),⁷² and from the introductory (“*Twelve slightly impertinent questions about Ma Kali:*”),⁷³ to the bizarre (“*Here follows a timeless and unifying spiritual message – via the 24-hour/7-days-a-week live broadcast channel of Sri Ramakrishna – to all religious zealots, humourless fundamentalists and wishy-washy-western New Agers:*”).⁷⁴ This device that authors usually utilise to impart background information, the author uses instead to undermine the genre of the historical novel or the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 294-5.

⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

⁷² Ibid., 1.

⁷³ Ibid., 61.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 123.

biography. By interjecting the regular narrative with random bits of information, haikus and texts from other books – such as a paragraph from the Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* and excerpts from the Bible’s Song of Solomon – observations the reader’s suspension of disbelief is continually interrupted and challenged, which gives an interesting insight into their internal posture, while simultaneously tying in with the theme of rejecting conformity.⁷⁵ Both Rani Rashmona and Sri Ramakrishna transgress their socio-cultural conformity: the Rani rejects traditional conventions of how a woman, a widow and someone born in a lower caste were expected to behave in 19th-century Bengal and Ramakrishna oversteps his conventions when he is acting like a monkey in public to imitate Hanuman, disrespects his status as a member of the priestly Brahmin caste by not properly wearing his sacred thread and dresses in women’s clothing on multiple occasions.

The constant interruptions and interjections – something Nicola Barker also does in her other novels – show an experimental and distinct voice where the author displays themselves clearest. It demonstrates a want to reject traditional conventions for the form of the novel and to look beyond them. This is sometimes done in a self-referential way, e.g. when the author openly asks “Is this book a farce, a comedy, a tragedy or a melodrama?”.⁷⁶ By plainly questioning the book’s status, the reader’s suspension of disbelief is once again broken, since it confronts the reader with the fact that they are currently reading a book and actively asks them to question what it is they are reading exactly and infuses the novel with a postmodernist, self-referential irony. Sometimes this self-referentiality is also used to undermine the quality of the novel itself, e.g. when the author writes that *The Cauliflower*[®] contains bad haikus or when the author wonders if they are indeed an author.⁷⁷ Besides being ironic, this self-doubt over one’s own authorship and wondering what they are writing is

⁷⁵ Ibid., 11 and 320.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 195 and 295.

actually good casts a layer of sincerity over the whole, since it shows a display of genuine human emotion.

2.1.4 Conclusion

There are several observations regarding internal posture that can be gleaned from *The Cauliflower*® then. Most of these observations lead to suggest that the author fits the description of a transgressive and nonconformist posture. Although the focus of the novel lends itself well to the biographical genre or the historical novel, the author chooses instead to take some liberties with history and fictionalise some accounts. The use of different kinds of texts, such as haikus, Bible verses and anachronistic, seemingly random inclusions into the narrative make for a disruptive and confusing read at times. This transgressive and nonconformist posture brings with it an experimental quality and mischievous zaniness. This becomes especially clear in sentences like when the author explicates that the anecdote about the titular cauliflower was fictionalised, but the reason for fictionalising was kept secret “for some perverse reason (known only to herself)”.⁷⁸ Despite, or arguably because of, such experimental paragraphs contribute to viewing the author as more sincere, since the author shows insecurity about their own work in said paragraphs. The internal posture that can be construed from *The Cauliflower*® can then best be described by adjectives such as transgressive, experimental, sincere, arguably intermedial, zany or whimsical, and nonconformist.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 294-5.

2.2 *H(A)PPY* (2017)⁷⁹

H(A)PPY is Barker's twelfth novel. It tells the story of Mira A in a dystopian future society where people are stripped of their private thoughts through a device called a Sensor, which other people can see. It pinkens or reddens The Graph when certain words are uttered or thought of that are considered dangerous by the System. When one's Graph pinkens or reddens, it creates a disbalance in surrounding Graphs or even in The Graph, which the entire society shares. In most of the chapters the words that pinken or redden The Graph are in some hue of pink or red in the book itself. The society that is burdened by, but simultaneously enables this socio-digital panopticon are The Young. In some ways they feel like a satire of certain mental health movements in the ways they are taught to "celebrate This Moment", that "We are In Balance. And we work hard – but never too hard" and "Everything is Whole."⁸⁰ The capitalisation of these concepts shows the apotheosis of them, since The Young were discouraged to believe in gods, although "The System is not our God. We are our own Gods."⁸¹ This obsession with the here and now makes it difficult to criticise the powers that be, since every moment is fleeting and it is discouraged to ponder on moments too long, instead people are told to "turn away" from thoughts – not to push them away, since that would be too aggressive.⁸² They are simultaneously discouraged from having emotions altogether – lest someone suffer from an EOE (an excess of emotion) and being publicly shamed – and are being pumped full of chemicals. Mira A seems to have a problem with her Graph, since when she is trying to be happy, she keeps being parenthesised – something she comments on in the book itself. Kite, a government Operator, tries to help her, but the

⁷⁹ The quotes used to show *H(A)PPY* only show the text. Since this is an academic text and Nicola Barker experiments with font, font size, word colour, artworks within the novel, blank lines and other typological and graphical styles, only the original text of the novel is quoted.

⁸⁰ Nicola Barker, *H(A)PPY* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 1-2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 28.

problem never truly goes away, leading Mira A to be involved in a revolutionary group called “The Banal”,⁸³ and ultimately being exiled from society.

For an author to write a dystopian science fiction novel – for I believe *H(A)PPY* can indeed be considered both a genre novel and a literary one – and make the dominant ideology overlap so much with ideas from mindfulness and other related psychological and/or meditational practices is very interesting from a posture perspective. Of course Barker’s spin on it puts it closer to what is in popular media often referred to as ‘toxic positivity’, a need to put a positive spin on anything and everything and to gloss over and not acknowledge negative experiences in life, which proves unconstructive in the long time. Just as can be observed in *The Cauliflower*[®] and especially in *I Am Sovereign*, Barker explores these ideas of (popular) psychology seemingly quite often.

The blurb of the novel describes itself as a “post-post-apocalyptic *Alice in Wonderland*, a story which tells itself and then consumes itself.” This comparison to *Alice in Wonderland* hints at references to the whimsical, the cute, the zany. Although Barker’s *H(A)PPY* deals with very serious subject matter, its form with its continued interruptions, use of every possible typological option and highly subjective, interior focalisation, does contain in some way similar notions. Whether it was Barker or her publisher that made the comparison is unknown, but it is certainly an interesting one.

2.2.1 Commenting on Typology

What perhaps problematises the novel *H(A)PPY* the most from a posture point of view is the way the author of the novel and Mira A, the protagonist, overlap. In the very first chapter of the book it becomes apparent that Mira A is aware of the text that is being written about her:

⁸³ Ibid., 106.

It makes us H(A)PPY . . .

H(A)PPY

H(A)PPY

But why is that happening?

H(A)PPY

Why does the A persist on disambiguating? On parenthesisising?

And why am I talking? What am I doing? Why am I rehearsing this?⁸⁴

The fact that Mira A is simultaneously seemingly talking to the reader, but also aware that the text being presented to the reader is the same that she is currently the protagonist of, calls into question the role of author, protagonist, and focaliser. In some ways it would seem, Nicola Barker wants the reader to believe that she is not the sole author of the novel. Mira A both produces and stars in this text. This becomes even more apparent when she is on multiple occasions told by Kite to stop telling the narrative, implying that the very book in front of the readers' nose is being told by Mira A, not Nicola Barker:

‘That isn’t the issue.’ Kite suddenly seems quite exasperated. ‘The issue is that you are *still* telling your story. Even this – our exchange – is now gradually becoming a part of it. And I am a character in the story. I’m being co-opted, reinvented, *used*. And that’s not acceptable. I don’t *want* to be a character in your story, Mira A. I want to be my own character in my own story . . .’ He pauses. ‘No. I don’t want to be a character at all. I just want to be myself.’⁸⁵

Kite here also expresses a wish to not be a character in a story, breaking the fourth wall and thereby reminding the reader that they are reading a book, forcefully interrupting their suspension of disbelief. This technique was used chiefly by postmodernists to show that narratives themselves are an artificial way of telling a story or portraying ‘real life’ and by

⁸⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 47. Original emphasis.

interrupting the reader's suspension of disbelief, they are forced to acknowledge and admit that they are reading a story, which discontinues their narrative and want for escapism. Kite's unwillingness to be a character in a story while simultaneously being one can be considered ironic.

The a in "H(A)PPY" disambiguating is not the only time the protagonist comments on the way the book is written. Mira A also questions herself why certain pieces of text are italicised and to then subsequently ask if that is the way she is thinking, the logical reason a reader might interpret the text as well.⁸⁶ This gives the impression that Mira A is right there along the reader. Simultaneously these comments give an insight into the mind of Mira. She is meta-recognisant: she observes the way 'the author' – the implied author of the text, not necessarily Nicola Barker – writes down her thoughts and at the same time observes that is the way she apparently thinks. This seems to imply that she Mira A is simultaneously both author as well as character. This dynamic of being both at the same time, means that in a way she also is neither. This both/neither dynamic is something that is observed a great deal within metamodernist fiction, since it is reminiscent of Vermeulen and Van den Akker's oscillation: this 'in-betweenness' or metaxy of modernist enthusiasm and postmodernist irony is still one of the most defining features of metamodernist art.⁸⁷ Immediately after this inner monologue Mira A asks herself: "Might it be a clue? A *clue*?"⁸⁸ This immediately shows her self-awareness and arguably her 'own' ability to shape the narrative currently being told. Something similar happens on page 80, where she states that she added an exclamation point to denote how emphatically she is feeling about something, or on page 117, where she notes she feels gaps after several blank lines interrupting the narrative. On page 123 she even seems to comment on how there has been a switch from the first person (which has hitherto been

⁸⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁷ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism", 5-6.

⁸⁸ Barker, *H(A)PPY*, 56. Original emphasis.

almost exclusively used) to the third person to even an unspecified first person plural: “She [Mira A] has been silly and greedy. She . . . she . . . I . . . we have taken up way too much of his precious time already.”⁸⁹ Who she refers to when she mentions this ‘we’ is unclear, although grammatically the context implies both the she and I preceding the we, hinting that they are separate entities. This happens again on page 144, where she questions what the odd movements are “I . . . she . . . we are making?”⁹⁰ The distinction she is making here makes more sense in the story, since she is watching a video of herself sleepwalking earlier and there seem to be implications of her being possessed by her “sister star” Mira B, Mira A’s incorporeal doppelgänger, or shadow, who makes her do these movements in a state similar to sleepwalking.⁹¹ Mira A also remarks that she wish she could stop could talking like this and just “*rein it in a little*”⁹². Such comments seem to suggest that the protagonist has some sort of authorial power, which calls into question who the implied author of this text is supposed to be.

Mira A also comments on why she adds certain phrases to the book. The recited phrase ‘*The tuning fork is in your heart*’, which she repeats to herself as a mantra to keep herself grounded into reality and in touch with the values of the Young is recited one more time, except this time she repeats the phrase with an exclamation mark:

I have added an exclamation mark (*heart!*) to denote how emphatically I am feeling about this . . . But I need to be extra careful, just in case my repeated use of the phrase becomes slightly hysterical. Sorry.⁹³

The way the author frames Mira A’s control over what is written down, implies one of two things. Either the reader is reading a text that is written or construed by Mira A, or the reader

⁸⁹ Ibid., 123. Original emphasis.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 144.

⁹¹ Ibid., 140.

⁹² Ibid., 210. Original emphasis.

⁹³ Ibid., 80.

is reading a text that is based on the thoughts of Mira A and the narrative takes place inside of her (digitally infiltrated) head. The apology at the end is then directed at whomever can read her mind – which any citizen within the story could do –, or it is the author, of whom the story implies it to be Mira A.

Although she sometimes shows control over what is written down, she is seemingly also not in control – “Why is that capitalised?”⁹⁴ –, wondering why certain things are written the way they are. She is both/neither in control.

2.2.2 Controlling the Narrative

Mira A’s concern with and awareness of the narrative also becomes apparent in the following lines

What kind of a narrative is this? Is it a Mystery ? A Tragedy? A Whodunnit? Oh, if I could only make sense of it then perhaps I might be able to break the cycle, to tighten my resolve and stop constantly harking back. I have tried to be silent. I have tried to stop talking.

The awareness of a narrative, but simultaneous unawareness of the kind that is being told, makes Mira A a problematic implied author, but also psychologically unaware of the control she seems to sometimes show over the narrative. This struggle, of a focaliser who does not want to tell a story, but where the narrative seems to subsist anyhow, makes for a whimsical situation. The zany situation Barker has created for this character seems to be on brand for her.

When donning the glasses of metamodernism, something that perhaps strikes the metamodernist scholar is the amount of oscillation happening in the novel. Mira A, both as a character and the star she is named after, oscillate constantly.⁹⁵ Some metamodernist scholars

⁹⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 14.

who particularly take after Vermeulen and Van den Akker could point at the 46 times some form of oscillation is proclaimed within the novel and exclaim that *H(A)PPY* is therefore a metamodernist novel. Oscillation happening in novels is not something new however, there have always been some antitheses that drive the plot, protagonist or antagonist forward. That those antitheses change throughout the novel and instead oscillate between extremes seems only logical from a narratological point of view. I always interpreted Vermeulen and Van den Akker's oscillation to be of a more thematic or stylistic nature, rather than a narratological one. Instead of the oscillation between Mira A and Mira B – which I do not consider oscillation at all; the body of Mira A is either in control of Mira A or Mira B, but never somewhere in between, which makes it the opposite of oscillation – I would consider the oscillation between Mira A being in control of the narrative and the narrative being in control of her to be true oscillation; Mira A never seems to be truly in control of the narrative, but the narrative never completely takes over and tells the story of Mira A without any of her 'input'. It is however interesting that Barker states oscillation so many times in her novel, perhaps being aware of the metamodernist concept behind the term, although it has to be noted that the novel includes a graph as an important device within the plot and graphs can of course oscillate.

Although Mira A seems to be the implied author of *H(A)PPY*, she is also undermined in her capacity as a story teller: “Narratives are not your speciality”⁹⁶, notes Kite, antagonist of the novel. Kite then goes on to explain that the way The Young deal with narratives from the past. After stating all sorts of narratives – family, romance, masculine and feminine, experimental, literary –, he says that The Sensor deconstructs these narratives for them, so that they can see the true meaning behind them. “To understand them is to disable them. It's how we stay safe.”⁹⁷ This need for deconstruction and only focusing on what is behind the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 45.

narrative, again suspends the reader's belief and makes them question what is behind this particular novel. In a sense, The Young regard literature in a way a postmodernist scholar would if they would take their beliefs to the extreme, losing sight of Rita Felski's enchantment and instead solely focusing on every meaning and agenda behind the text and only reading distrustfully.⁹⁸ Tuesday, who starts off as a friend in Mira A's kora group, but later proves to be part of The Banal as well, seems satiated with the conviction that all narratives are to be distrusted: "All narratives, to my mind, are inherently bad and dangerous and only ever really exist as vehicles for a confused and over-inflated Ego."⁹⁹ This also seems to be an ironic inside joke considering Nicola Barker wrote this line herself.

Over the course of the story Mira A's grasp over the narrative shifts: she starts off as not feeling in charge over how and why a narrative is being told to saying that someone else is telling the story – "Someone else is telling this story. They are opening and closing my mouth. [...] And these words . . . they are not mine, surely?"¹⁰⁰ – to ultimately realising she is in control of her own narrative at the end of the novel, where she starts to realise "this is my narrative [...] my story, after all".¹⁰¹ This struggle of a character arc from unreliable narrator to omniscient focaliser calls into question the author's final say over the novel; implying that that the author is somehow not in complete control over what makes the final draft of the novel. When Mira A simultaneously declares her frustration over the narrative subsisting even though she no longer wishes to tell the story – and later exclaiming that "*I MUST TELL THE STORY OF MYSELF! I MUST TELL IT EVEN IF – IN ALL LIKELIHOOD – IT ISN'T EVEN MY STORY BUT THE STORY OF SOMEONE ELSE*"¹⁰² –, this makes for an interesting view of internal posture. What does then this say about Nicola Barker's posture? The unwillingness

⁹⁸ Rita Felski. *Uses of literature*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 51-76.

⁹⁹ Barker, *H(A)PPY*, 106.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 256. Original emphasis.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 195. Original emphasis.

and unclear position on authorial authority within *H(A)PPY* seem to suggest an author who is unsure about her own fiction and therefore hides behind her characters, while simultaneously admitting that she is hiding. The novel suggests at the start that there is nobody (voluntarily) at the wheel, only to conclude that the person behind the wheel was a character all along. Barker seems to imply that while she is the author of this novel, she also does away with the authorial authority that comes with this position. One key passage where ‘the author’ shows their true face is when Mira A is pondering on the idea of a shadow or a double – which in this novel would be Mira B, her incorporeal counterpart. Then, in a different font, someone with seeming authorial authority starts to talk back to her.

“Whoever you are, insolent corrector of my pen, you are beginning to annoy me. You don’t understand what I write. You don’t understand that the law is symbolic. Twisted minds are unable to grasp this. They interpret the symbols literally . . .”

Mira is then confused and wonders who would say this. This passage suggests there is indeed some higher form of authority within the story. It is left unclear who or what this entity is exactly. Although it is left unclear as to how the story implies a posture of an author, since it continuously problematises the notion of a fixed author, it can be agreed upon the novel’s writing can certainly be configured as experimental, which is probably one of the contributing factors of why Barker was awarded the Goldsmith’s Prize for *H(A)PPY*.

Although the narrative is mostly focalised through Mira A, it sometimes changes. In one case ‘the author’ directly speaks to the reader:

Perhaps you will have noticed that Mira A’s Sensor is now feeding random script onto the back of its screen? Perhaps you will have noticed that Mira A’s Graph is no longer pinkening or purpling? It is blueing and greening. In fact Mira A is currently operating – to all intents and purposes – in a state of complete liberty.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Ibid., 172-3.

This apostrophe is another example of Nicola Barker trying to convey that there is no longer an author in charge of the book.

2.2.3 Interjections

Especially near the end of the novel where Mira's Sensor starts malfunctioning more and more, *H(A)PPY* is filled with interjections and interruptions of the narrative flow. One of the most common interjections presented in the novel is "TERRIBLE DISCIPLINE"¹⁰⁴, usually in some hue of red or purple between asterisks. This message starts popping up from page 70 and onwards not unlike a hiccup throughout the novel. It refers to Agustín Barrios, world-renowned Paraguayan guitar composer, whose life story is told alongside Mira A's story, since her Sensor starts to interject pieces of Barrios' life randomly within the story. The terrible discipline supposedly refers to how Barrios would chastise himself during practise, bringing an entire sack of rocks with him. When he played a song perfectly he would take one out, but if he made a mistake, he would place all the rocks back and start over.

Faux news articles, facts about Guaraní culture (Barrios was of Guaraní descent), criminal cases, historical accounts; Mira's Sensor starts to feed her all sorts of random information. It even feeds her the fact that the information is random:

My Graph began flashing: This is random information. All connections are arbitrary. There is no overall plan. This is random information. There is no unity here. All unity is in the System. This is random information. Any attempt to form these random facts into a narrative will meet with chaos. All Order, all Unity, all Purity is encoded into the System. This is random information...¹⁰⁵

The way it is written discourages the reader to notice a pattern or a larger whole when fed all the random information, since readers are mainly trying to construe a cohesive, logical

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 234-6.

narrative. The way this information is presented, makes the reader aware of the fact that there are different voices advocating different things within the novel; it makes the reader more suspicious of the text itself and it therefore makes for a more difficult read. It is interjections like these that give the book its experimental and offbeat character.

2.2.4 'Art in the art'

Alongside literature, Nicola Barker's books also tend to contain some form of visual art, whether they are created by ordering words in a certain way so that the space between the words form an image or in *H(A)PPY*'s case, sometimes real images within the book, which are somewhat rare in works of literature. *H(A)PPY* includes a page where the space left empty forms a guitar, with the word 'love' in its sound hole,¹⁰⁶ chapter 11, *The Gaps*, has every page repeating the same word sequences with a giant symbol over the text,¹⁰⁷ a giant cathedral made up of mathematical symbols¹⁰⁸ and the same symbols as the ones encountered at *The Gaps*, but now over the one word they are associated with in Mira's dream drawn over the repeated corresponding word in green¹⁰⁹. This is excluding all the typological differences employed in the novel, such as experimenting with font, font size, word colour, word effects (e.g. the word 'war' in bold red letters, dripping as if bleeding¹¹⁰) and e.g. circular or mirror text. These artworks, made by Tania Barker,¹¹¹ showcase that the posture of the author represented in the novel can be construed as an interdisciplinary artist, or at least being interested in more than just literary art, perhaps pushing more in the direction of intermedial art.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 129-35.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 253.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 271-9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 171.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 285.

2.2.5 Conclusion

H(A)PPY shows a problematic relationship between the author, the focaliser and Nicola Barker herself, since the protagonist and main focaliser sometimes claim control over the narrative and sometimes the narrative is described as a power of nature that cannot be suppressed. Simultaneously, Mira A, the main focaliser of the novel, seems aware of what is being written down, although she does not always show control over it. This creates the awkward situation where Mira A and the implied author of the text at times fall together, while at others Mira A is undermined in her authorial powers.

What this means in terms of internal posture is that the posture Nicola Barker casts from *H(A)PPY* showcases an experimental author, who can be zany and offbeat, anti-establishment, and show a love for intermedial art.

The technique of undercutting one's own narrative is a mainly postmodernist technique, but from the context of *H(A)PPY* it becomes clear that Nicola Barker desires more than gimmicky fourth-wall breaking dialogue. It is employed to showcase how an outside narrative can interject itself into one's own life, all the while semi-aware of its effect on us, reminding readers that they have a choice of telling one's own story. The inclusion of a biography of Agustín Barrios bolsters this view; a person of a dual nature – both Guaraní and classical guitar composer – who ultimately finds their own voice through the trade they ply. This use of postmodernist techniques – utilising them to employ them beyond their mere showcase that they are tools that can be employed –; to use them to create something new, is exactly what Bentley et al. include in their definition of “novelists who continue to use narrative techniques associated with postmodernism but have reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions”.¹¹²

¹¹² Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, “Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s,” 17.

2.3 *I Am Sovereign* (2019)

I Am Sovereign teeters on the brink between that of a novel and a novella with its meagre 209 pages. It will be referred to as novella, since the same happens in the book itself. *I Am Sovereign* tells the story of a twenty-minute long house viewing in Llandudno, Wales. Charles, the neurotic owner of the house, makes novelty teddy bears and is trying to sell his late mother's house. Avigail, the estate agent is showing the house to viewers Wang Shu, who is on the phone for almost the entire visit, and her daughter Ying Yue. The novella is focalised through Charles, Avigail, Ying Yue and The Author. The Author plays a significant role in the novel, describing how she – The Author is actively referred to in the novel as Nicola Barker – fires a character and replaces him with someone else.¹¹³ The Author as a character in the novel is different from the author who is construed by researching the internal posture of the novella. The character will therefore always be capitalised and referred to by the pronouns she/her, where the non-binary entity of the implied author will continue to be referred to as they/them. The visit goes chaotically and at the end the very narrative unravels slightly with The Author going on a tangent about writing the very book the reader has before them. The novella contains an abundance of irony, so much so that its chapters bear the title of the ironic T-shirts Charles wears. It ends with Charles and Ying Yue falling in love.

2.3.1 Irony

One of the main ways to convey humour in *I Am Sovereign* is irony and since the novella is very comical, it contains a great deal of it. Not only in the humour, but the characters themselves as well. Charles wears his ironic T-shirts, Wang Shu seems very rude, but is actually one of “the most horribly sensitive insensitive people” around and Ying Yue is “almost . . . but not quite. [She] is very nearly . . . but not actually”.¹¹⁴ The way they are

¹¹³ Nicola Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2019), 149.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 and 187.

written, every character in *I Am Sovereign* has a sense of not belonging, either in the sense of the place they are currently – e.g. people boring Avigail to death, despite dealing with them every day or Charles stumbling into the novelty bear-making by accident – or on a larger, more existential scale, like Charles who, despite falling victim to numerous self-help books and online videos “Just. *Can’t*. Get. Started. *Never*. Quite. Got. Started. My. Whole. Damn. *Life*.”¹¹⁵ Even some connections between the characters are ironic, such as that both Avigail and Ying Yue are fans of influencer Lucy Molloy, but neither of them are going to find out about it.¹¹⁶ Lucy Molloy, just like Richard Grannon, Charles’s online self-help guru, are real people, which is one of the ways the author blurs the line between the real and the fictional world. Richard Grannon is a self-styled life coach whose original website (Spartan Life Coach) is now closed.¹¹⁷ Influencer Lucy Molloy has deleted her social media accounts after issuing an apology regarding statements she made in the past about being a Nazi.¹¹⁸ Just as Grannon and Molloy, the tiles that decorate Charles’s kitchen walls are designed by Alan Wallwork, who is also a real person. When the irony of someone with the name Wallwork designing wall tiles hits Charles, he admits that him not noticing this earlier, despite having an advanced grasp of irony, can even be seen as ironic.¹¹⁹

Irony has always been closely associated with postmodernism. Modernism seemed more hopeful for the future. And although Jos de Mul warns that postmodernism must through this comparison not be seen as an antimodernist phenomenon, it does inevitably lead to nihilism or fatalism.¹²⁰ Vermeulen and Van den Akker paraphrase and expand upon Jos de

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 60.

¹¹⁷ Richard Grannon, “Spartan Life Coach,” accessed 27 June, 2022, <https://www.spartanlifecoach.com/>.

¹¹⁸ Lindsay Dodgson, “An influencer has apologized for her Nazi past. Here's how the situation unfolded,” *Insider*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/influencer-lucy-molloy-apologizes-for-old-nazi-social-media-posts-2020-6>.

¹¹⁹ Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, 61.

¹²⁰ Jos de Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art and Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 18-9.

Mul's distinction as "postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth) and modern enthusiasm (encompassing everything from utopism to the unconditional belief in Reason)."¹²¹ Between these two metamodernism supposedly oscillates. In true metamodernist fashion then, the irony of *I Am Sovereign* is rescinded and makes way for a hopeful message at the end, where The Author refuses to give in to despair and instead says that she "just needs to hope. And she needs to love. And she needs to believe, in spite of."¹²² This sentiment of believing "in spite of" is then a perfect example of informed naïveté, which is quintessentially metamodernist. The fact that the character of The Author states this in the novella, is of course interesting for construing the internal posture. Since The Author expresses this, it is hard to argue anything different than that the implied author also shares this sentiment, since that is what is being presented to the reader. What then is construed is a façade of irony harbouring a sincere hope for a better future.

2.3.2 References to popular and other culture

I Am Sovereign contains many different references to both real people as well as to other cultural phenomena. The novella starts with an epigraph by T.S. Eliot from his play *The Rock* (1934), "Where is the life we have lost in living?". Eliot, and modernist authors more broadly, are often invoked to impart a text with a more serious, literary, and highbrow tone. Despite this invocation, there are also numerous references to popular culture, such as YouTube, where Wang Shu loves to watch videos of cats falling and where Charles watches all of his Richard Grannon videos. The Author also admits her enjoyment of watching videos of Richard Grannon and Lucy Molloy on YouTube.¹²³ References to both T.S. Eliot and

¹²¹ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism", 4.

¹²² Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, 207.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 203.

famous YouTubers, a blending of highbrow and popular culture in a literary novella, are often regarded as very postmodernist. This postmodernist sentiment is then also imparted on the posture of the author and partly shapes the internal posture for this novella. The author declaring to liking these videos on YouTube is interesting for several reasons. One of these reasons is that since Nicola Barker is a prized literary author, the general expectations the public could have of her is that she has an elevated taste on culture and would therefore not consume or enjoy popular culture, which would convey this postmodernist blending of high and popular culture also onto her. On the other hand, The Author's liking for scrolling through posts on Instagram is a way of being 'just like the rest of us', perhaps displaying elements of what Meizoz calls the "working-class author".¹²⁴ This theory is complemented by what The Author states in the book in the way she talks about how Lucy Molloy's birth and subsequent joy and renewed purpose irks her, since it does not fit the "narrative/moral/social commentary The Author is surreptitiously asserting. Or not actually asserting but kind of asserting."¹²⁵ This shows that although the author seems to simply share their hobbies with their readers, they are still consciously engaged with what they want to write.

Besides reference to popular culture, *I Am Sovereign* also contains some references to Barker's earlier work. *Ein Sof*, the Hasidic Jewish concept of omnipresence of God which plagues Avigail, is as omnipresent as God is made out to be in *The Cauliflower*®: just as God is "Illumed by giant white wings:/ God is everywhere!" in *The Cauliflower*®,¹²⁶ *Ein Sof* is "Illumined. [...] *Ein Sof*, in everything, NOW" in *I Am Sovereign*.¹²⁷ Lucy Molloy also happens to have a tattoo of Kali on her back, Sri Ramakrishna's main focus of devotion.¹²⁸ Sri Ramakrishna is also called by name.¹²⁹ *H(A)PPY* is also brought up: The Author states that

¹²⁴ Meizoz, "Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau," 81.

¹²⁵ Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, 203.

¹²⁶ Barker, *The Cauliflower*®, 34.

¹²⁷ Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, 67.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

she has mixed feelings about the novel as a form “ever since completing her last work (*H(A)PPY*) which – to all intents and purposes – destroyed the novel (as a form) for The Author.”¹³⁰ These references to Barker’s other work tie in with the self-awareness of *I Am Sovereign* and the internal posture that is construed in the rest of the text.

2.3.3 Typology

Although the typological abnormalities in *I Am Sovereign* are not as extreme as they are in *H(A)PPY*, they are more numerous and radical than those in *The Cauliflower*®, where the most irregular typology used in the book is the consistent bolding of the word “salt”.¹³¹ In *I Am Sovereign* there are lines that are inclined to support the text visually, when Ying Yue thinks that she is like a feather “drifting gently [...] down, down, down, to the ground”, where each down is further inclined to the right of the page.¹³² The author also varies their font, font size, adds symbols and uses interpunction innovatively. These typological variations are mostly used to accentuate or complement the text. Sometimes they are used for comical effect, such as when Charles imagines a new idea for an ironic T-shirt that reads: “*I sincerely apologise for the using the word SHHHHHHHHHHHITTTT!*”, with the expletive taking up almost an entire half of a page.¹³³ Other times in a style that is perhaps most reminiscent of comic books, where an internal scream starts out with a bigger font and slowly starts to decrease in size, giving the effect of someone falling from a cliff.¹³⁴ The author even creates a question mark in a negative space of full stops and the word “of”.¹³⁵ The way the author makes these things visual can, just as in *H(A)PPY* certainly be considered intermedial, since novels – or novellas in this case – do not normally contain these kinds of visual expressions. Besides

¹³⁰ Ibid., 207.

¹³¹ Barker, *The Cauliflower*®, 5.

¹³² Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, 15.

¹³³ Ibid., 24-5. Original emphasis.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 73-4.

actual visuals, there are also implied icons in the novella, such as “*emoji of shrugging person*”.¹³⁶ ‘Symbols’ like these help construct the internal posture of the author, just as the references to popular social media, and construe the author’s posture to be more like that of an ordinary, younger person, someone who texts, watches clips on YouTube and scrolls through the pages of Instagram.

The changing of fonts is mainly utilised in relation to the character of Gyasi ‘Chance’ Ebo, who has requested that the font American Typewriter is used in the chapters in which he features heavily.¹³⁷ But since that would undermine the calm fluidity of the text The Author refuses, only to briefly use it later to spite him.¹³⁸

These variations with typology are probably one of the factors that contribute to other actors in the field referring to Nicola Barker as experimental. By diverging from only using typology and interpunction in a traditional way, the author explores beyond the traditional way of writing.

2.3.4 ‘The Author in the Novel’

It is hard to ignore a character in a novella literally called The Author and not comment on it while researching posture in a thesis. The character of The Author is first introduced in a brief interruption in legalese, where she is introduced as “*Nicola Barker (henceforth referred to as The Author)*”.¹³⁹ There are many examples of books where the author themselves becomes a character in the story, but there are few where they play such a clear role as author of the story, still deciding over the writing process they are currently going through.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 149.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 158 and 162.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 149.

Although the status of the character of The Author is apparent in the last quarter of the book, where she is merely a character in the story, although she does show her agency over who does and does not ultimately end up in the novella, there are other instances where an omniscient narrator also rears their head, who does have final say over how the story develops. When it is revealed that both Avigail and Ying Yue are fans of Lucy Molloy, the author states that they are unlikely to find out of their shared fandom “because there now only eight short minutes remaining of this particular house viewing”.¹⁴⁰ This seems to also alarm the author, who starts to nervously count down a second further, which indicates that the author does not have final say in their work.

The unwillingness of the character of Gyasi ‘Chance’ Ebo to cooperate with The Author’s intention to portray him is a similar style as the one that is utilised in *H(A)PPY*, where the author no longer seems in control of the narrative, with characters rebelling to authorial authority or insisting or creating their own narrative. Portraying these characters infuses the story with an anti-establishment spirit. This spirit is not as apparent in *I Am Sovereign* as it is in *H(A)PPY*, but in both characters seem to rebel against the power structures that seem to contain them.

In the interruption the author discusses the characters as if they were actors in a play: Wang Shu’s character arc was cut short, Charles’s cat Morpheus was originally played by Sindy, but Ebo kept complaining the white fur kept marking his white jeans – even though Charles offered him lint rollers on multiple occasions.¹⁴¹ The Author later even admits that Charles is merely a hoarder for the benefit of this narrative.¹⁴² This adds another layer of fiction to the novella, characters having a life beside the story they are currently portraying. The Author then trying to respectfully interact with all these characters also adds another

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 151-3.

¹⁴² Ibid., 190.

layer of humanity and likeability to her, although she comes across as petty sometimes, squabbling with Ebo over whether his sunglasses are real or knockoffs.¹⁴³ These interactions do therefore come across as genuine. This discussion evolves in a rapid unravelling of the actual story told within the novella, after The Author demands full access to the novel.¹⁴⁴ She discusses the ordeal of her copy-editor of having to check Avigail's name, but making sure that Charles mistakenly calls her Abigail from time to time and even includes "peaceful entry (Sorry – this is just a note I left on the page to remind myself of something else.)" after which the actual story is continued with a revised version of chapter seven wherein Gyasi 'Chance' Ebo is replaced with Denny Neale.¹⁴⁵

What then do these things say about internal posture? The interruption suspends the reader's disbelief, since they are made unambiguously made aware that they are reading a book. In the interruption the author talks about how writing is a craft, how novels are "finely honed and delicate organisms" which shows the author as a professional.¹⁴⁶ Simultaneously the author is displayed in a forgetful way, where random notes are left in a published novella. Although the author seems reasonable with most characters, they sometimes act petty towards the noncompliant character. If a character in a novel was described in a similar way, it would not be described as a flat character, but as a rounded character. All of these descriptions help humanise the author: they can be reasonable, but petty at times, they are a professional, but can be forgetful. This sincere authenticity then shapes the image the reader has of the author.

In fashion with the internal posture that was construed from previous novels, The Author states that she has been "AT WAR" with the autocorrect function that continued to change the names of Wang Shu, Ying Yue, Avigail and Gyasi 'Chance' Ebo, voicing her frustration with the "all-pervasive technological urge to conformity", which is not the first

¹⁴³ Ibid., 157.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 160-4.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 152.

indication of a nonconformist attitude within the author's writing.¹⁴⁷ This evokes an imagery of one of the presentations of self Meizoz refers to as "the anti-establishment figure".¹⁴⁸

2.3.5 Conclusion

There are multiple observations that can be made about *I Am Sovereign* then. Although the novella contains a great deal of irony and is written in an ironic way, the novella ends in a hopeful way and is therefore a move away from encompassing nihilism or sarcasm, as Vermeulen and Van den Akker describe it. The novella's blending of high and popular culture and the author's admitting of consuming popular culture frame the author in a way that makes them seem down to earth and more working-class than cultural elitist. Although *I Am Sovereign* contains some experimental typology and style, it is not as experimental or avant-garde as *H(A)PPY*, although it is more experimental than *The Cauliflower*®. *I Am Sovereign* also explores the author's intermedial approach to writing more so than *The Cauliflower*®, which could perhaps be seen as an evolution, although Nicola Barker's next novel has not been announced of yet in June 2022. Just as in *The Cauliflower*® and *H(A)PPY* the author once again explores themes of nonconformity and anti-establishment in *I Am Sovereign*. By staging a character called The Author and framing her in a way that show a very human and sincere person, there is an image construed that shows a certain amount of sincerity, which logically helps define the posture of Nicola Barker as well as an authentic person.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 206.

¹⁴⁸ Meizoz, "Modern Posterities of Posture. Jean-Jacques Rousseau," 81.

Chapter 3: External Posture

As explained in the first chapter, internal posture deals with everything that construes an image of an author inside the literary text. External posture then, deals with everything that construes an image of an author outside of their literary text and can be as close to the literary text as paratextual praise for the novel or its blurb or as far removed from an actual novel and seemingly trivial as the author's hairpins in an interview. Different from internal posture, external posture can be both auto-representative as well hetero-representative, meaning that the author themselves can help construe their external posture as well as any other actors in the literary field. Because the entirety of Nicola Barker's external posture would be impossible to capture, this chapter deals with three of the fields where external posture is arguably construed the most, both by the author as well as other authoritative actors. The first is academia. Here it will be discussed how other scholars analyse Barker's work and implicitly help form an outer image of Barker at the same time. The second part of this chapter will be both auto-representative and hetero-representative, since it will discuss interviews with Nicola Barker herself. The third and last field that will be discussed in this chapter will be reviews of the novels examined in chapter two, *The Cauliflower* (2016), *H(A)PPY* (2018) and *I Am Sovereign* (2019).

3.1 Academia

Although Barker is seemingly not nearly as popular as her contemporary Ali Smith in academic search engines – with a near 6:1 ratio – she is discussed in academia. In 2020 an entire collection of critical essays came to be solely focusing on Barker's writing or using her work as a case study to showcase interesting new developments in literary studies. One of the ideas shared in the bundle perhaps most novel was written by Ben Masters who compares Barker's style of writing with the musical genre of indie music. Originally, indie stems from

the word ‘independent’, since the musicians who produced the alba that subscribed to the notions related with an indie sensibility, released their music with independent labels, as opposed to pop musicians who released their music with major labels. However, the indie label has changed considerably since its conception and has subsequently developed as a musical genre of its own, complete with tone, style and aesthetic. Ben Masters makes a comparison with these developments in music and the style of Barker’s work, which he calls indie style. The comparison with music is helpful, since this particular style of writing shows many parallel paths with its musical counterpart: both styles emerged in the 1990s, feature similar character types, share an ethical and politically driven independence from the mainstream, and a similar style of publishing or producing.¹⁴⁹ The character types that Masters brings up are outsider types, “like the misfit, the stranger, the intruder (a favourite of fellow indie stylist, Ali Smith) and the slacker.”¹⁵⁰ Although Masters’s focusses solely on her debut novel, it is clear to see that Nicola Barker’s choice of protagonists has not changed much from her first novel. Barker seems to affirm Masters’s statements as she states in an interview that “at some level, we are all outsiders [...] [and] you need to stand outside of a situation, a dilemma, an experience, to truly understand it. That’s what my characters often do”.¹⁵¹ It is also interesting to note that Masters brings up Ali Smith, who is often discussed in one breath with Nicola Barker; the comparison with other authors often contributes greatly to how an author is perceived by the public. Other authors that Masters says “sit alongside Barker as exponents of indie style” are Ali Smith, Adam Thirlwell, Toby Litt and Irvine Welsh.¹⁵² It is clear from such a sentence that Ben Masters frames Barker as an experimental,

¹⁴⁹ Ben Masters, “Indie Style: *Reversed Forecast* and a Turn of the Century Aesthetic,” in *Nicola Barker: Critical Essays*, ed. Berthold Schoene (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited, 2020), 25-7.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁵¹ Brian Castleberry, “Nicola Barker is Our Great Post-Punk Novelist,” *Literary Hub*, February 22, 2021, <https://lithub.com/nicola-barker-is-our-great-post-punk-novelist/>.

¹⁵² Masters, “Indie Style: *Reversed Forecast* and a Turn of the Century Aesthetic,” 26.

prized, and literary author, since all of these authors have been awarded prizes for their literary work in some degree.

Another similarity Masters notices is that of publishing (in case of books) or producing (when discussing music). Although both the musical as well as the literary strain of Masters's indie style pride themselves on their independence, the truth in both industries is that most independent labels, either literary or musical, are owned by larger, corporate ones. Masters notes that Barker and Smith both debuted at "indie publishers like Faber [...] and Virago" and that the other authors all publish their books at formerly independent publishers, which are now all part of Penguin Random House, stating that "the literary takes up a curious double position: it is both an alternative crosscurrent to the mainstream and utterly complicit with it."¹⁵³ The hypocrisy of appearing independent, while surreptitiously being complicit with the current power structure seems like a necessary evil for these authors, but not being associated openly with major publishers helps with their distinction nonetheless.

Inspired by Sianne Ngai's observations on the zany, cute and interesting, Masters states that its propensity for offbeat moods and tones are another defining characteristic of indie literature. Of course, Barker's outsider protagonists commodify this set of aesthetics phenomenally well: Sri Ramakrishna has an enchanting smile, of all the musical instruments available to her, Mira A chooses to learn more about the kora, and Charles and his job as novelty teddy bear maker could be perceived as zany in more than one way.

All of these observations seem to run parallel with the research regarding metamodernism, with their toing and froing "between the minimalist and the baroque, the demotic and the literary, resulting in an oscillating aesthetics that is especially prevalent in Barker's work, which has been described as minimalist *and* excessive."¹⁵⁴ This leaves indie style in an interesting position, in name different from metamodernism, but sharing a largely

¹⁵³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 27.

overlapping definition. It comes as no surprise then that other scholars, such as Greg Dember, also noted a correlation between metamodernism and indie music.¹⁵⁵ Although many observations by Masters make Barker sound postmodernist, he also argues that she moves beyond postmodernism, since “Barker still holds a very sincere faith in the possibilities of love” whereas other authors’ cynicism will not fully allow this faith.¹⁵⁶ And reminiscent of Bentley et al.’s remark about authors who continue to utilise postmodernist techniques, “but who have reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions”,¹⁵⁷ Masters notes that “Barker’s pursuit of literary confoundment, then, is ethically charged”.¹⁵⁸ This context of indie style – and arguably, metamodernism – Barker is placed in, sheds an interesting light on her posture. It places her in a tradition of offbeat, outsider, anti-establishment, but simultaneously infuses her with a sense of sincere authenticity, which rings similar to what the research into her internal posture has found. Perhaps it is then also of little surprise that the authors that are named in academia are often the same ones that are also often associated with metamodernism.

3.2 Interviews

The second field that will be discussed, will be interviews. There is a significant amount of information that can be gleaned from both what sort of questions an interviewer asks, as well as what and how Nicola Barker answers these questions. Non-discursive elements can also be analysed in these. In an interview with *The Guardian* from 2020, she is wearing an orange shirt, with orange-tinted glasses, gold nail polish and a denim skirt, her arms spread wide, touching the brick wall behind her on the picture that is displayed at the top

¹⁵⁵ Greg Dember, “Punk Rock for Sissies: Metamodernism and the Return of Affect in Early 21st Century American Indie Rock,” *Medium*, 13 August, 2019, <https://medium.com/what-is-metamodern/punk-rock-for-sissies-74e57c10396a>.

¹⁵⁶ Masters, “Indie Style: *Reversed Forecast* and a Turn of the Century Aesthetic,” 35.

¹⁵⁷ Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, “Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s,” 17.

¹⁵⁸ Masters, “Indie Style: *Reversed Forecast* and a Turn of the Century Aesthetic,” 39.

of the article.¹⁵⁹ Although there is no knowing whether she dressed up specifically for this interview, it is interesting to note that she wishes to convey herself in such an outfit to the public. The outfit combined with the unusual pose comes across as eccentric, something that is reinforced by the line under the heading, where she is referred to as an offbeat novelist.¹⁶⁰ Before the actual questions start, her Goldsmith's Prize is pointed out, which is awarded for innovative or experimental fiction. Furthermore, her work is called avant-garde. All these factors indicate that the reader is dealing with an eccentric and unconventional author.

When asked what the impulse that informs her work is, Barker states that her philosophy of life is ferocious innocence, something that she echoes in other texts.¹⁶¹ Armed with this knowledge, it is interesting to note that innocence is a recurring theme in Barker's three latest books: according to Hriday, Sri Ramakrishna has a childlike innocence, but there is also an honesty and an intensity.¹⁶² Mira A informs the reader that The Young were made innocent by the censoring of information.¹⁶³ Ying Yue in *I Am Sovereign* is remarked to be "ferociously innocent".¹⁶⁴ This means that Barker infuses her protagonists with her own paradoxical life philosophy and arguably puts something of herself into these characters, which shows an engagement and sincerity with her work.

Brian Castleberry, who had an email exchange with Barker, also suggests that one could call Barker an avant-garde writer, to which Barker responds: "I need to feel free. I won't be constrained."¹⁶⁵ She even goes as far as saying she has a horror of convention. This concurs with the nonconformist posture that has been observed before. When she is asked

¹⁵⁹ Alex Preston, "Nicola Barker: 'If I have a life philosophy, it's ferocious innocence'," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/11/nicola-barker-if-i-have-a-life-philosophy-its-ferocious-innocence>.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Nicola Barker, "Foreword," in *Nicola Barker: Critical Essays*, ed. Berthold Schoene, (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited, 2020), 1.

¹⁶² Barker, *The Cauliflower*®, 79.

¹⁶³ Barker, *H(A)PPY*, 1.

¹⁶⁴ Barker, *I Am Sovereign*, 15.

¹⁶⁵ Castleberry, "Nicola Barker is Our Great Post-Punk Novelist."

about her immigration to South Africa, she mentions the awfulness of apartheid and states that her work “is always agenda-driven”, which is confirmed by Castleberry, who states that there is a moral force that runs through Barker’s novels.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps it comes as no surprise then that Castleberry goes on to describe Barker’s books as having “a postmodern self-referentiality without all the theoretical navel-gazing – something DIY [Do It Yourself] and yet very informed, like a band who met at art school, equally at home in galleries or in the street.” This again subscribes to the notion of Barker as a metamodernist author: going beyond postmodernism in a way, having an authenticity and experimentalism to her writing, an informed naïveté, and also a moral code of sorts.

Normally in this day and age an interesting expression of external posture comes in the form of online presence. Whether it is Facebook, Twitter or TikTok, authors nowadays have a plethora of ways to reach their audience in other ways than solely their books. In true nonconformist fashion then, Nicola Barker barely has an online presence, apart from an account on Twitter that is barely used. Thus, not much can be gleaned from Nicola Barker’s online presence, except her apparent lack of one.

Other media that report on Barker seem to construe her external posture in a similar way print media does. In a video interview with Nicola Barker, the first time she is brought in frame, she is apparently asked her thoughts on the opinion as herself being “a maggot working in the corpse of fiction”, which is framing her in a bizarre way.¹⁶⁷ However, Barker argues, since maggots are useful creatures for cleaning wounds, she does not mind the comparison. She continues: “I’m an acquired taste, I think.”¹⁶⁸ These observations are curious, since they are somewhat different from what previous sources have argued, although what is consistent is the way she frames and is in turn framed as a nonconventional person.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Open Road Media, “Meet Nicola Barker,” *YouTube* video, 2:07, November 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sa6j3DSv0FQ>.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

Many authors need to distinguish themselves from others in some way and being nonconventional is one way to achieve that. But the way Barker discusses her own fiction as an acquired taste and later also refers to her work as something irritating, something that works away at you – which to her is often the most beguiling thing –, feels as if she is describing a high-brow, difficult to interpret piece of literature. It is possible that this small difference in posture is due to the source being the oldest interview.¹⁶⁹

What is consistent about the interview are all the non-discursive expressions from the author in the video. She is shown in her modest living room wearing dungarees over her sweater, walking her dog, and browsing the market. All of these expressions fit more or less into a working-class background. This puts Nicola Barker in a peculiar position, since her remarks regarding her words, construe her work in a more high-brow context, although this is compliant with her postmodernist. What is also consistent is her statement at the end of the video, where the goal of her fiction is to make tiny changes in people, such as addressing prejudices.¹⁷⁰ Multiple familiar themes have come forward then, between her working-class background, the literariness of her work, her ethical grounds for it, and her unconventionality. This suggests that her internal and external posture are verisimilar and largely overlap.

3.3 Reviews

Since reviews dictate for a significant amount whether an author is in taste or not – and if they are, why that is the case –, reviews are an important piece of solving someone's puzzle of external posture. The simple fact that Barker's books are always reviewed by The Guardian is an interesting fact in its own right: reviewers fulfil an important role as gatekeepers to what does and does not constitute literature. Taking this into account, it is then generally agreed upon that Nicola Barker's work pertains to the field of literature.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

Stuart Kelly's review of *The Cauliflower*[®] starts off with stating that Barker's previous work gives no indication where you might be going next, since her books have been oscillating between "the gothic and the zany, the gracious and the macabre, the indignant and the cute, the tender and the terrible."¹⁷¹ This is reminiscent of Ben Masters's indie style, which in turn echoes Sianne Ngai, and is similarly evocative of Vermeulen and Van den Akker's definition of metamodernism. What Kelly calls distinctively Barkeresque is her unorthodox relation towards the genre of the historical novel. Whether Barker consciously projects an unconventionality or not, interviewers and reviewers pick up on it. This is interesting because both the external and internal posture apparently construe this image.

Justine Jordan also discusses how "*H(a)ppy* [sic] is anything but conventional, subverting traditions of sci-fi, typography and narrative, just as *The Cauliflower*[®] shook up biographical fiction."¹⁷² Barker's choice of offbeat characters are also noticed by Jordan, who describes them as "outliers, oddballs, obsessives of all kinds".¹⁷³ Although the use of offbeat characters does not say anything about the author, the review does discuss Barker's defiance of narrative and typographic convention, which frames Barker as a nonconventional, experimental author.

Toby Litt frames Nicola Barker in an unambiguous light: "Nicola Barker is literary royalty. [...] She is Queen of the Hinterlands of Quirk".¹⁷⁴ Not only does Litt doubly confirm Barker's consecrated literary status – by reviewing her book and by calling her literary royalty

¹⁷¹ Stuart Kelly, "The Cauliflower by Nicola Barker review – unclassifiable genius," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/13/the-cauliflower-nicola-barker-review-novel#:~:text=Cauliflowers%20bear%20an%20uncanny%20resemblance,and%20giddies%20and%20churns%20relentlessly>

¹⁷² Justine Jordan, "H(a)ppy by Nicola Barker review – visionary satire of a new information age," *The Guardian*, 14 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/14/happy-nicola-barker-review-science-fiction-dystopian-vision>.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Toby Litt, "I Am Sovereign by Nicola Barker review – The Author strikes back," *The Guardian*, 19 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/19/i-am-sovereign-by-nicola-barker-review>.

–, he also comments on her status as an author who writes quirkily and defies convention. He also calls *I Am Sovereign* funny and lauds Barker as a “great comic”.¹⁷⁵

It can then be gleaned from the reviews that reviewers construe a similar internal posture from Barker’s books as was construed in this thesis: Barker is experimental, defies convention and transgresses genre boundaries. An important difference between the reviewers and the other agents in chapter three is that the reviewers seem to fulfil a much larger role in the consecration of Nicola Barker as a literary author than either interviewers or academics seem to have.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

In this thesis the internal and external posture of Nicola Barker have been researched. In order to research this properly, two novels, one novella, myriad interviews, reviews, academic, and other texts were thoroughly examined. Although the sources were numerous, several notable themes kept returning regarding the posture of Nicola Barker.

What became clear about Nicola Barker's internal posture from *The Cauliflower*®, *H(A)PPY*, and *I Am Sovereign*, is that she tends to write from the perspective of outsider types that do not conform to society and transgress social norms in some way. This overlaps with the author to a certain extent, because the protagonist sometimes is an extension of the author, which becomes especially clear in *H(A)PPY* where Mira A is sometimes implied to be in control of the narrative and in *I Am Sovereign* where Nicola Barker construes an internal posture verisimilar to herself by introducing the character of The Author. Barker's experimentalism is also apparent in each book and thus construes her as an experimental author. The main way this manifests in *The Cauliflower*® is the way the novel is structured and its inclusion of different textual forms from regular prose. *H(A)PPY* is arguably Barker's most experimental novel, with its variations in font, font size, word colour, and inclusion of other art. Although other authors might use this in a way that could be considered gimmicky or trite, Barker insists on a serious tone throughout the novel, which complies with what she states in multiple interviews and is congruent with her internal posture: there is always an ethical agenda to her work. *I Am Sovereign* also contains a great deal of irony, but ends in a hopeful way, moving the work beyond postmodernist deconstructivism. The author's admitting to consuming and liking popular culture frames her in a way that makes her seem down to earth and different from what her literary status would suggest, more working-class than cultural elitist. Although it is not as experimental or avant-garde as *H(A)PPY*, *I Am Sovereign* does further Barker's posture as an intermedial artist and as developing the form of

the novel as something beyond just words. In all three of the novels, she explores anti-establishment and nonconformist themes, as well as authentic sincerity.

Ben Masters's insight into Barker's writing being analogous with indie style, which in turn seems to contain many similarities with metamodernism, was particularly helpful when looking into academia for the construction of Nicola Barker's external posture. Naming authors who do similar things also puts Barker in an interesting light, since grouping certain authors together is a clear way of framing all the authors named in the same way. Just as the research into Barker's internal posture yielded, scholars, critics, and journalists also notice a sincerity about Barker's writing, which is noticeable in the research into her external posture. The non-discursive elements observed in the interviews seem to convey Barker as a member of the working class, just as the enjoyment of popular media from *I Am Sovereign* suggested. Similar to her posture of a working-class author, the anti-establishment elements in her writing were interpreted as having a moral core to them. The reviews confirmed Barker's status as a consecrated literary author.

What then can be considered the posture of author Nicola Barker? Perhaps it is best described in an enumeration of adjectives. Her posture is depicted as working-class, anti-establishment and nonconformist, zany and quirky, authentic and sincere, transgressive and intermedial, mischievous and disruptive, and literary. It comes as no surprise then that these – at times paradoxical – descriptors constitute that her posture can indeed be considered metamodernist, since Nicola Barker's posture and what is considered to be metamodernist sometimes overlap as if they were the same. This would put Barker somewhere between Meizoz's working-class author and anti-establishment figure.

This thesis leaves many a lacuna to be filled with further research. Can other metamodernist postures be observed? Can a modernist or postmodernist posture be observed? If this thesis notices that Barker has a metamodernist posture, what other authors fit this

posture then? Of course a full posture can only be truly completed after an author's death, so the posture of Nicola Barker is not finished as of yet, unless *I Am Sovereign* turns out to be her final book, which it hopefully is not. Other angles of study could include how the involvement of other agents affects an author's external posture. It is with a hopeful eye to the future that this thesis is then concluded.

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