

Where is the modernism?

The role of early twentieth-century modernism in post-postmodernism,
specifically contemporary British literature

MA Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis will focus on the resurgence of what is quite broadly received as an engagement with early 20th century Anglophone literary modernist modes of writing in contemporary British fiction. This phenomenon has been placed in the broader context of the supposed end of postmodernism as the dominant cultural mode and the question of what follows on postmodernism ('post-postmodernism'). An important contribution to the post-postmodernist debate has taken the form of 'metamodernism' as proposed by by Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their short paper "Notes on Metamodernism". However, their assessment of post-postmodernism downplays the importance of modernism as a specific phenomenon of the early 20th century, instead generalizing it to a sort of 'pre-postmodernism', apart from which they do not engage with literature. To counter this tendency, I aim to investigate the role and significance of early 20th century modernism in contemporary British literature.

Key Words: Modernism, Epiphany, Postmodernism, Post-postmodernism, Metamodernism, Historicity, Depth, Affect

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Introduction

In 2010, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker published their first exploration of a new phenomenon that they had observed creeping into our broader contemporary cultural sensibility since the turn of the millennium in a paper called “Notes on Metamodernism”. They note the disruption of the ecosystem, the lack of control within the financial system in the new millennium, and the instability of global politics as the context for the rise of this phenomenon.¹ They contend that the by now ‘traditional’, postmodern mode of engagement with issues such as the aforementioned, a more in-depth discussion of which will be given in Chapter Four, would no longer suffice. Instead, “planners and architects increasingly replace their blueprints [...] with environmental “greenprints” [and] artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor (*sic*) of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis.”² In other words, a new form of artistic expression that goes beyond postmodernism (the collective denotation of which will henceforth be *post-postmodernism*) seems to be necessary to tackle the problems of our time – a form of expression favouring a positive, ethical stance, marked by (an “often guarded”)³ hopefulness and sincerity.

Vermeulen and Van den Akker call this new mode of cultural engagement *metamodernism*. They characterize this metamodernism as moving between two poles – *oscillating* between “a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality,

¹ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2 (2010), doi:10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677

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

³ *Ibid.*

totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.”⁴ In other words, they give a conception of the *modern* on the one hand, in all its hopeful, utopian, and therefore naïve, enthusiasm and search for authenticity, and the *postmodern* on the other, expressing a fundamental distrust of the modern idealism of the first pole through knowing irony and melancholic suspicion. This oscillation results in what Vermeulen and Van den Akker propose as the alignment of metamodernism with Kant’s negative idealism. In contrast with Hegel’s positive idealism, in which history moves to some end-goal in a process of dialectically fuelled progress, Kant’s idealism rejects this positive existence of a natural end-goal, but in order for any kind of progress to be possible, humanity must act *as if* it is moving towards such a goal:

“humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically. Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find.”⁵ Thus, the metamodern manages to negotiate both the modern and the postmodern by moving from the former, whose naïveté we need in order to face – and face up – to the issues of the contemporary crises of the world, to the latter, which tells us we will never find solutions to these crises, back to the former, presenting us with hope in spite of the postmodern scepticism, etc.

The suspicion towards postmodernism that has ostensibly become visible during the first decade of the new millennium – or alternatively and more specifically, the necessity to move beyond postmodernism into something new, or to augment it in order for it to be able of dealing with the issues of the contemporary – has also been noted by Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson in the introduction to their anthology of essays *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* (2015). The authors present a list of new –isms which have been used to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

describe that which might come after postmodernism or “a series of post-postmodernisms”: beyond postmodernism, after postmodernism, altermodernism, Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s very own metamodernism, digimodernism, the new puritans, the new sincerity, and more.⁶ This appearance of the two Dutch authors’ conception of this broader tendency to “interrogate the legacies of postmodernism”⁷ in a list of hypotheses more or less on the same line of validity – or equally worthy of consideration – reveals an initial inkling that what Vermeulen and Van den Akker propose cannot be taken as a definitive model of post-postmodernism. In other words, where Vermeulen and Van den Akker thus propose their metamodernism as the “structure of feeling”⁸ that defines the negotiation of the end of postmodernism, it is clear that the authors of *The 2000s* see this particular characterization of post-postmodernism as merely one among many others. Exemplary of this partial appreciation is that whereas Vermeulen and Van den Akker in their essay focus on the visual arts, Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson continue their exploration of post-postmodernism within contemporary British fiction. Indeed, in the paragraphs following the aforementioned list of characterizations of post-postmodernism, three ways of engaging with the legacies of postmodernism in contemporary British fiction are proposed. It is important to note, however, the overlap that exists within these categories: “as often with the attempt to shoehorn writers and their work into a particular modal framework, much depends on the critical lens applied to aspects of their work.”⁹ In other words, as we will see below, these categories are mainly

⁶ Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson, introduction to *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 16.

⁷ Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, introduction to *The 2000s*, 17.

⁸ Vermeulen and Van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism.”

⁹ Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, introduction to *The 2000s*, 17.

categories of style, which seem quite similar in their underlying inspiration, motivation, or sensibility.

The first category entails those authors who “continue to use narrative techniques associated with postmodernism but who have reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions.”¹⁰ Authors such as Nicola Barker, Tom McCarthy, David Mitchell, Ali Smith, and Will Self have continued using the narrative devices of “self-reflexivity” and “metafictive complexities”¹¹ – ostensibly features associated with postmodernist writing – but they have attempted to negotiate the relativism implied with these techniques by nevertheless holding on to a search for meaning or “some defined and concrete sense of human values”¹² (the authors specifically referring to David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* here). The quest for meaning is, for authors in this category, “still a worthwhile endeavour”¹³ and rather than “allowing [fragments] to float apart”, there is a “desire to stitch [them] together.”¹⁴ Through deploying the postmodernist mode of parody on the one hand, but still trying to find meaning and value, “[postmodernism] itself becomes the object of parody.”¹⁵

A second category identified by Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson concerns a “re-engagement with realist modes of writing.”¹⁶ There seems to be a similar motivation at work here as in the first category: “realism, in its philosophical sense, implies the possibility of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

arriving at a set of truth claims about the nature of reality and the human condition.”¹⁷

Realism allows contemporary authors to represent authentic human experience as a way of engaging with the crises of contemporary society mentioned above. Exemplary in this category are those authors – Monica Ali, Andrea Levy, Caryl Phillips, and Zadie Smith, for instance – who are “associated with the expression of marginalized positions in British society, especially in terms of ethnicity.”¹⁸

The third and final category of post-postmodernist writing presented by Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson is marked by a conscious return to modernism. Authors such as Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, and Will Self have hearkened back either to early twentieth-century modernist authors and works, such as Forster’s *Howard’s End* for Zadie Smith,¹⁹ or modernist stylistic techniques and modes of writing, such as the deploying the “interior monologue and free-indirect discourse” of Virginia Woolf in McEwan’s work.²⁰ Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson do not give what might be called some sort of ethical motivation for this return to modernism, as they do much more clearly for the former two categories, but their remark concerning Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* and Henry James’s *The Line of Beauty* – “perhaps the search for beauty in both these novels is an indication in itself of a rejection of postmodernism’s scepticism towards such essentializing qualities”²¹ – implies one. It furthermore implies that a single overarching motivation is at work in all three categories. I contend that the second and third categories are primarily categories of style and technique – realist and modernist – and that the ethical motivations of the first category may actually be drawn through and across all

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

three. I will further argue that this motivational framework is in line specifically with that of modernism in the early twentieth century, which will be the focus of the final chapter of this thesis on modernism in contemporary post-postmodern fiction.

This brings us back to Vermeulen and Van den Akker, whose metamodernism can also be placed within this overarching category of ethically inspired motivation in the face of the deficiencies of postmodernism. This ethical motivation might be characterized, as we have seen above, as the search for some form or sense of meaning, truth, beauty, human value or authentic experience, both in spite of and taking into consideration all that postmodernism has taught us about distrust of overarching narratives, hopeful naïveté, and essentializing categories. Using the language of environmentalism, Vermeulen and Van den Akker characterize this tendency in literature in the introduction to their anthology *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism* as a form of “upcycling,” rather than simply postmodernist “recycling:” “the former results in a product with less purity and value than the original, while the latter aims to approach – or do justice – to the original’s style and substance while purportedly adding value.”²²

Here, however, we also have to touch on what are arguably the two gaping lacunae – separate, but connected – in Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s conceptualization of metamodernism and the impetus for this current project. As Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson show, a vital part of post-postmodernism is the resurgence of modernist stylistic tendencies in contemporary British literature. Firstly, Vermeulen and Van den Akker acknowledge the presence of these tendencies in literature only in the aforementioned introduction to their 2017 anthology: “many West European and Northern American literatures [...] both incorporate

²² Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, “Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism,” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), 10.

and move beyond postmodern authorial strategies by harking back (*sic*), paradoxically, to modernist, realist or even earlier forms.”²³ Their 2010 “Notes on Metamodernism” does not explicitly deal with literature, instead focussing on the visual arts. A second, equally important element of post-postmodernism that lacks an in-depth, theoretical characterization in both Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s conceptualization of metamodernism is the re-appreciation of and engagement with *modernism*, whether it be in literature or in other arts. In the introduction to *Metamodernism*, Vermeulen and Van den Akker acknowledge “some kind of cultural predilection, among the now-newly available ‘pre-postmodern’ elements, for modernism.”²⁴ They contend to have argued this in 2010 as well,²⁵ but the extent to which they engage with modernism proper, as opposed to a more general ‘modern’ sensibility of enthusiasm, hope, and naïveté, frankly lacks the depth and accuracy necessitated by the apparent importance of modernist tendencies within post-postmodern literature.

Vermeulen and Van den Akker cite the 2014 paper “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution” by Davind James and Urmila Seshagiri as making a similar point to their assertions of identifying a resurgence of modernist tendencies within literature. James and Seshagiri’s paper can be argued to view the resurgence of modernism in contemporary British fiction as primarily a process in which contemporary authors reach back, over postmodernism, into the archive of the early twentieth-century modernists, and therein find useful and meaningful ways of shaping their literature. The paper makes a point of defending the temporal perspective on modernism that it takes up: “[although] stubbornly in conflict with the critical rhetoric of transhistorical extension,” James and Seshagiri contend that modernism “as a moment as well as a movement [...] should still be understood in historically

²³ Van den Akker and Vermeulen, “Periodinsing the 2000s,” 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

conditioned and culturally specific clusters of artistic achievements between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.”²⁶ They state that this periodized view on modernism “offers a clear premise for tracing how a significant body of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature consciously responds to modernist impulses, methods, and commitments”, and without such a “temporally bounded and formally precise understanding of what modernism does and means in any cultural moment, the ability to make other aesthetic and historical claims about its contemporary reactivation suffers.”²⁷ Seeing modernism as a temporally situated phenomenon allows for an understanding of how authors such as Will Self and Tom McCarthy (among many others, of course) not merely transport or transfer modernism to the present day; a conclusion an alternative, non-temporal view of modernism – “fading one domain into another”²⁸ – might arrive at, seeing as in such a view, modernism is arguably disconnected from its historical moment and transferrable across time. The problem with such a view is that it is essentially reductive in its denial of both early twentieth century and its contemporary resurgence as “domain[s] whose aesthetic, historical, and political particulars merit their own forms of intellectual inquiry.”²⁹

To say that the authors aforementioned merely transfer the modernist mode across time into the contemporary is thus a view that disregards the historical particulars of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernism, and a periodizing perspective on modernism is needed to fully do justice to these particulars. But even if this view is taken on, it would be equally reductive to claim that the contemporary ‘neo-modernists’ merely reach

²⁶ David James and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 87-100, 88.

²⁷ James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism,” 88.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

back into the archives of style and form and take what they find interesting or useful, only to implement it unaltered and therefore torn from its historicity. Instead, James and Seshagiri contend that these authors “extend, reanimate, and repudiate twentieth-century modernist literature.”³⁰ In other words, these authors engage with twentieth-century modernism not merely by regurgitating its texts and their style or form, but by employing these elements in the service of something new, while at the same time not losing sight of their original meaning and historical situatedness.

Thus, in conclusion of all of the above, I contend that a combination of twentieth-century modernism and the role of literature in post-postmodernism must be examined in order to come to a more comprehensive account of the way post-postmodernism works. The present study is an attempt at such an examination, and will consist of two main sections. Firstly, I will attempt a synthesis of twentieth-century modernism, both as a historical moment and a sensibility within the arts – more specifically literature. I have chosen to move beyond literature in my assessment of modernism into forms of philosophical and political modernism, as one of my aims is to look behind the stylistic features and devices of modernism (stream of consciousness, fragmentation, etc.) used both by the twentieth-century modernists as well as the new modernist authors today, and find out whether there is an overarching ground, motivation, or impulse for utilizing said stylistic techniques. Following authors such as Shane Weller and Roger Griffin, I will argue that modernism has a very specific place in and attitude towards (late) modernity – an attitude of criticism and suspicion, resulting in a pessimism towards the decadence of late modernity and at the same time a hopeful desire to move beyond it and bring ‘alternative modernities’³¹ into being. Thus,

³⁰ Ibid., 89.

³¹ I take this term from Roger Griffin’s *Modernism and Fascism*; elaboration will follow in the relevant section of this thesis.

modernism is a *reaction* to the tendencies of modernity towards the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries – a modernity that was mainly characterized by a belief in the ability of human beings to move towards a brighter future in the light of liberalism and scientific progress, but whose material conditions had become out of sync with these ideals. This discrepancy between modernity and modernism – between the unwavering belief in liberalizing and technologizing progress and proposing that society had become decadent and fragmented in the wake of that belief and its material consequences – will also immediately make clear why Vermeulen and Van den Akker's characterization of the modern and its conflation with modernism as opposed to postmodernism is inadequate, making the aforementioned claim that they signalled the return of modernism to contemporary art in 2010 a dubious one.

Resulting from the exploration of modernism will be a synthesis of the core of what modernism is and/or does in relation to modernity. The second of the two sections of this thesis will contain firstly a characterization of postmodernity as a cultural condition, mainly following Fredric Jameson and Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen's assessment of his work along the three important concepts of historicity, depth, and affect. This analysis will reveal the postmodern condition as a cultural moment that shares characteristics of depthlessness and meaninglessness with the state of modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. After establishing these similarities, I will present an attempt to transpose the framework of the modernist attitude towards a decadent modernity into the twenty-first century and the contemporary British authors who are now using modernist stylistic devices in their work. In the same way that these devices are extended and reanimated by these authors, so might the underlying motivational framework also be an updated version of the twentieth-century modernist one. Indeed, the ethical underpinnings of Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson's characterization of post-postmodernism in British literature that I elaborated on

above will be important in this regard and I will refer to the analysis given in this introduction.

In order to investigate and illustrate the role of the modernist motivational framework in contemporary British fiction, I will single out two authors out of the plethora of authors to whom a new engagement with modernism has been attributed, and in addition I will pick one work of each: Will Self and his novel *Umbrella*, and Ali Smith, with her novel *How to be Both*. The choice for Will Self and Ali Smith was informed by two aspects. Firstly, there is a profound modernist influence in the stylistic devices at work in their novels, an influence frequently noted in the reception of their work. Both use stream of consciousness techniques and fragmented narratives, and in their narratives they focus on attempting to portray the inner life of their protagonists. The selection of the two novels is also based on this criterion. Secondly, and this goes especially for Will Self, they have engaged favourably with twentieth-century modernism in interviews. This is particularly significant in light of the idea that the authors' use of modernist devices might be informed by an underlying attitude towards contemporary modernity. This attitude may of course be gleaned from a close reading of their novels, but where the authors' stance towards contemporary social and cultural developments is concerned, interviews and other sources may be just as informative.

Initially, but briefly, I will determine modernist stylistic devices at play in the novels. More crucially, I will attempt to hone in on whether an underlying modernist attitude or motivational framework may be seen in the novel. Furthermore, I will examine the presence of such a framework or attitude with the authors themselves, which will mainly be drawn from interview with the authors. As hinted at above, especially Will Self has repeatedly spoken out about his relationship to modernism and his attitude towards various elements of both conventional realist fiction and the postmodern. Interviews are therefore indispensable in establishing the attitude of these two authors towards the contemporary. It is important to

note, however, that these analyses of Smith's and Self's modernism will be used as a final illustration of the theoretical argument of this thesis, rather than serving as actual case studies intended to provide some sort of conclusive evidence of my claims. Finally, a conclusion will synthesize the results of the study and comment on the more in-depth understanding of the role of not only modernist stylistic techniques, but also the modernist attitude, in post-postmodernism, which will hopefully have been provided by the present project.

SECTION I: MODERNITY AND MODERNISM

CHAPTER ONE: A Methodological Issue

Before I can proceed to establishing *modernity* and *modernism* as separate but obviously closely related categories, I must address an issue of methodology, namely the question of how we may meaningfully attribute characteristics to these terms in the first place. In her paper “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism”, Susan Friedman states that the terms “*modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism* constitute a critical Tower of Babel, a cacophony of categories that become increasingly useless the more inconsistently they are used [and] a parody of critical discourse in which everyone keeps talking at the same time in a language without common meanings.”³² Exploring this cacophony, Friedman then goes on to expand on two ways in which the aforementioned terms might be given a more definitive meaning or in which they might be placed in their proper context: the grammatical or philosophical and the political or cultural. The first of these two routes within the “Wanderland of Modernist Studies”³³ focuses on the way in which the terms function as words. As a quick aside, ‘philosophical’ here arguably means something akin to ‘analytical’ or ‘logical’, disregarding the continental tradition of philosophy which might belong more in the second route, which will be discussed later. Friedman being an American scholar and thus perhaps more disposed to equating ‘philosophy’ as a general term with analytical philosophy – concerned with language and logic – in particular, this seems a logical assumption in order to avoid any confusion with regards to the meaning of the word

³² Susan Stanford Friedman, “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no. 3 (2001): 493-513, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2001.0062>, 497.

³³ Friedman, “Definitional Excursions,” 499.

‘philosophy’ here. This definition of ‘philosophy’ becomes further evident in her assessment of the second route, which may arguably be said to be rooted more in the continental, emancipatory tradition of philosophy and which will be discussed later.

This first route of grammar and philosophy forks off into two distinct paths: the nominal mode, which focuses on the words as nouns, and the relational mode, with its focus on the words as adjectives. The nominal mode tends to attribute certain specific content to the words *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism* – the “definitional project” for “those working within or seeking a nominal framework [...] centers on fixing the categories to a set of meanings to which others might be persuaded.”³⁴ Additionally, this need for persuasion arises from the disagreement among those scholars working within this particular framework about the actual meanings of the three terms – in the process of giving them meaning the actual outcome of the project will almost inevitably differ. This difference and therefore disagreement within those working in the nominal mode is, for Friedman, the result of disciplinary schisms: “Nominal discussions of *modern/modernity/modernism* tend to be very field specific [*sic*], with definitional dissonance and even outright contradiction developing as a result of disciplinary boundaries and considerable isolation of disciplinary discourses from each other.”³⁵ The gap between the social sciences and the humanities is the most radical in this regard. The social sciences “tend to follow the lead of historians of Europe”³⁶, who tend to divide their field into time periods: the classical, the medieval, early modern, and modern, the definition of which is then the “initial break with medieval institutions and outlooks.”³⁷ For historiography, and therefore for the social sciences, Friedman argues, *modernity*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 500.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

encompasses a specific set of historical developments, such as the industrial revolution, conquest and political and economic expansion, urbanisation, the rise of the nation-state, and the burgeoning bourgeoisie.³⁸ In tandem with this, philosophers will cite such thinkers as Locke, Kant, and Hegel as exemplary of modern secular and humanist thought; political theorists will focus on new kinds of political systems, away from feudalism towards democracies, autocracies, and constrained forms of monarchy; economists will point to market types, capital, and labour; and so on.³⁹

The humanities, on the other hand, rather than focusing on the aforementioned developments – which are all arguably extensions of what is known as the Enlightenment – will tend to associate the modern/modernity/modernism with the “radical rupture”⁴⁰ with such Enlightenment notions. This rupture may take many forms, such as there is the “fragmentation, parataxis, image, and idiosyncratic rhythms and sound patterns”⁴¹ identified by scholars of modernist poetry; the break with realism in the growing importance of form, culminating in an interest in geometric shapes, pointed to by art historians; functionalist minimalism and urban or machine-like aesthetics within architecture; and atonality and primitivism in music.⁴² Friedman points out that, “however debated, modernism in the context of the humanities is most often understood as the loosely affiliated movements and individuals in the arts and literature that reflect and contribute to the conditions and consciousness of modernity in Europe, Britain, and the United States [...] the epitome of modernity for those in the social sciences is precisely what modernity dismantles for those in

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 501.

⁴² Ibid.

the humanities.”⁴³ This contrast between the definitions attributed to the modern/modernity/modernism unit already serves to illustrate what the present thesis will later develop as a contrast between modernity on the one hand and modernism on the other.

Still, the nominal path thus provides no clarity on the meaning of the modern/modernity/modernism unit across the disciplines, something which the second path of the grammatically defined route that Friedman discusses – the one focused on the modern/modernity/modernism unit as *adjectives*: the *relational* route – might be able to do more adequately. Those following this path are more interested in the relation of the terms within the unit to one another and the way they denote certain sensibilities rather than temporally situated periods or movements.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the way these terms are relationally situated is characterized by negation: “What is modern or modernist gains its meaning through negation, as a rebellion against what once was or was presumed to be.”⁴⁵ Modernity is characterized as an opposition to tradition, whether explicit or implied – a wind of radical change, breaking with its immediate past. This liberates the terminology from its temporal constraints, as

a particularized modernity located in space and time could potentially emerge wherever and whenever the winds of radical disruption blew, the conditions of rapid change flared up, or the reflexive consciousness of newness spread— whether these were eagerly sought or resisted; whether imposed from without or developed within.⁴⁶

As Friedman also notes, however, this perspective is accompanied with immediate problems, the most prominent of which is the durability of the characterization of modernity as rebellion and renewal: “change becomes institutionalized. What begin as multiple acts of rebellion

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 503.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

against prevailing hegemonies become through their very success a newly codified, often commodified system.”⁴⁷ As will hopefully become clear later, modernity may be conceived of in both the nominal and relational categories with not much effort as a roughly circumscribed period in history and localized in a certain space in which radical change occurred in various social and cultural areas, but this tendency developed into a decadent and demythologized status quo. Furthermore, as Friedman points out, “[t]he avant-garde artists initially greeted with hoots of derision—the impressionists, postimpressionists, cubists, abstract expressionists—are now the great masters whose works are mainstays of museums and sell for fabulous sums.”⁴⁸ Thus, the characterization of the modern/modernity/modernism unit in terms of rebellion against the existing order falls short the moment the actual conditions these terms denote become the new establishment.

This second path, however, seems too much of a caricature of the relational mode to be taken seriously and in turn, this slightly exaggerated and one-sided presentation reveals that Friedman’s division between the nominal and adjectival modes might miss the mark somewhat. Friedman does not seem to be privy to the idea that those scholars from the disciplines she mentions – historians, literary scholars, etc. – might employ both modes at the same time, both temporally and spatially situating the various nodes of the modern/modernity/modernism unit *and* describing them in relation to one another. This would enable these nodes to be situated events, processes, or categories, and at the same time they might be said to embody certain sensibilities that may stretch and reach beyond their temporal and spatial constraints. Here an echo of James and Seshagiri may hopefully be discerned and it should clarify the direction I will take in this chapter. I will attempt to situate the nodes of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 504.

the unit temporally and spatially, and at the same time make clear the sensibilities which speak through them and how they relate to one another.

However slightly misconstrued Friedman's analysis of the grammatical route is, her reductionist and at the same time over-pluralistic view of this approach does prove effective at showing how certain scholars *might* use these terms in an overly simplified manner, as I have noted Vermeulen and Van den Akker doing. However, even though the terms *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism* are often used interchangeably, as Friedman demonstrates, this "refus[al] of consistency and homogenization"⁴⁹ ensures that the project of scholarship continues in its open-ended striving for interrogation and investigation. Thus in what at first seems to be a threat to the scholarly project, the interchangeable, oversimplified, and contradictory use of the terms nevertheless "form a fertile terrain for interrogation, providing ever more sites for examination with each new meaning spawned."⁵⁰ With each new use and, perhaps inevitably, each new confusion and interchange of the terms *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism*, new ways of placing them and their signified concepts in a meaningful dialogue and extracting insights from this dialogue are made possible. Therefore, it should be clear that I do not presume to definitively attribute the ultimate meaning to the terms in question, but I am merely attempting to bring together and synthesize the various meanings they have been given across the disciplines in order to establish a working definition of these terms that may be used in analysing the role of modernism in post-postmodernism.

I hope it is clear from this short elaboration of this particular part of Friedman's paper that even she, whose project it arguably is to bring some clarity or at least distinction within the modern/modernity/modernism confusion which she herself expands on, cannot seem to separate the terms from each other in a meaningful way and uses them interchangeably. I will

⁴⁹ Ibid., 497.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

attempt a clarification of my own in the following chapters, which will distinguish between *modernity* on the one hand (the conceptualization of modern/modernity/modernism that Friedman associates with the social sciences) and *modernism* on the other (the modern/modernity/modernism concept as denoted by the humanities, for Friedman). This tension between what Friedman notes as the differing concepts of the social sciences and historiography on the one hand and the humanities or literary studies and art history on the other will be the subject for the following chapters, where I will attempt to bring these two fields together by prizing apart the modern/modernity/modernism unit along a different axis. For this purpose and for the purpose of the argument of this chapter, I will condense the unit into two elements, *modernity* and *modernism*. *The modern* may be taken as an alternative for *modernity*, and *modern* as an adjective may be taken to refer back to either of these nouns. This chapter will ultimately lead to an analysis of the role of modernism as a reaction to late nineteenth-century modernity, which will in turn be of use to analyse how modernism as an archive may be seen as a reaction towards the contemporary cultural condition of postmodernism. This first element of the unit, Anthony Giddens states in his *The Consequences of Modernity*, “refers to modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence.”⁵¹ This, as Giddens further notes, positions modernity squarely in a temporal framework, as well as associating it with a specific place. Before I proceed, a brief elaboration on the latter element is required, taking into account the second route of Friedman’s excursion into the meaning of the terms modern/modernity/modernism.

Friedman’s article further expands on a political and cultural route for understanding the complexities of the modern/modernity/modernism unit. She identifies the act of defining

⁵¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1.

modernity as only being possible through differentiation and exclusion: “Definitional acts establish territories, map terrains, determine centers, margins, and areas ‘beyond the pale’.”⁵² In other words, some phenomena can be ascribed to modernity, some cannot. This in turn means that the onset of modernity had its influence in some areas of the globe initially, whereas others followed, which is where the charge of Eurocentrism becomes relevant. Critical of Giddens’ and others’ Eurocentric position, Friedman asks: “without a sufficient knowledge base in the civilizations of Asia, Africa, and the non-Anglo Americas, is it any surprise that the definitional binary of inclusion/exclusion is profoundly Eurocentric?”⁵³ Immediately afterwards she gives the answer (“No.”)⁵⁴ and reflects on the ways in which the influence of non-western others and their interaction with western societies on the production of western forms of modernity is left chronically underdeveloped and under-researched. The West is instead held simply to produce and those spaces outside the West to copy and assimilate.

While these are all valid criticisms of modernity and modernism studies, the following chapter is concerned precisely with those European forms of modernity and their influence on the modernist artists and movements that emanated from them. This focus does not stem from an ignorance of the complexities of global modernities, nor from a wilful disagreement with or disdain for such criticisms. The elaboration on western modernity and its relation with early twentieth-century modernism in all its western forms is to be used as an instrument in describing the way these forms of modernism are at this very moment having their influence on western culture, using as an illustration British literature, as stated in the introduction. The reception of said literature contains ample allusions and references to early twentieth-century

⁵² Friedman, “Definitional Excursions,” 506.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 506-507.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 507.

literary modernism, which as I hope to show in this chapter, may be understood in light of western forms of modernity and the forms of modernism produced by this modernity. In other words, my primary aim is not to establish the way western modernity is related to a global set of modernities, nor is it to ascertain the ways in which forms of modernity are produced and specifically the powers that produce them, nor the way in which they are disseminated across the globe. The primary aim of this chapter is to establish an overview of western modernity and modernism in order to have an insight into precisely those forms of modernity and modernism which may be of influence on the contemporary post-postmodernist move.

CHAPTER TWO: Modernity and Decadence

The Eurocentrism charge now shelved not as irrelevant, but merely as a topic for a different study, in the course of the previous chapter, the way is free for an elaboration on a temporally situated modernity and the modernist archive its effects produced and, as per James & Seshagiri's argument expanded on in the previous chapter, from which the contemporary 'new modernist' authors draw their influences. An analysis of the relation between late nineteenth-century modernity and the reaction it provoked in modernism may reveal the very particular sensibility of 'resacralization', which will be relevant for discerning the motivations or ethical impetus behind contemporary authors' reaching back into the modernist archive in the face of the postmodern condition. The main aim of this chapter is to provide the background for the development of said sensibility at the base of modernism. For the purposes of establishing the categories of modernity and modernism and their relation to one another, I will draw heavily from Griffin's book *Modernism and Fascism* (2007), as he sets out a comprehensive analysis of modernism in connection to modernity and he makes the defining distinction between two modes of modernism that is rather pertinent to the analysis of post-postmodernist new modernism in contemporary British literature. The main insight offered by scholars such as Roger Griffin is that modernism was a reaction to the condition that Western modernity had acquired towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ This at once gives an initial idea of how the modernity/modernism unit is to be divided into its separate constituents: apparently modernism needs to be understood as standing apart from the general condition of modernity precisely in its critique of modernity, while at the same time it is still part of the modernizing process. In order to diagnose the condition that modernity had reached and to which modernism reacted, it is necessary to roughly map the development of

⁵⁵ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 45.

modernity from its waxing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the decadence to which it had ostensibly fallen by the time of the beginnings of modernism.

Firstly, the focus must be on the general condition of Western modernity and its onset. Griffin reproduces a widely held list of elements present at the onset of modernity and in general held to summarize the political, economic, social, and cultural changes that comprise it:

[The] spread of rationalism, liberalism, secularization, individualism, and capitalism, the cult of progress, expanding literacy rates and social mobility, urbanization and industrialization, the emergence of the urban middle (capitalist), and working (rural and proletarian) classes from a feudal structure of society, the growth of representative government and bureaucratization, revolutionary developments in communications and transport, geographical discoveries and imperial expansion, the advance of secular science and ever more powerful technology and technocracy.⁵⁶

It is important to realize that through this collection of elements, the onset of modernity (although it cannot be situated historically to have started at any one specific time, more on which later) was a radical break with what came before. Keeping with the idea that ‘modernity’ should actually be ‘modernities’ – in other words, modernity is comprised of a pluralistic set of events and developments, each with its own reach, scope, and depth of influence, rather than a monolithic cutting off point – Anthony Giddens notes a “set of discontinuities of the modern period”: “The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion.”⁵⁷ Exemplary of this discontinuity or break inherent in modernization is what Eric Hobsbawm in his *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* identifies as the “dual revolution”: the (political) French Revolution on the one hand and the (primarily

⁵⁶ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 45-46.

⁵⁷ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 4.

technological and demographic) Industrial Revolution, primarily and initially in Britain.⁵⁸ Of course these events cannot be held to be the start of modernity, as the American Revolution of 1776 and the English Revolution or Civil War of the seventeenth century may be seen as precursors to the Dual Revolution.⁵⁹ However, the Dual Revolution may be seen as the epitome of the “social and economic forces, [and] the political and intellectual tools” that had been prepared beforehand.⁶⁰

I need to stress here that I am not working under the assumption or the pretence that the modernization process is a monolithic, chronologically identifiable, and causally related one throughout. Griffin calls the history of modernization a “multiple phenomenon”⁶¹, which nevertheless has had a major influence on the modernist’s response to it. A further important point here is that the process of modernization described above cannot be held to have started at a given point in time. Griffin notes that “in the context of Western history; [modernity] has come to denote the effects of the modernization process a social force, both objective and subjective, rather than a period.”⁶² However, the periodization of modernity is not the imperative of this chapter, or indeed this study, but rather the way certain features of it rose to prominence in the cultural and social sphere and the way in which these features ultimately led to its decadence. It is precisely the subjective force of modernity on the social and cultural landscape of the nineteenth century that is of importance in the assessment of modernism. As a side note, the admission of the impossibility to periodize modernity is by no means contrary

⁵⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 2.

⁵⁹ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 46.

⁶² Ibid., 47.

to the idea of modernity as temporally situated. As Griffin states, “[modernity] has a chronology, of course, but a disputed one impossible to chart with precision.”⁶³ In other words and to reverse the focal point of the previous statement: the chronology of modernity is impossibly to lay out precisely and with causally linked nodes on a linear tract, but despite this impossibility, it has a chronology and thus a temporality nonetheless.

The features of modernity listed above are arguably of a positive nature. Individualisation, liberalisation, the freedom from the yoke of monarch and Church alike, and the acquisition of technology offering the possibility to make life agreeable to all do seem to be positive outcomes of the modernization process. However, Griffin notes that “there is general unanimity on the disorienting, destabilizing nature” of modernity as well. As Anthony Giddens states: “modernity also has a sombre side, which has become very apparent in the present century.”⁶⁴ I will try to show that this more negative side had already begun to appear earlier, during the nineteenth century, and I will further flesh out what this dark side of the medallion of modernity entails and how modernism can ultimately be seen as a response to it.

To begin with, I need to elaborate on a specific change in the appreciation of time and history that is characteristic of the Enlightenment and the promise of progress inherent in modernity. Turning to Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Koselleck, Roger Griffin identifies the particular relation towards time and history brought on by the modernizing process as “the growth of ‘reflexivity’, in which human beings first become aware of themselves as historical agents within [...] a particular epoch [...]”⁶⁵ Time and the position of humans within it had become subject to reflection, arguably in line with the various Enlightenment thinkers questioning the position of the divine as the driving force of the constellation of reality

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 7.

⁶⁵ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 49.

(necessitating a reflection on what might be driving the engine of history forward, if the possibility of a God that does this is taken out of the picture), asserting the autonomous individuality of the human being, and therewith making space for a reflective stance towards the place of these autonomous agents within the larger process of history. The elimination of the divine and the assertion of the human being as historical agent resulted in the future no longer being a “neutral temporal space for what destiny or providence will bring”, but a space where human beings could exert their influence and control, and organise historical and political change themselves.⁶⁶ In other words, human beings were no longer felt to be subject to the divine or to some outside force that they could not control, but they had their fates in their own hands. Indeed, they could make history, fostering the feeling that the time in which they lived was potentially “*the beginning of a new epoch.*”⁶⁷

The ultimate expression of this new reflexive stance towards time and the temporal human agent is the French Revolution, one side of Hobsbawm’s Dual Revolution. It was precisely the reflexive stance towards history that “legitimated the French revolutionaries’ fundamentalist war against tradition and their deliberate attempt to replace it lock, stock, and barrel with an entirely new epoch.”⁶⁸ Hobsbawm calls the French Revolution “immeasurably more radical than any comparable upheaval”,⁶⁹ such as for example the American Revolution or any one of the other revolutionary moments in the late eighteenth century, its defining characteristic being that it was “ecumenical. Its armies set out to revolutionize the world; its ideas actually did so.”⁷⁰ It was perhaps the radical nature of the French revolutionaries’ ideas

⁶⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁹ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 54.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

that made its promises so fleeting and unviable. Griffin notes that the Enlightenment and revolutionary promise of progress towards freedom began to “run *against* the grain of actually existing modernity and the way post-Revolutionary society was visibly developing.”⁷¹ Exemplary here is of course Napoleon, whose rise to power resulted in a “conservative, hierarchical and authoritarian”⁷² end. A similar, yet slightly more complex sentiment may be discerned with regard to the forward march of scientific progress. To be sure, enormous strides within science were being taken, from Newton in the seventeenth century to Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* from 1859, along with a slew of other naturalists and empirical scientists. Especially Darwin’s insights into the evolutionary nature of the development of species – and therefore also of the human species – however, seemed to imply something much more sinister. Even though the earlier Enlightenment thinkers had been adamant about the improbability and ‘perfectability’ of the human being through its autonomous use of reason, doing away with a God that turned the wheel of progress, now a view arose from their immediate theoretical descendants that put the evolution of the species in general down to, as Stephan Karschay in *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle* puts it, “dispassionate Chance as its unsteering driving force.”⁷³ Furthermore, the implication that the human and the bestial are but nodes upon a here admittedly enormously simplified, but in essence nonetheless linear developmental process opens up the consideration of a frightening possibility: the obverse of evolution – development reversed.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 52.

⁷² Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 75.

⁷³ Stephan Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015): 32.

⁷⁴ Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic*, 35-36.

In light of a more general suspicion of the progress of science, David Punter discusses two novels from the nineteenth century: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). Even though the former's take on modernity is slightly more complex than merely asserting the evils of untrammelled scientific experimentation (Frankenstein's knowledge is drawn much more from "the archaic, mysterious world of alchemy"⁷⁵ than modern scientific method, for example), both novels can be said to feature "fictional scientists engaged in dubious modernising processes."⁷⁶ Both Shelley's scientist and Dr Moreau are engaging in fundamentally modernising projects: Frankenstein is attempting to bring life back to dead matter – to basically create a human – and Moreau focuses on a project even more infused with an Enlightenment attitude of progress, namely the attempt of turning beast into human. Both these projects are seen as sinister, or at least tragic, and from their depictions speaks a suspicion of science – the sentiment that science should know its bounds.

Coming back to the idea that the onset of the modern as described above was a great breach with what came before, Punter identifies a curiously paradoxical sentiment concerning modernity developing during the nineteenth century and partially speaking through the literary examples mentioned above:

[on] the one hand, modernity asserts the dominance of – scientific or rational – knowledge; it promises to banish the dark places of the mind, to lay the ghosts to rest and exterminate the monsters. But on the other, it beckons us towards an unknown future, where old certainties will no longer hold and the old writs will no longer run.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ David Punter, *Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 24.

⁷⁶ Punter, *Modernity*, 24-25.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

In other words, modernity bears in itself the promise of a brighter tomorrow brought about by Enlightenment-style dependence on reason and science. It promises to bring the dawn of the new age, where the human species may live without the oppressive traditional modes of government or pseudo-science and superstition under which it has laboured for centuries. However, at the same time, this new age is completely unknown and uncertain, and those traditions and frameworks of understanding or granting a certain meaning or truth to human existence are thrown aside, deemed no longer necessary, but at the same time no longer able to fulfil these tasks. The human species therefore is thrown into an epoch where, on the one hand, its traditional mores and forms of society are forcibly made redundant, but on the other, those ideas that would replace those frameworks are viewed with suspicion and cannot seem to provide the meaning and certainty that tradition did. As Michael Levenson states in *Modernism* (2011): “Modernity remains haunted both by a search for novelty and by the recollection of precursors. This double sense creates an abiding instability, a sense of modernity as inescapable but undecidable.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2011), 2.

CHAPTER THREE: Modernism and its Ethical Impulse

As was made clear in the previous chapter, despite its idealistic promise of a new age and the belief in progress, modernity also carried in it the germ of the dissolution of such promises in a meaninglessness and decadence towards the end of the nineteenth century. For Fredric Jameson, modernity in this way “dashes traditional structures and lifeways to pieces, sweeps away the sacred, undermines immemorial habits and inherited languages, and leaves the world as a set of raw materials to be reconstructed rationally.”⁷⁹ It may be said that modernism is a response to precisely this tendency of modernity which Shane Weller in his book *Modernism and Nihilism* (2011) calls “desacralization”⁸⁰ This desacralizing process present in especially nineteenth-century modernity and the various philosophical critiques aimed at it (most notably that of Nietzsche and his analysis of desacralization as nihilism),⁸¹ along with the First World War, which may be seen almost as an affirmation of the meaninglessness ushered in by technological and political modernization, resulted in “a range of resacralizing modernist projects” in the interwar period. These projects ranged “from the various European avant-garde movements, to the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger, to Italian fascism and German Nazism.”⁸²

Within these resacralizing projects, Anglophone modernist literature has a place as well, but before I move on to an exploration of its role, I should briefly come back to the issue of terminology and point out that here the separation of the modernity/modernism unit may start to become clear. As made clear above, modernity is that which carries in itself a process

⁷⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia Press, 1994), 84.

⁸⁰ Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, 4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*

that has at the point in time at which we have now arrived – the end of the nineteenth century, the *fin de siècle* – has made all that granted human existence meaning before and during its onset incapable of providing this meaning. In other words, it has *desacralized*, or disenchanted, the world. Modernism as I understand and employ it, then, is the collective term for those projects, whether captured in movements, political action or parties, or merely nominally or conceptually connected without any material or actual cohesion or articulated intention, that seek to *resacralize* the world. These projects seek, in an enormous variety of different ways, to reinvigorate human existence with that which it has lost through the process of modernisation. In order to discern the motivations behind the early twentieth-century literary modernism that contemporary post-postmodernist authors draw on, I will follow Roger Griffin in distinguishing two modernist ‘modes’, after which I will proceed to discuss early twentieth-century modernist literature and its role within the resacralizing project of modernism.

As we have seen, by the middle of the nineteenth century “the practical effects on European society of [...] the Dual Revolution” – and in addition, the progress made by science – “had undermined the myth of progress to a point where for many among its cultural elites modernity lost its utopian connotations and began to be constructed as a period of decline, decay, and loss.”⁸³ The promises made by early modernity, supported by the rationalism and idealism of the Enlightenment, had resulted in effects that could be constructed as completely adverse to these promises. This condition that modernity had reached compelled many artists and others “not just to find ways of expressing the decadence of modernity” – as we have seen above in the examples of Wells and Shelley – but to go further and “assert a higher vision of reality” in response to this perceived decline.⁸⁴ In some

⁸³ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 51.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

cases they even sought to “inaugurate an entirely new epoch.”⁸⁵ This tendency on the part of these cultural, artistic, philosophical, and political movements and figures to express not only their suspicion of or disappointment in modernity or certain elements contained within it, but to go further and try to find new ways of going *beyond* the decadence of modernity, can be called *modernism*. Griffin uses the term *Aufbruch* to identify what the modernists were after and describes it rather poetically in this way:

[*Aufbruch* is] the drive to break through established normality to find unsuspecting patterns of meaning and order within the encroaching chaos, to turn crepuscular twilight into a new dawn, to inaugurate a new beginning beyond the ongoing dissolution, and achieve, if not an alternative modernity, at least a lasting spiritual refuge, or even just a temporary night-shelter, from its devastating effects.⁸⁶

Incidentally, this tendency to envisage an entirely new age to be inaugurated in light of the decadence of late modernity is still completely in line with the archetypal modern figure of the revolutionary, as seen above: “[it] suggests that modernism is to be seen as the fruit of a modern reflexivity *in crisis*, the product of a temporalized self-awareness.”⁸⁷ This serves as a reminder that these artists are still very much products of modernity, even though they respond critically to it. Another reminder that modernism was still very much a part of the modernity against which it reacted, is offered by Michael Levenson: “It is insufficient [...] to see [this] conflict [between the modernists and the society against which they rebelled] as that between revolutionary art and static bourgeois resistance, [...] between motion and stasis, change and permanence.”⁸⁸ In other words, it is not a question of a number of movements,

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Levenson, *Modernism*, 5.

artistic or otherwise, standing up in defiance of a stagnant or even regressive society. As Griffin's characterization of modernism attempting to achieve "alternative modernities" attests, the modernist reaction to modernity was, for Levenson, "not a collision between novelty and tradition but a *contest of novelties*, a struggle to define the trajectory of the new."⁸⁹ It is prudent to remember that modernity was not seen to be stagnating necessarily; it was still in motion, yet it was moving in a direction deemed disastrous by the various modernist movements and figures that arose to counter it.

While the various forms of modernism all share this tendency to somehow counter the decadence of modernity, the ways they go about this attempt at redemption covers a vast spectrum. Roger Griffin derives two major categories of modernism from a tension that he identifies in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. On the one hand, there is the proposition that "social reality might be transformable,"⁹⁰ and on the other there is the deep scepticism that such a transformation would actually be viable. Nietzsche was "walking a tightrope between palingenesis [or cultural rebirth] as a social and metapolitical (but ultimately also *political* and revolutionary) project and palingenesis as a 'fiction', as a literary trope, a utopian metaphor, with which to investigate reality without any concrete strategy or even desire to intervene directly in the historical process in order to realize it."⁹¹ In accordance with these two sides of the tension in Nietzsche, Griffin identifies his two major categories of modernism: *programmatically* modernism on the one hand and *epiphanic* modernism on the other.⁹²

Before continuing on to the latter of the two, epiphanic modernism which, I will contend, is the more important concept for this particular project and of which more elaborate

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 62.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

examples will be given later, programmatic modernism will have to be addressed in order to make the distinction between these two general modes of modernism clear. Programmatic modernism is the modernism in which the reaction to the decadent modernity described above takes the shape of “a mission to change society, to inaugurate a new epoch, to start time anew.”⁹³ It is the modernism of “the rhetoric of manifestos and declarations,”⁹⁴ and the aesthetic form of this type of modernism often features artists working in active collaboration with movements – artistic or not – in projects for the radical transformation of social and political realities. These “revitalization movements”⁹⁵ are concerned with combating the decadence of modernity by positing alternative modernities, in which what Griffin calls the “liminoid conditions caused by the impact of modernization” are resolved.⁹⁶ The ‘liminoid’ here refers to the situation of a complete society in crisis – here the crisis of modernity, or the decadence of modernity – on the verge (Latin *limen*: threshold) of a transformation, not on the terms of that society’s previous state, but as a completely new rebirth: “the outcome [of this resolution of the liminoid conditions of modernity] is not society’s reaggregation but its rebirth in a new form.”⁹⁷ Artists within this mode may feel themselves called on to “inspire such movements and act as the catalyst which precipitates historical transformation,” or what has previously been termed rebirth – *palingenesis*.⁹⁸

Programmatic modernism is also that mode of modernism which explicitly does not have to be aesthetic or artistic – this mode or modernism in its purest form is arguably most

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 62.

suiting to political forms. As the title of his book foreshadows, Griffin will go on to identify Italian fascism and German national-socialism as forms of this mode of modernism – political modernist revitalization movements whose “core goal was to overcome decadence and create [...] a new form of transcendence for the modern age.”⁹⁹ These movements set out political paths, manifestos, and revolutionary programmes in order to achieve this transformation and, as such, may clearly be categorized as *programmatically* modernism. The other mode of modernism – *epiphanic* modernism – is slightly more nebulous and may most definitively be found in the artistic modernisms of the early twentieth century, especially in some of the literary figures pertinent to my investigation of contemporary British post-postmodernism and its engagement with early twentieth-century modernism. Griffin takes the term from James Joyce’s *Stephen Hero* (1944) and it describes the “protracted sense of disorientation and unreality”¹⁰⁰ that the decadence of modernity induces, a sense of utter confusion and fragmentation that is “punctuated by fleeting episodes of spiritual union with something ‘higher’ – what T.S. Eliot called ‘the unattended Moment, the moment in and out of time’.”¹⁰¹ Griffin further describes these moments in the terms related to the experience of time in Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* (2000): “the soul-destroying *chronos* [...] magically gives way to *kairos*.”¹⁰² *Chronos* is identified as “waiting time”¹⁰³ – that which is “simply successive” or “mere successiveness.”¹⁰⁴ With respect to the experience of time, the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47.

¹⁰⁴ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 46.

decadence modernity had fallen to in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may be seen characterized as *chronos*: as all that had provided meaning before had been ‘dashed to pieces’, to speak with Jameson, nothing remained to infuse the experience of time with any significance, resulting in this dreary, monotonous, meaningless ‘waiting time.’ In the fleeting moment of transcendence characteristic of epiphanic modernism, *chronos* for an instance becomes *kairos* – “a point in time filled with significance.”¹⁰⁵ These moments are “unexpected and unsustainable experiences of the lightness of being,”¹⁰⁶ moments which Virginia Woolf characterized as “separate moments of being [...] embedded in many more moments of non-being.”¹⁰⁷

An early but very exemplary instance of the epiphanic moment occurs in Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-1891): the prophet Zarathustra (a figure of revitalizing and resacralizing modernist tendencies and arguably Nietzsche’s alter ego) experiences the insight that the greatest joy may be gained from that which is “the least thing precisely, the gentlest thing, the littlest thing”¹⁰⁸ – a realization that makes him fall “into the well of eternity.”¹⁰⁹ Even more significant is that this insight occurs in the *Augenblick* – the blinking of an eye, the German word for the *moment*. Another example from Nietzsche is the actual insight – admittedly somewhat mythologized, but nonetheless an important instance of insight – the author and philosopher himself had during one of his customary walks in Sils-Maria. As he stopped to rest by a large rock, he purportedly suddenly gained insight into the ideas that

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁶ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 63.

¹⁰⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), 83.

¹⁰⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 1999), 197.

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 197.

would shape the rest of his career and his most significant works: the prophet Zarathustra and the Übermensch, as well as the idea of the eternal return of the same – ideas that are vital in Nietzsche’s critique of the decay of modernity in that they precipitate the possibility of overcoming the ‘nihilism’ inherent in modernity. Significantly, this insight occurred in a *moment* and ostensibly completely unexpectedly. Evidencing this, Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo* (written in 1888, but not published until 1908, after Nietzsche’s fall into madness): “*Da kam mir diese Gedanke*” – “there [at the rock], this thought [of the eternal return] *came to me.*”¹¹⁰ These examples make clear that epiphanic modernism is thus primarily concerned not with “revolutionary, epoch-making designs on ‘creating a new world,’” but with “the cultivation of special moments in which there is *Aufbruch* of a purely inner, spiritual kind.”¹¹¹

Thus, epiphanic modernism is characterized by an attentiveness to these unexpected moments of transcendence or insight – sometimes almost mystical in nature, revealing that “all human beings are connected within a much greater scheme of things,”¹¹² or with Woolf, quoted in Griffin, that ““the whole work is a work of art; [...] we are works of art; [...] we are the thing in itself.””¹¹³ Similar to the more structured and actively transformative attempts at revitalization and resacralization of programmatic modernism, this characteristic of epiphanic modernism may be read as an attempt at breaking through the monotony, emptiness, and dreariness of the decadence of late modernity in search for something higher, fuller, or filled with significance. However, the modernist author’s impulse to reach such a deeper

¹¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/EH>. – my translation.

¹¹¹ Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 62.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹³ Virginia Woolf, “Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), quoted in Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 63.

significance does not immediately have to concern itself with the epiphanic moment, but may also be focused on a truer or more real – and therefore more significant and meaningful – depiction of human consciousness and still be tentatively classed under the epiphanic category, even simply as a counterpart to the programmatic mode. Attempting to “come closer to life” and to “preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them”,¹¹⁴ authors such as Joyce discard the conventional modes of writing and “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, [...] trace the pattern” of the little things in which life exists.¹¹⁵ Woolf says of James Joyce that he is a “spiritual” writer: “he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain.”¹¹⁶ The language employed by Woolf – the language of “flickerings” and “flames” – evokes a sense that this commitment to recording the immediate consciousness of a human mind is a commitment to something more true and significant than a conventional omnisciently narrated, chronologically structured story in the typically nineteenth-century realist mode could ever reveal. Furthermore, in tracing these minutiae of the human consciousness – resulting of course in the technique of ‘stream of consciousness’ – may indeed reveal the sudden insights and moments of significance and *kairos* within the *chronos* of simply “one damn thing after another”¹¹⁷ characteristic of living in the decadent emptiness of late modernity – insights that are of primary concern to epiphanic modernism.

A similar quest at coming to a more fundamental and true picture of the self that Woolf notes in Joyce’s writing may be found in the writing of Woolf herself. David Punter

¹¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 899.

¹¹⁵ Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” 899.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Kermode, “The Sense of an Ending,” 47.

points out that, contrary to the “confinement and frustration”¹¹⁸ of Ezra Pound’s poetry, or the diffuse use of style and tradition in T.S. Eliot’s, or for example the bleak world painted in Wyndham Lewis’s unperformable play *Enemy of the Stars*, Woolf’s work does not necessarily imply a decaying, fragmented world: “despite [the] elevated position in the modernist canon [of Woolf’s works], it is not at all that society has ceased to exist, nor is it necessarily regarded as corrupt.”¹¹⁹ However, Punter’s claim that “the psyches she depicts are not at all divorced from society”¹²⁰ must be qualified with the reminder that the psyches depicted do not *need* to be divorced from society in order to be alienated. Indeed, Woolf’s characters being embedded in society facilitates precisely the “quailing and reeling before the social pressures exerted upon them.”¹²¹ Furthermore, Woolf seems to be committed to what has been established as the central concern of what we – with Griffin – have called epiphanic modernism, namely the fleeting but profound moments of insight into a more fundamental and experiential truth. As an example, the musings of Mrs Ramsay from Woolf’s seminal novel *To the Lighthouse* make perfectly clear that she is living in an alienating, demystified world: “How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice; but suffering, death, the poor [...] No happiness lasted; she knew that.”¹²² Yet in this continuous knowledge of meaninglessness, there are moments of insight and epiphany – moments of touching on something more fundamental:

¹¹⁸ Punter, *Modernity*, 39.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd, 2013), 59.

she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and [the light of the lighthouse] silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!¹²³

Thus, Woolf's modernism too is of the epiphanic variety: Mrs Ramsay is aware of the meaninglessness of existence, but she experiences moments of transcendence and insight.

In summary, modernism may be seen as a reaction to the desacralizing and demythologizing tendencies of modernity, which, in all its rationality and individualization, in all its scientific progress and technological strides, in fact had created a society and a culture in which the traditional modes in which life had been granted meaning and purpose had been shattered and fragmented. The modernists, then, did not merely express their dissatisfaction or fear in the face of this desacralization, but attempted to bring forth something new and different which would aid in the rebirth of culture – which would lead to *palingenesis*. The two different modes of modernism attempted to do so in different ways. Programmatic modernism was concerned more with direct and transformational action. It attempted through programmes and manifestos to directly influence the culture which they saw as decadent and meaningless. This is the mode of modernism where political forms of modernism – revitalization movements such as fascism – are most at home. Another mode of modernism, epiphanic modernism, was not so much concerned with direct transformative action, but rather with a breaking through the meaninglessness of a decadent modernity in unexpected and unsustainable moments of insight and transcendence. Griffin calls this *Aufbruch*, as quoted above, and the fact that *Aufbruch* is concerned with these moments of insight, but also with unsuspected patterns of meaning and order within the chaos of late modernity sheds

¹²³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 59-60.

some light on the defining and uniting factor of authors such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.

In the following chapters I will attempt to bring this temporalized – but at the same time marked with a definitive sensibility – characterization of modernism into the post-postmodern framework. I will give an outline of the postmodern condition which will draw comparisons with the analysis of the decadence of modernity given above, relying on Jameson's and subsequently Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen's focus on historicity, affect, and depth. I will deal with questions of postmodern irony versus post-postmodern sincerity, the neglect of meaning versus the search for it, and issues of time and the relation of the human being to past, present, and future to illustrate the claim that the modernist motivational imperative of finding meaning in a world that has become newly meaningless is similar to the post-postmodern return to historicity, affect, and depth. I will furthermore use the novels by Ali Smith and Will Self – *How to be both* and *Umbrella* respectively – to illustrate these elements in my exploration of modernism in post-postmodernism.

SECTION II: THE ROLE OF MODERNISM IN POST-POSTMODERNISM

CHAPTER FOUR: Postmodernism Historicized

Before I move on to assessing the role of modernism in post-postmodernist literature, it is necessary to sketch the environment in which the call for a new cultural mode or sensibility – a mode that moves beyond postmodernism – is even required to be heard. In a similar manner as the previous chapters, this chapter will deal with precisely that environment and as I proceed with expanding on what might be called the conditions for metamodernism, I will touch on the deficiencies of postmodernism which metamodernism ostensibly counters. I will do so by referring both to Fredric Jameson’s account the waning of historicity, affect, and depth under postmodernism, and Robin van den Akker, Tim Vermeulen, and Alison Gibbons’s outline of return of these three elements in a very particular way in metamodernism.

Firstly, as an addition to James and Seshagiri’s adherence to a periodized view of modernism – or to modernism as a moment and a movement in history – Fredric Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* advocates a similarly temporalized conception of postmodernism. Jameson stresses the “radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism.”¹²⁴ He further states that these two views lead to two different outcomes: the former may only lead to some moralising assessment of postmodernism – both celebration and condemnation – which needs to be rejected. He personally does not seem to doubt “its essential triviality when juxtaposed against [...] the great modernisms” or that “the logic of the simulacrum [...] does more than

¹²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 45.

merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it.”¹²⁵ However, he wishes to view postmodernism from his second proposed perspective, which might provide “a genuine dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History.”¹²⁶ In other words, seeing postmodernism merely as one possibility of stylistic choice among many others, thus granting oneself the freedom of criticizing it purely on terms of those stylistic choices in the light of the other options, veils the historical and developmental significance that postmodernism has had in the process towards something new – the ‘something new’ that is now at hand in the present study. Seeing postmodernism as a step or a lynch pin in the development of culture will help us in understanding the developments that we are concerned with at present. Furthermore, metamodernism itself may thus also be seen not merely as one of the many cultural options alongside postmodernism, but as a reaction to postmodernism – a response to those elements within postmodernism that are now deemed to be irrelevant, redundant, or no longer viable in responding to the social, political, and cultural moment in which we find ourselves.

Here I wish to point out once more the distinction that I have been attempting to make throughout the previous chapters, namely between modernity and modernism. Postmodernism is often taught or colloquially explained to constitute a critical reaction towards the ‘grand narratives’ of that which came before and of a rejection of modernism – sometimes even explicitly conflated to mean ‘the grand narratives of modernism’ (as an example of this commonly held view on the topic one might look at the ‘Postmodernism’ page in that bastion of collective knowledge Wikipedia). As the in this respect oft-cited or at least alluded to Jean-Francois Lyotard puts it in *The Postmodern Condition*: “the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a

¹²⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 46.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.”¹²⁷ He further groups under his grand narratives – also called metanarratives – “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.”¹²⁸ As should be clear by now, these grand narratives are the grand narratives of *modernity* as expanded on in the previous chapters, rather than specifically of *modernism*. Whereas for example the dialectics of Spirit – an allusion of course to Hegel – has been utilized or adapted into what might arguably be called modernist projects, such as the various strands of emancipatory and revolutionary Marxism, it must be noted that this adaptation relied on a rejection precisely of the idea that Spirit is the area where this dialectic development is taking place, and a substitution of the material for the spiritual. In other words, even though some of the aforementioned examples of grand narratives might be adapted into modernist projects, they are all examples of modern predilections, rooted for the most part in Enlightenment thought. Furthermore, modernism itself may also be seen as a critical response precisely to these modern Enlightenment values.

Thus, postmodernism must first and foremost be seen as a response to institutionalized *modernity* and its grand narratives, which have hopefully been tackled sufficiently in the previous chapters. All this does not mean, of course, that the view of postmodernism as a critique of modernism is completely invalid; rather, it needs qualification. Indeed, the postmodernist critique of what has been called programmatic modernism – the impulse to eventually affect an ultimate and complete change of the world which has become decadent, or to usher in an alternative modernity, is quite readily clear. David Harvey points out the “intense distrust of all universal or ‘totalizing’ discourses (to use the favoured phrase) [as] a

¹²⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 37.

¹²⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii.

hallmark of postmodernist thought.”¹²⁹ The focus postmodernism places on “heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces”¹³⁰ is almost obviously a reaction in the face of what might be called the culmination of the totalizing aspect of modernism in the catastrophe of World War Two. Furthermore, if programmatic and epiphanic modernism work under the same impulse of reaction against the decadent modernity the modernists found themselves in, it is only understandable that the postmodern critique of said impulse extends towards the epiphanic mode as well. In the postmodernist light, the modernist impulse of revitalization or epiphanic moments of lightness of being may not only be described as futile or based in ideals that are themselves rooted in a metanarrative or a final trust in such concepts as *truth* or *meaning*, even if obscured and vague, but may even be deemed complicit in the carnage wrought by fascism and National Socialism. Also, even if the Marxist dialectic may be a radical re-imagining of the spiritual dialectic of Hegel, it nevertheless constitutes a metanarrative of its own to which postmodernism reacts with incredulity and, in the face of Stalin’s reign of terror in the Soviet Union, horror.

Thus, postmodernism may also be seen as a critical response to the forms of modernist art that it deemed complicit in the maintenance of such destructive and totalizing grand narratives. As Harvey states, the institutionalization of modernism coupled a continuation of the Enlightenment faith in progress with a further technologization and the elitism of the avant-garde: “[it was] ‘positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic’ at the same time as it was imposed as the work of an elite avant-garde of planners, artists, architects, critics and other guardians of high taste.”¹³¹ In other words, the *stylistic* devices germinating from the

¹²⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Massachusetts/Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 9.

¹³⁰ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 9.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

modernist repulsion of the unchecked belief in progress of the Enlightenment and the unbridled technological and scientific innovations, leading to the decadence modernity had fallen to by the end of the nineteenth century (in the eyes of the modernists), had been institutionalized, while the individualization, atomization, and ‘capitalization’ continued, now ostensibly to “[bring] a benevolent and progressive ‘modernization process’ to a backward Third World.”¹³² Purely stylistically or artistically, Fredric Jameson makes a similar point. In response to the – for him faulty – idea that postmodernism might be no more than an extension of modernism, he notes the social status of modernism when it first arose and modernism round about the 1950s, after which the traditional narrative has it that postmodernism began to gain traction. Whereas for the “Victorian and Post-Victorian bourgeoisie”, the modernist aesthetics (encompassing literature, music, visual art, and so on) and ethos were “received as being variously ugly, dissonant, obscure, scandalous, immoral, subversive and generally ‘anti-social’”,¹³³ the late 1950s saw an institutionalization and canonization of precisely these forms of art, rendering artists such as James Joyce and Pablo Picasso not only “no longer ugly”, but even “on the whole [...] rather realistic.”¹³⁴ While the claim of Joyce and Picasso being accepted by the general public as ‘rather realistic’ may be disputed, Jameson is of course correct in asserting the canonization of these and many other artists and authors. Jameson further states that it was quite a logical point of departure for the postmodernists: “[the aforementioned institutionalization] is indeed surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself, since the younger generation of the 1960s [now confronted] the formerly oppositional modern[ist] movement as

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

a set of dead classics.”¹³⁵ In other words, the canonization of modernist art rendered them just as dead to the postmodernists as the earlier modern forms of art – such as for example the Victorian realist novel – had become to the modernists.

¹³⁵ Ibid. While Jameson uses the word ‘modern’ here, it is clear he is speaking of those artists that I wish throughout this thesis quite clearly to designate as ‘modernist’, in order to not be guilty myself of precisely the confusion I note – and wish to counter – in the discourse on the modernity/modernism unit.

CHAPTER FIVE: The Postmodern Condition

The brief analysis of the institutionalization of modernism, removing its artistic devices from its revolutionizing and revitalizing tendencies, while the process of modernity, rooted in the Enlightenment – responsible for the desacralization so prominent in the modernist narrative – continued, and the postmodernist reaction to this development, clears the way for an analysis of how postmodernism appears to be failing itself, in becoming complicit with the process of modernization. Indeed, in the same way that the once offensive artworks of modernism had become canonized by the 1950s, so the postmodernist tendencies to irreverence and sexual explicitness “no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official culture of Western society.”¹³⁶ I will follow three aspects of the postmodern condition as described by both Jameson on the one hand and Van den Akker, Vermeulen, and Gibbons on the other, both discussing the way postmodernism has brought on the lack of historicity, affect, and depth. I will furthermore have to rely on Jameson’s text especially in laying out these three aspects, as he presents the case from which Van den Akker, Vermeulen, and Gibbons depart in their analysis. I must finally stress that the following is not a wholesale dismissal of postmodernism. Rather, I wish to present the way in which postmodernism has effected a broader cultural sensibility which is has become depthless, and thus presents a fruitful ground for a new structure of feeling to emerge in the same way that modernity had fallen to a form of decadence toward the end of the nineteenth century to which modernism reacted and modernism itself became institutionalized around the 1950s, which paved the way for a postmodernist response. Take therefore into account that whenever a generalizing

¹³⁶ Ibid.

statement about postmodernism is made, it is always in the light of the cultural sensibility which it has brought about throughout the latter stages of the twentieth century.

In respect especially of the waning of depth and affect, Jameson presents an interesting case of comparison, namely on the one hand what he calls the “high modernist moment”¹³⁷ of Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of peasant shoes from 1886 and the postmodernist *Diamond Dust Shoes* by Andy Warhol. Jameson argues that the Van Gogh painting is open to various hermeneutical readings – readings consisting in a multi-staged process and refusing to let the artwork “sink to the level of sheer decoration” and “remain an inert object.”¹³⁸ Furthermore, both these interpretations are ways of reconstructing the “initial situation to which the work is somehow a response.”¹³⁹ Firstly, this initial situation might be seen as the raw materials confronted and reworked in the work of art. Jameson rather poetically typifies these raw materials which Van Gogh worked with as “the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, [and] backbreaking peasant toil, [where] fruit trees [...] are ancient and exhausted sticks coming out of poor soil, [and] the people of the village are worn down to their skulls.”¹⁴⁰ Confronting and reworking this world in the way Van Gogh did, transforming “a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure colour in oil paint”, Jameson argues, “is to be seen as a Utopian gesture.”¹⁴¹ It suggests a different way of looking at the world, which in the first instance seems drab, bleak, and meaningless, yet the transformation into an explosion of colour may offer some way of touching on a more fundamental and deeply personal or human perspective

¹³⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

on the world. This should, in reference to the previous chapters on modernity and modernism, also make clear how Van Gogh may indeed be seen as a modernist painter. The second interpretation consists in Heidegger's reading of the work of art in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*. Heidegger makes the distinction between what *earth* and *world* – what Jameson calls “the meaningless materiality of the body and nature and the meaning-endowment of history and of the social.”¹⁴² In the gap between these two, between the mere “thing-being (the thingliness) of the thing”¹⁴³ and the granting of meaning to these things by the social and cultural sphere emerges the artwork. The shoes in the painting are transformed from mere thingly things into something in which “[vibrates] with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field..”¹⁴⁴ Heidegger goes on to state that “this equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.”¹⁴⁵ Once more, through a hermeneutic process of interpretation, meaning may be glimpsed from the work of art deeper than its immediate surface – a surface which nonetheless invites the viewer to an affective engagement with the artwork. In this interpretative act, “the work in its inert, objectal form, is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth.”¹⁴⁶

In contrast to this, Jameson presents Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*. Whereas Van Gogh presents the viewer with a painting which invites an affective and interpretative

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

¹⁴⁴ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 14.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 8.

gesture, engaging with Warhol's work goes no further than the encounter with the contingent, "confront[ing] it at the turning of a museum corridor or gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object."¹⁴⁷ In Heideggerian terms, the "so many turnips"¹⁴⁸ that Warhol's shoes resemble might be argued to no longer objects salvaged from the 'thingliness' of the earth into a person's life-world, given meaning through an interpretative process, but remain in their 'thing-being' lifeless and meaningless: they are "shorn of their earlier life-world as the pile of shoes left over from Auschwitz, or the remainders and tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in a packed dancehall."¹⁴⁹ The comparison with the shoes at Auschwitz is particularly telling and serves as a potent reminder of the meaninglessness that is alluded to here. Furthermore, it is as though the utopian use of colour of Van Gogh's painting has been reversed in Warhol's work. Rather than presenting the drab outside world of toil and hardship with an overlaying of vibrancy and colour in order to perhaps touch on something more fundamentally human within the bleak meaninglessness of that toil, Warhol presents the negative of an image that is already ripped from its life-world, in a sense stripping away the colour and showing us the "deathly black-and-white substratum"¹⁵⁰ underneath. However, Jameson contends that even this cannot be properly called interpretative content; Warhol presents us with an image of a negative of a photograph, or as Alison Gibbons in her short introduction to the "Affect" section of *Metamodernism*:

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.

Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism puts it: “Warhol’s shoes are [...] an image of an image rather than a depiction of a world with depth.”¹⁵¹

This depthlessness may also be found in the position of history and historicity within postmodernism. Robin van den Akker, in his introductory “Historicity” chapter preceding the relevant section in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, follows Francois Hartog in defining the way cultures define their place within history, their relation to past, present and future, and the way these three are related during a specific time and in a specific place as a “regime of historicity”.¹⁵² These regimes of historicity vary across time periods, cultures, and cultural moments: “there are various modalities in which one can relate past, present, and future (or be in history) and that these modalities vary across time and over cultures.”¹⁵³ The postmodern regime of historicity is most poignantly expressed as Francis Fukuyama’s purported “end of history”: the twentieth century, Fukuyama holds in his 1989 paper “The End of History?”, consisted of “liberalism contend[ing] first with the remnants of absolutism, then bolshevism and fascism, and finally an updated Marxism that threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war”, culminating in “an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.”¹⁵⁴ Fukuyama argues that the alternatives to liberal democracy, such as the various forms of socialism (Marxist or otherwise), fascism, or absolutist monarchism, have been exhausted, leaving liberalism as the only viable option both

¹⁵¹ Alison Gibbons, “Metamodern Affect,” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), 83.

¹⁵² Robin van den Akker “Metamodern Historicity,” in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), 21.

¹⁵³ Van den Akker “Metamodern Historicity,” 21.

¹⁵⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.

in the economic and in the political sphere. This exhaustion of alternatives has led to “the end of history as such: [...] the end of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy.”¹⁵⁵ Thus, access to both the future and the past is closed off, and what remains is an eternal present. Fukuyama does qualify this statement by posing that this victory is mainly one of ideas that has not pervaded throughout the material world yet, but eventually, he holds, it will “govern the material world *in the long run*.”¹⁵⁶ Fredric Jameson takes Fukuyama’s idea of an imminent liberal victory and provides a different perspective, specifically taking the economic side of liberal capitalism into account: there is no ‘in the long run’ – the end of history is “not really about Time at all but rather about Space.”¹⁵⁷

Fukuyama’s statement implies the closing of an all-encompassing frontier for liberal capitalism and the new globalized market of transnational corporations. This final closure leads to an impossibility of thinking a significant future:

The impossibility to imagine a future to which Fukuyama's conception of the 'end of history' gives voice is the result of new and more fundamental spatial limits, not as a result of the end of the Cold War or of the failure of socialism, as rather of the entrance of capitalism into a new third stage and its consequent penetration of as yet uncommodified parts of the world which make it difficult to imagine any further enlargement of the system.¹⁵⁸

What might be called the filling up of space, or a form of spatial completion – closing off a final frontier – is not only discernable on the global level, but also on a local, even individual level. Van den Akker points to the “completed incorporation of culture by the

¹⁵⁵ Fukuyama “The End of history?,” 4.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London/New York: Verso, 1998), 90.

¹⁵⁸ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 90.

commodity logic”:¹⁵⁹ “everyday life increasingly took place in a mass-mediatised, credit-driven consumer bubble that hatched each bored moment against so many variations on a theme park.”¹⁶⁰ The completion of the incorporation of culture into the capitalist logic of commodities and consumerism, Van den Akker argues with Jameson, results in everyday experiences to be nothing more than “a series of ‘impersonal’ and ‘free-floating’ intensities amounting to the euphoric immediacy of so many disconnected presents.”¹⁶¹ In other words, what might be called the regime of a-historicity of the postmodern condition of consumer capitalism is intensified and supplemented by culture. With regards to postmodernist architecture, Jameson puts the difference between modernist and postmodernist culture and art in this way: “[postmodernist architects] no longer attempt, as did the masterworks and monuments of high modernism, to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new Utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign-system of the surrounding city, but rather, on the contrary, seek to speak that very language, using its lexicon and syntax as that has been emblematically ‘learned from Las Vegas’.”¹⁶² Even though Jameson speaks specifically of architecture, the commercialized city and the place of the architect as the artist therein, either attempting to break through the depthless, decadent sign-city of late capitalism via a Utopian gesture, or completely co-opting its consumerist language, is an apt metaphor for the place of art and culture in relation to the postmodern condition of depthlessness, loss of affect, and regime of a-historicity.

As I have been attempting to make clear in the previous chapters, the decadence that modernity had fallen to by the end of the nineteenth century, intensified by the early twentieth

¹⁵⁹ Van den Akker “Metamodern Historicity,” 22.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 39.

century's disaster of the First World War, demanded forms of cultural expression that would face up to this decadence, dull meaninglessness, and falling away of revolutionary Enlightenment ideals into nationalism and the carnage of war. This calling culminated in the modes of modernism as discussed in the previous chapter, with especially epiphanic modernism seeking for a glimpse of a higher truth, meaning, or a way of touching on more fundamental human experience or attempting to depict the human mind in all its intricacies, in order to achieve mere moments of lightness of being. Vermeulen puts it in a similar way when he states that the modernist approach to art might, with Jameson, be called the "depth-model":¹⁶³ "the world that appears to us, the world that we see, is a reflection, an expression, a symptom of what you might, with some liberty, call 'noumena', an invisible realm behind or beneath it, a hinter-or netherworld."¹⁶⁴ Especially the epiphanic or more broadly artistic modernist project exists precisely in the attempt to at least for a moment uncover this invisible realm, where, in the face of the decadence of the surface, truth, meaning, or beauty might actually be found. In contrast, postmodernist art may be characterized as following the "'surface-model', in which what you see is what you get."¹⁶⁵ The above analysis of postmodernism as taking on the late capitalist logic of depthlessness, the waning of affect, and the regime of a-historicity, may be argued to have ushered in a new condition of meaninglessness, the decadence of consumerism, and the complacency brought on by the media bubble. Post-postmodernism (as understood simply as that which comes after postmodernism), then, may be seen as a response to this decadence in a similar way that

¹⁶³ Timotheus Vermeulen, "Metamodern Depth, or 'depthliness'," in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), 147.

¹⁶⁴ Vermeulen "Metamodern Depth," 147.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

modernism has been argued to respond to the decadence of late nineteenth-century modernity. This final section of the present thesis will attempt to show how post-postmodernism effects this response and the place of distinctly modernist techniques, stylistic devices, and indeed ethical considerations within that response. Firstly, a brief and general discussion of post-postmodernism will be given, after which the distinctly modernist elements within post-postmodernism will be illustrated by referring to Ali Smith and her novel *How to be Both* on the one hand, and Will Self and his *Umbrella* on the other.

CHAPTER SIX: The Ethical Impulse of Modernism in Post-postmodernism

Having elaborated on the depthlessness, lack of affect, and regime of a-historicity of the postmodern condition, I can now turn to the way post-postmodernism has been attempting to recuperate or revive the elements of depth, affect, and a different regime of historicity. Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen inevitably define this recuperation in terms of the metamodern. The metamodern regime of historicity, for instance, differs from the modern and the postmodern regimes of historicity in that, instead of the “futurism” of the former and the “presentism” of the latter, its present “opens onto – in an attempt to bring within its fold – past possibilities and possible futures.”¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, affect seems to be much more straightforwardly returning, with “a growing body of work show[ing] that contemporary art works display something akin to a return of affect.”¹⁶⁷ Jameson’s hermeneutic possibility and the invitation to such hermeneutics, interpretation, and the affective or emotional relationship towards the artwork that he identifies as being at work in modernist art, seems to be returning. Gibbons notes that “we can perhaps speak once more of a hermeneutics of the self, a will and ability to process intensities so that we can articulate meaningful emotional reactions or cognitive responses to today’s social situation in which another affective modality has substituted yesterday’s fragmented and fragmenting euphoria”¹⁶⁸ – yesterday’s modality of affect is of course a modality of no affect; the waning of affect in postmodernism. An important development in the quite straightforward return of affect is the work of American author David Foster Wallace, evident in the fact that two of the four chapters dealing with affect in Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen’s book discuss Foster Wallace. Even

¹⁶⁶ Van den Akker “Metamodern Historicity,” 22.

¹⁶⁷ Gibbons, “Metamodern Affect,” 85.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

though the straightforwardness of his return to affect is problematized in these chapters, his suspicion of irony especially in television, consorting with contemporary American fiction and the consumer capitalist mode,¹⁶⁹ and his tacit call for a new generation of writers who “treat old untrendy troubles and emotions [...] with reverence and conviction”¹⁷⁰ point to a marked interest in the affective mode, reacting to the self-referential irony and lack of genuine affect in postmodern culture. In relation to depth, Vermeulen turns Jameson’s focus on the two artworks depicting footwear into a metaphor in order to describe modernist, postmodernist, and metamodernist conceptions of depth. Vermeulen says that “Van Gogh’s shoes are worn-out sandals, his feet register every rain drop, each little bump in the road.”¹⁷¹ Warhol, contrastively, provides himself with a buffer between the bumpy ground and his feet, wearing “the latest Nike Air Max”¹⁷² – an allusion to the ostensibly complicity of postmodern art in the greater scheme of consumer capitalism outlined above. The metamodern footwear trend, then, “neither allows contact with an ultimate ground nor negates it, but instead performs it.”¹⁷³ Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen’s analysis on the whole characterizes contemporary art, literature, and culture, which they call metamodern, as attempting to uncover those elements that have been lost under postmodernism.

As I have alluded to in the introduction, whereas Vermeulen and Van den Akker in their early essay “Notes on Metamodernism” identify their form of post-postmodernism as being characterized by an oscillating movement between ‘modern’ utopianism and

¹⁶⁹ David Foster Wallace “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 171.

¹⁷⁰ Wallace “E Unibus Pluram,” 191-192.

¹⁷¹ Vermeulen “Metamodern Depth,” 147.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

‘postmodern’ irony, Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson in their introduction to *The 2000s: a Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, identify the more specific trends in contemporary British literature as bearing a marked rejection of postmodernism. They identify the perception of postmodernism “not as a radical disruption of totalizing narratives with the potential liberatory space that that opens up, but in fact the appropriate aesthetic practice to go hand-in hand with late capitalist and neo-imperialistic practices as pursued by Western nations.”¹⁷⁴ This echoes Jameson’s critique of postmodernism and is the same collusion of postmodern cultural expression with late capitalism that Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen also note. Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson furthermore identify the three overlapping categories of contemporary British fiction also already touched upon in the introduction: novelists continuing to use postmodern techniques but having introduced “a set of grounded ethical positions”;¹⁷⁵ those novelists returning to a “broadly realist mode”¹⁷⁶ in their rejection of postmodernism; and novelists who return to “modernist techniques as a way of return to a pre-postmodernist aesthetics.”¹⁷⁷ In light of the analyses on postmodernism and post-postmodernism, the shared impulse of a rejection of postmodernism that I have argued for in the introduction may now become somewhat more specific. I have contended that these three categories share the ethical motivation of a search for meaning, truth, beauty, value, or authentic experience that have been lost under the postmodern mode of culture and its complicity in consumerism and capitalist imperialism. The return to a historical perspective and especially the return of affect and a search for depth or what lies under the surface seem to fit seamlessly into this impulse. It seems prudent, therefore, to move away from the idea of

¹⁷⁴ Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson, introduction to the *2000s*, 15-16.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

oscillation presented by Vermeulen and Van den Akker in “Notes on Metamodernism”, as this concept does imply an even-handed balance between the ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ pole – a balance that does not adequately address the primacy of the rejection of postmodernism and the search for meaning, affect, and depth under the surface. Furthermore, this single ethical imperative is ideally suited to the epiphanic mode of modernism that I have outlined in the relevant chapter on modernism – an artistic and literary mode of modernism that attempted to search for moments of lightness of being and fundamental insights in the face of the decadent, meaningless cultural and social landscape in which it found itself. Thus, what Vermeulen and Van den Akker call the ‘modern’ impulse to idealism and utopia can for the purposes of this thesis be reinterpreted as meaning the *modernist* impulse to finding truth, meaning, and purpose underneath a superficial appearance of depthlessness. Surely, this might be termed in itself a ‘utopian’ or ‘idealistic’ enterprise, but qualification of these two words is necessary in order to do justice to the actual modernist imperative outlined in the chapters above. It furthermore clarifies once again that post-postmodernism cannot be an even-handed oscillation, but must prefer one side over the other in its rejection of postmodernism. This rejection constitutes for at least a segment of the post-postmodern artistic environment a re-engagement with modernism which, as David James and Urmila Seshagiri argue, is used as the archive of a historical moment by several authors that fall into all three of Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson’s categories (Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, Will Self, Ali Smith, Tom McCarthy, etc.) in order to reinvigorate and repurpose not only the stylistic devices or aesthetical choices in order to face the present-day crises and postmodern condition, but also, I contend, the ethical considerations, impulses, and imperatives at the root of these choices. The following section will attempt to illustrate this claim by referring to two authors, Ali Smith and Will Self, and their attitudes towards modernism and what I have

called its ethical impulse, drawing on interviews with the authors, pieces written by the authors themselves, and touching on their novels *How to be Both* and *Umbrella* respectively.

ALI SMITH

Of the two authors at hand, Ali Smith is the one who is most conveniently presented along the lines of Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen's three aspects of metamodernism, and whose modernist style is less overt than Will Self's. Indeed, in the introduction to *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2013), Monica Germanà and Emily Horton list several critics assessing her work as primarily postmodern.¹⁷⁸ However, they further point to “a certain political despondency, particularly in relation to the disaffected, apathetic responses generated by the politics and aesthetics of twenty-first-century media.”¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, stylistically her novel *How to be Both* contains a definitive modernist influence. The novel is comprised of two parts: one part focusing on the young George (a variation of the name Georgia), who has lost her mother and is trying to cope with the loss; the other part is told from the perspective of the ghost of Francescho, a female Renaissance painter having pretended to be male in order to be eligible for an artist's apprenticeship. Depending on the version of the book, either one or the other section can be the first one the reader encounters. As to the modernist influences, the most important one is arguably the stream-of-consciousness section at the beginning of Francescho's narrative. Furthermore, Smith has the tendency to jump from timeframe to timeframe, as when after George has made herself a slice of toast and eats it while she watches her brother Henry sleep in her bed after their mother's

¹⁷⁸ Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4.

¹⁷⁹ Germanà and Horton, *Ali Smith*, 4.

death, the narrative jumps to George being bored at the palazzo, vacationing in Italy while her mother is still alive, with no apparent sign in the textual structure that the jump has happened.¹⁸⁰

Aside from these stylistic devices, Smith's *How to be Both* bears a similar impulse as the one outlined in the section on epiphanic modernism, particularly regarding Woolf. Smith's characters are prone to sudden realizations that transport them from a quite diffuse sense of consciousness – flitting back and forth between memories, going on tangents in their minds – into the present moment. This happens for example when Helena Fisker knocks on George's door and George is transported to the memory of Helena saving her from a group of bullies in the school lavatories, followed by a train of thought on the recording that the bullies made of her urinating. Helena makes a number of jokes while talking with George and suddenly, George “realizes that she has laughed twice” at these two jokes, making it “three times since September that George has laughed in an undeniable present tense.”¹⁸¹ In the wake of her mother's death, George is suddenly brought into the present and into a moment of joy by something as ordinary as a number of jokes, revealing their greater significance, as well as the significance of the person telling them. In order to make the rejection of postmodernism clear and analyse Smith's work in the light of Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen's three aspects of metamodernism outlined above, I will continue with a discussion of a comparison made by Sonya Andermahr with Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969).

Both Smith's and Brophy's novels deal among other things with the subjects of gender and the problematization of the gender binary, and pornography. Both novels take different approaches to both these themes, however – a difference that is significant in the light of Smith's modernism as a rejection of postmodernism. Brophy's novel is narrated in the third

¹⁸⁰ Ali Smith, *How to be Both* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 46.

¹⁸¹ Smith, *How to be Both*, 80.

person, “never explicitly identifying the sex of the narrator or giving the reader enough information to establish it one way or the other.”¹⁸² The narrator’s name is eventually given as the “significantly non-genderspecific” Evelyn Hilary (Pat) O’Rooley.¹⁸³ The search for sexual identity even becomes part of the narrative in the second part of the novel, first by “feel[ing] around inside his/her corduroy trousers”, later in “an increasingly surreal quest for the missing member.”¹⁸⁴ This gender ambiguity is also present in Smith’s *How to be Both*. The protagonist has a similarly non-genderspecific name, George, which at first seems like a male name but later the reader learns is short for Georgia. Still, George’s gender is quite readily glimpsed from Smith’s use of the feminine pronouns to refer to her protagonist. The second protagonist of *How to be Both* is (arguably) Renaissance artist Francesco del Cossa, in the novel rendered as the fictional character Francescho – or rather, his ghost. Francescho was born a girl and in order for her to be recognized as a legitimate candidate for an artist’s apprenticeship, she had to change her gender identity. George’s mother Carol’s reply to George’s question whether the figure in the fresco is male or female – “Male, female, both Beautiful, all of them”¹⁸⁵ – signifies a similar freedom of gender fluidity: “Carol confirms the both/and aesthetic that structures the whole novel and gives George license to experience gender as a fluid construct.”¹⁸⁶ This fluidity or ‘both/and’ aesthetic is affirmed and intensified by the innovative way the books was published. There are two versions of the novel, one

¹⁸² Sonya Andermahr, “Both/And Aesthetics: Gender, Art, and Language in Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit* and Ali Smith’s *How to be Both*,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 12, no. 2 (2018), 251.

¹⁸³ Andermahr, “Both/And Aesthetics,” 252.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Smith, *How to be Both*, 52.

¹⁸⁶ Andermahr, “Both/And Aesthetics,” 253.

starting with George's story and one beginning with Francescho's, leaving different readers with different experiences of the same aesthetic and ultimately ethical principle.

Thus, it seems that both novels deal with gender in a similar way. However, where Brophy's protagonist is "perpetually 'in transit'"¹⁸⁷ between male and female and on a "feverish if avowedly futile hunt for actual organs,"¹⁸⁸ George and Francescho in Smith's novel can "revel in being both."¹⁸⁹ It must also be added that Brophy's novel "renders any attempt to determine identity and, crucially, gender identity, impossible."¹⁹⁰ Smith's novel, however, does establish the protagonist's gender quite early on and while Andermahr contends that it "similarly plays and puns on [...] sexual ambiguity",¹⁹¹ it may be argued that the narrative is more about the ethical appraisal and the social and cultural aspects of gender fluidity, and the individual characters' affective stance towards it, rather than on the radical structure that characterizes the narrative of Brophy's novel. A similar contrast between Brophy's playfulness and irony – the novel is frequently qualified by Andermahr with words such as "hilarious",¹⁹² pointing out the "parody"¹⁹³ and "joke"¹⁹⁴ of the text – and Smith's more serious and ethically aware stance is seen in the way both novels deal with pornography. Brophy re-examines the power relations at play in pornography through "absurd and comic

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 254.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 253.

¹⁹² Ibid., 252.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 253.

punning”,¹⁹⁵ making her engagement of pornography into a playful commentary on the way power may also reside in the feminine rather than the masculine. All in all, pornography is engaged with playfully, ironically, calling into question the radical feminist critique of pornography in the 1970s and taking a sex-positive¹⁹⁶ and libertarian¹⁹⁷ stance towards it. In Smith’s novel, George’s encounter with pornography and her subsequent reaction to it established pornography as “a series of decontextualized visuals.”¹⁹⁸ Watching a film of a woman being blinded with eye drops before being penetrated or a woman having sex with forty men in forty minutes (the actual video lasting only five) does not leave George feeling liberated or empowered, but with a number of questions that cannot be answered: “was the woman just acting?”, “was she really blind?”, “why was it forty?”¹⁹⁹ George’s worried identification with a girl in one of the videos she watches²⁰⁰ foregrounds the ethical questions that Smith asks about pornography and the way pornography for her is not about exploring the artificiality of power relations, but going one step further and engaging with individual, affective, ethical responses to pornography.

George’s response to the pornographic clip she watches is indicative of Smith’s engagement with surfaces and depth. After having watched the video, George cannot watch other pornographic videos of the same kind, nor indeed even regular television shows or YouTube videos: “that girl was there waiting under them all.”²⁰¹ George’s ethical

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 254.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 250.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 254.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 255.

¹⁹⁹ Smith, *How to be Both*, 33.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 35.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

considerations and worries about that particular pornographic depiction made her able to see – or indeed, even incapable of not seeing – this kind of ethical concern underneath all popular culture. Whereas Brophy’s novel presents the reader with a nonlinear cavalcade of parodic, hilarious, playful moments, Smith attempts to dig under the surface, revealing the ethical apprehensions underneath and allowing for an individual, affective, hermeneutic response towards the “boring sameness and [...] poverty of language and the imagination”²⁰² inherent in pornography and, by extension, popular culture. The surface/depth relation is also evident in the theme of the fresco that is pertinent in *How to be Both*. In an interview with the Guardian in 2014, Smith stated:

There's a fresco on the wall: there it is, you and I look at it, we see it right in front of us; underneath that there's another version of the story and it may or may not be connected to the surface. And they're both in front of our eyes, but you can only see one, or you see one first. So it's about the understory. I have the feeling that all stories travel with an understory.²⁰³

As Cara L. Lewis states in “Beholding: Visuality and Postcritical Reading in Ali Smith's *How to be Both*”, Smith’s wall motif constantly reminds us that walls—from the [...] wall in George’s bedroom [...] to the [wall] through which Francescho emerges [...]—are vulnerable, porous, material objects with significant depth.”²⁰⁴ Thus, Smith’s interest lies with the ‘understory’ – with that which is beyond the surface, but which may have a lasting impact on the surface, or indeed, similarly to Van Gogh’s shoes, be the social and cultural basis for that which is on the surface. Significant here, of course, is that Francescho speaks with “a

²⁰² Andermahr, “Both/And Aesthetics,” 255.

²⁰³ Alex Clark, “Ali Smith: ‘There are two ways to read this novel, but you’re stuck with it – you’ll end up reading one of them’,” *The Guardian*, September 6 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/06/ali-smith-interview-how-to-be-both>.

²⁰⁴ Cara L. Lewis, “Beholding: Visuality and Postcritical Reading in Ali Smith’s *How to be Both*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 3 (2019), 137.

disembodied voice from behind the fresco and beyond the grave”,²⁰⁵ revealing once more the cultural and societal significance of that which lies behind the surface, as Francescho is/was in a similar situation as George and can therefore identify with George.

Francescho’s status as a ghost come back from the past to observe and attach herself to George may also be seen as an explicit engagement with historicity and the way issues of identity and the individual affective stance towards those issues and towards identity are not just issues of the present. As discussed above, the postmodern regime of historicity is one of an on-going present; history has come to an end and any significant development or change in the future is foreclosed with the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism, a triumph additionally effectively closing off access to the past. *How to be Both*, however, opens up the access of the past to the present in Francescho’s return from the dead. Francescho’s rendering of what for us are everyday occurrences and items – personal audio devices, for example – in the language of someone for whom these are entirely unfamiliar provides a commentary on the oddities of our present-day culture. Furthermore, Francescho’s story mirrors George’s, in that both lose their mothers, both are in some way or other gender fluid, and both attract a female significant other, which connects them across time. Francescho’s ability to relate to George and Helena’s sense of humour is an example of this: when Helena holds two bits of paper, cut out from where it was stained by cups of coffee, in front of her face as if they are eyes, not only does George laugh, but the narrative voice of Francescho laughs as well.²⁰⁶ George’s friend Helena further opens up access to the future. Francescho remarks when she enters that “the friend has a look of my Isotta, very fine, and has arrived in here like a burst of air as if a new door opened itself in a wall where no door was suspected.”²⁰⁷ Thus, rather than

²⁰⁵ Andermahr, “Both/And Aesthetics,” 253.

²⁰⁶ Smith, *How to be Both*, 366.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 364.

holding on to the ‘presentism’ of postmodernism, the novel opens up access to both past and future, and both interweave with the present.

On a final note on the role of modernism in Smith’s work, she sees the modernist mode as a way of engaging with the political, cultural, and social issues at hand at any given moment. As Mary Horgan states in her paper “About Change: Ali Smith’s Numismatic Modernism”, “Smith sees modernism as possessing a unique political dynamism, one that is unlocked by imaginative activity that is motivated by an associated desire or imperative to interrogate the contemporary economic, social, and political milieu.”²⁰⁸ This tendency of modernism to interrogate the present moment within politics, culture, or society – as came forward quite clearly in the initial modernist move against a decadence inherent in late modernity – based on a guided ethical imperative and expressed in the exploration of individual human consciousness and experience, is also important in the work of the second author at hand, Will Self.

WILL SELF

Discussing Will Self’s modernism, the role and task of literature within our present society will be much more central, and the rejection of postmodernism much more explicit, both in itself and in its relation to modernism. Self feels that the novel has to be relevant within our current societal and cultural context, on top of which he has expressed two ways in which this relevance must be brought to bear in the actual novels themselves: firstly, the imperative to attempt a depiction of the world through human consciousness as we actually experience it; secondly, an engagement with contemporary societal and cultural issues, specifically the influence of modernity on human beings. This role of literature is framed in a rejection of

²⁰⁸ Mary Horgan, “About Change: Ali Smith’s Numismatic Modernism,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 10, no. 2 (2016), 167.

several elements that Self feels have been particularly ubiquitous in contemporary and late twentieth-century popular fiction: a purported realism and its tendency to psychologize, and postmodernism. I contend that his rejection of these elements is connected to the common notion of what novels are meant to establish and I furthermore hold that this notion comes very close to the modernist idea of the function of literature.

Stylistically, Self wears his modernist influences on his sleeve, particularly from *Umbrella* onwards. The novel is set partly in the 1970s and is about psychiatrist Zach Busner, who is newly instated at the Friern Hospital, a psychiatric hospital that houses several victims of the encephalitis lethargica outbreak after the First World War. One of them is Audrey Death, a woman who has been in a vegetative state since 1918 and whose narrative as a child in early twentieth-century London and as a young adult makes up a significant part of the novel. Busner, using an innovative treatment (L-Dopa, reminiscent of Oliver Sacks's actual treatment of similar patients in the 1970s), manages to wake her, her body a disconnected series of tics and spasms. Finally, in 2010, the hospital has been closed down and a retired Zach Busner wanders through London, culminating in his visit to what was once Friern. The novel is written in one continuous stream, with no chapters and barely any paragraph break or indentation. The fragmented inner monologue of the characters is separated not by punctuation but rendered in italics to distinguish it from the dialogue and descriptive narration, and the narrative has the tendency to jump from one time-frame to another. These elements are also prominent in the reception of the novel as experimental and modernist. A Telegraph review of 2012 called it "a daring Joycean work of experimental fiction",²⁰⁹ tying in with the wider reception of Self's novel as Joycean (arguably at least in part a consequence of the novel's epigraph, taken from Joyce's *Ulysses*: "A brother is as easily forgotten as an

²⁰⁹ Sheena Joughin, "Umbrella by Will Self: Review," *The Telegraph*, August 30, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/9497006/Umbrella-by-Will-Self-review.html>.

umbrella”), while the Guardian review of the same year went so far as to describe it as “old-school modernism.”²¹⁰

The author himself identifies his work with that of the early twentieth-century modernists as well, both in its stylistic techniques and the underlying principles guiding the use of these techniques. Firstly, Self tends to see his writing as more realistic than the purported realism of late nineteenth- and, according to Self, much of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. In a 2013 interview with the White Review, Self remarks: “I think realism is a highly artificial convention [...] partly connected to the fact that most novels are written by people who read too many novels – it’s like a worm eating itself. There are certain ways that people write novels that are meant to be realist that are so ingrained that they can’t see them for how artificial they are.”²¹¹ Self thus sees the ostensible ‘realism’ in novels written in the traditional third person not as realism at all, but as a highly artificial convention both readers and authors have been lead to experience as realistic. Aptly summarizing the two functions he holds literature to have, the author feels that the literature written in this highly artificial ‘realist’ mode is not “capable of addressing either what life is like subjectively, or what is happening in the wider world.”²¹² Self feels that realist literature cannot address the world as it is anymore, nor what it is like to experience that world: “The world is really strange. It's not to be explained by 'He went to the pub'. You cannot capture what's going on with that form [...] you can't reach any closer to any kind of truth about what it is to exist.”²¹³

²¹⁰ Sam Leith, “Umbrella by Will Self – review,” *The Guardian*, August 19, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/19/umbrella-will-self-review>.

²¹¹ Jacques Testard, “Interview with Will Self,” *The White Review*, July 2013, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-will-self/>.

²¹² “Will Self on Literary Influences,” *Fivebooks.com*, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://fivebooks.com/best-books/will-self-influences/>.

²¹³ Elizabeth Day, “Will Self: I Don’t Write for Readers,” *The Guardian*, August 5, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/05/will-self-umbrella-booker-interview>.

The attempt to reach into a human consciousness and explain what is happening therein is another of Self's points of critique towards realist fiction and the psychologizing tendencies of certain authors and culture at large. On the Fivebooks interviewer's claim that Self's way of writing novels is not the only way and that writers may have different ways of "get[ting] at the same psychological nub",²¹⁴ Self responds that he "is not interested in psychology."²¹⁵ In the White Review interview, Self expands on this notion: "It's not that I'm trying to say, "What is going on here?," because that presupposes a naturalistic world that is a given."²¹⁶ Instead, Self seems to be much more interested in depicting what it is like to live in our world or in "saying something more oblique about the kind of society in which we do live, or seem to live."²¹⁷ Andrew Gaedtke in his "Neuromodernism: Diagnosis and Disability in Will Self's *Umbrella*" recognizes Self's novel as part of a larger trend of suspicion towards traditional psychology or psychologizing tendencies. He calls this category "neuronovels", whose aim, among others, is the "phenomenological exploration of neurological disorders."²¹⁸ This emphasis on phenomenology – on capturing the experience of human beings in the world, rather than trying to explain what is behind this experience – is also precisely Self's concern. Gaedtke also recognizes the formal features that this type of novel shares with what he calls "modernist novels of consciousness",²¹⁹ i.e. novels such as *Ulysses* which attempt to

²¹⁴ "Will Self on Literary Influences."

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Testard, "Interview with Will Self."

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Andrew Gaedtke, "Neuromodernism: Diagnosis and Disability in Will Self's *Umbrella*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 61, no. 2 (2015), 273.

²¹⁹ Gaedtke, "Neuromodernism," 272.

capture the intricacies of the human mind and experience, which is what Self appears to be primarily interested in.

As alluded to above in his rejection of ‘realism’, Self feels that this capturing of human experience and addressing that experience within the world we live in today is one of the duties of literature. He furthermore sees modernism as the most adequate way of addressing these issues. Self calls the modernism of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf “naturalism”²²⁰: “a desire to render in language the effects of modernity on human perception and cognition.”²²¹ He furthermore and in an even stronger rejection of realism feels that realist fiction is “an abrogation of responsibility to deal with the impact of modernity on both the individual and the collective consciousness.”²²² In other words, realist fiction is a way of doing away with the responsibility that literature should take on itself, namely addressing the way modernity impacts the human experience, both individually and as a whole. Self further rejects postmodernism on the same grounds: ““I think postmodernism is a retreat from the hard-edged insights of modernism itself. It’s an attempt to have the cachet of reinventing the traditional structure of narrative prose fiction without actually having to do the hard work implied by modernist insight.”²²³ He feels that postmodernism is both a renunciation of the responsibility to do the actual work of writing a novel that fulfils the duties of literature and, more importantly, a way of negating or rendering insignificant the insight provided by modernism that the detrimental effects of modernity demand a response, rather than reacting with indifference or even compliance. Postmodernism, to Self, holds “a determination to

²²⁰ Will Self, “Will Self: In Praise of Difficult Novels – Modernism is Still the Best Way to Reflect Our World Back to Us,” *Literary Hub*, February 7, 2018, <https://lithub.com/will-self-in-praise-of-difficult-novels>.

²²¹ Self, “In Praise of Difficult Novels.”

²²² “Will Self on Literary Influences.”

²²³ Ibid.

vault over all the quicksand of the twentieth century, in order to gain the seemingly safer ground provided by a cut-and-paste job on the styles and modes that antedated it.”²²⁴ Thus, the theme that has been addressed in relation to Ali Smith returns here. Rather than reaching under the surface and finding some sort of truth or fundamental meaning about what it means to be a human being – indeed, a human being living in this particular age and societal and cultural context – postmodernism is content to remain on the surface and construct that surface of the cuttings of the styles and modes that came before.

The conclusion to Self’s novel reveals a number of the issues that the author is concerned with, as well as again a particular element of epiphanic modernism. As Busner stands in what was once Friern Hospital, he realises that the spot he is standing on is “*exactly [...] the point where I was when I first saw her.*”²²⁵ The timelines of the 1970s and the present day seem to converge at this point and Busner realizes that “*it all had to do with time.*”²²⁶ The fragmentation of the novel and the parallel timelines running through the book and interweaving with one another culminate in the epiphany of becoming conscious of precisely this time-travelling aspect of Audrey Death – “*I saw [...] that through her ticking she was travelling in time*”²²⁷ – as well as the broader issues the novel is attempting to address. The technologization of society, particularly the digitization that by the twenty-first century is in full swing (“the binary blizzard that would blow through humanity’s consciousness”)²²⁸, had been foreshadowed in Audrey’s tics and spasms before her final collapse. The identification

²²⁴ Will Self, “Will Self: modernism and me,” *The Guardian*, August 3, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/03/will-self-modernism-and-me>.

²²⁵ Will Self, *Umbrella* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012): 395.

²²⁶ Self, *Umbrella*, 395.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

of (digital) technology – the binary “0/1”²²⁹ – with the spasms and tics of the sufferers of encephalitis lethargica is arguably a commentary on the implications of this technology and the way it fragments human consciousness into awareness of mere disconnected moments and experiences. In this it falls in line with Self’s ideas on what literature should do, namely engage with and provide a commentary on societal issues through both the content and the form of the novel.

²²⁹ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The perceived loss of depth, affect, and historicity in the wake of the cultural and societal institutionalization of certain elements of postmodernism as a cultural mode that not so much opposes as confirms the logic of late capitalism can be argued to have ushered in a time which bears the hallmarks of decadence, complacency, and loss of meaning. Elements such as these can also be identified at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, as a result of both the failure and overreaching of modern projects of progress, inspired by Enlightenment thought, and the incongruence between the belief in progress and the actual outcome of such projects. As outlined in Chapter Three, the modernism of the early twentieth century reacted to this decadence in the form of broadly two modes, programmatic and epiphanic modernism. Programmatic modernism may be seen as the mainly political form of modernism, particularly suited to manifestos and actual (quasi-)revolutionary action: the programmatic modernist movements may be called revitalization movements, with as their main objective the resacralization of a society that had been thoroughly desacralized and demythologized, or the rebirth or palingenesis of society and culture. Epiphanic modernism can be characterized as a much more introverted and restrained form of modernism, wherein the focus lies not so much on the complete and utter transformation of society as on a way of individual moments of insight into truth, meaning, or elements of human experience that have been lost in a society that has become decadent and meaningless.

In the face of the meaninglessness and depthlessness of contemporary society as a result of the institutionalization of certain elements of postmodernism – the postmodern condition, characterized by irony, depthlessness, and ‘presentism’ – the initial emancipatory effect of postmodernism seems to be lost, and a new mode of engaging with the issues of our time seems to be required. Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen identify a very definitive strain of this so-called ‘post-postmodernism’ – *metamodernism* – as being concerned with

precisely a return to depth, affect, and historicity. Furthermore, Van den Akker and Vermeulen have characterized this re-engagement with those elements lost under postmodernism as an *oscillation* between a modern enthusiasm and idealism on the one hand, and a postmodern irony and melancholy on the other. At the same time, David James and Urmila Seshagiri have made similar observations, but their concern is mainly the return of contemporary British authors to modernist stylistic devices. In light of this given and in an analysis of what modernism might actually mean, for both the original modernists and the post-postmodern artists re-engaging with their legacy, I have attempted to show that there is more to Vermeulen and Van den Akker's simple and therefore seemingly elegant idea of oscillation and specifically the attribution of 'idealism' or 'utopianism' to the label 'modern'. I have tried to make clear that the motivations of authors such as Ali Smith and Will Self are not so much rooted in the Enlightenment forms of idealism, but that they are indebted specifically to a *modernist*, rather than simply a *modern* attempt of digging beneath the surface of the postmodern condition and attempting to uncover what it means to be human.

Therefore once again it seems that the idea of oscillation – which presupposes an equality between the two principles – must be given up or at least supplemented with the realization that the post-postmodern artists taking up the legacy of modernism and reinterpreting that legacy to use it in our contemporary societal and cultural context do so in a *rejection* of the cultural mode of postmodernism. The form that this rejection takes, furthermore, is in line with Van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen's analysis of metamodernism as a return to affect, depth, and historicity. Modernism may be said to reject depthlessness and meaninglessness in its search for actual fundamental human experience, whether it be through investigating and attempting to depict human consciousness or focusing on moments of 'lightness of being' within the human experience of the world. Authors such as Ali Smith and Will Self see the modernist mode of writing as the most effective way of

returning to these three aspects in their rejection of postmodernism and thus reach back over postmodernism into the archive of modernism, in order to give not only the stylistic techniques found there new meaning and purpose, but also the underlying ethical motivations of modernism.

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