

EXISTENTIALISM IN METAMODERN ART

EXISTENTIALISM IN METAMODERN ART:
THE OTHER SIDE OF OSCILLATION

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LAY ABSTRACT

There is a growing consensus among scholars that early 21st century art can no longer be explained in terms of familiar aesthetic conventions. The term ‘metamodernism’ is catching on as a description of our new era. Metamodernism is understood as an oscillation between two modalities – modernism and postmodernism – generating art that is more idealistic and romantic than what we have seen in previous decades, while retaining its capacity to be ironizing and self-aware.

However, the discourse surrounding metamodernism has been tentative, provisional, and difficult to circumscribe. In avoiding any overarching claims or settled positions, metamodernism risks remaining only a radicalisation of previous conventions rather than a genuine evolution. The goal of this project is to come to grips with the core tenets of metamodernism, to present them more clearly and distinctly, and to suggest what the scholarship surrounding metamodernism might need to move beyond its current constraints.

ABSTRACT

The discourse surrounding art in the early 21st century seeks to explain our artistic practices in terms of a radically distinct set of conventions, which many have dubbed ‘metamodern.’ Metamodernism abides neither by modernist aspirations of linear progress, nor by the cynical distrust of narratives familiar to postmodernism. Instead it appears to be based on an entirely different set of premises, relating to betweenness, oscillation, and metaxis, generating art with a dual capacity for irony and sincerity.

While metamodernism seeks to break the mold of the conventions that preceded it, it also avoids delimitation and prescription, and this traps it in an impossibility. To truly supplant the postmodern, the metamodern state of betweenness must be equally definite and formally circumscribed. In this project, I argue that metamodernism can be defined as an aesthetic of liminality – a state of thresholds and transitions – and that such a definition opens new avenues for understanding its core axioms. The second goal of the project is to reflect on where the metamodern state of transition might lead, and what future forms it promises. The project relies on literary theory, chiefly that of Northrop Frye, on analysis of the discourse surrounding contemporary aesthetics, as well as on occasional forays into philosophy, anthropology and sociology.

The project concludes that metamodernism’s core tenets are best understood as existentialist in nature, abiding by the tradition of existentialist writers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and others. Identifying an existential underpinning to metamodern art is also to uncover an ethical substrate to what otherwise appears to be a freeform aestheticism. The ties between existentialism and metamodernism provide a case study for a broader look at the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, which might be pursued in future work.

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INTRODUCTION: What is Metamodernism?	1
CHAPTER 1: Liminal Aesthetics	9
1.1. Defining the Liminal	9
1.2. Liminal Time	15
1.3. Liminal Rites	30
1.4. Liminal Initiatives	38
1.5. Liminal Ethics	54
CHAPTER 2: Prophetic Aesthetics	62
2.1. Defining the Prophetic	62
2.2. Prophetic Time	73
2.3. Integration Rites	77
2.4. Prophetic Ethics	83
CONCLUSION	89

List of Figures

Figure 1. The Metamodern as Hypersurface 17

DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

I, Stephen Danilovich, declare this thesis to be my own work. I am the sole author of this document. No part of this work has been published or submitted for publication or for a higher degree at another institution.

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My supervisor, Professor Jeffery Donaldson, and the members of my supervisory committee, Professor Gena Zuroski and Professor Rick Monture, have provided guidance and support at all stages of this project. I completed all of the research work.

INTRODUCTION
What is Metamodernism?

In *Supplanting the Postmodern*, David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris anthologise the many writers who, in various ways, have described postmodernism as “a spent force” (11). Likening it to a once-mighty river, surging forth with such iconoclastic pronouncements as Barthes’s death of the author and Lyotard’s demise of grand narratives, Rudrum and Stavris claim that it has since dispersed out into a “too inclusive, too all-embracing” delta, its critical focus “irretrievably swamped” by the cultural sediment gathered in its wake (10). We find ourselves at this delta now, not a hard finishing line but a diffusion and scattering in new directions. The fact that we can talk of “the *mainstream* of postmodernism,” as Rudrum and Stavris point out, already implies such a dispersal from the stream (11). This so-called ‘delta effect’ has resulted in a wide accumulation of ‘post-postmodern’ neologisms in the last three decades (Lipovetsky’s hypermodernism, Samuels’ automodernism, Kirby’s digimodernism, to name a few). While these terms have seen wide circulation, one departure from the postmodern seems to stand out from the rest, if only for its committed attitude to avoid circumscription, to remain ‘between’ movements: metamodernism. This take on the aftermath of postmodernism will be the focal point of my project, as well as the attempt to both problematize and gesture beyond it.

I have chosen metamodernism over other contemporary alternatives for a number of reasons. First, it seems to be the most prominent and preeminent answer in the discourse today, appearing in fields as diverse as health administration (Montgomery) and counseling (Gardner), in a wide range of artistic practices, as well as in online

communities where it has found acceptance outside academics and the avant-garde. Secondly, the metamodern seems to be the most internally coherent of these ‘post-postmodern’ movements, operating according to an oscillatory logic that seems capable of summing up and circumscribing both its predecessors and its contemporaries. Positioning itself “ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes on metamodernism* 2), the metamodern does not seek to be a sharp departure but instead enacts a utopic capacity to oscillate freely between modern and postmodern modalities, a freedom of movement “characterised by oscillation rather than synthesis, harmony, reconciliation” (Akker et al, *Metamodernism* 6). This precarious and unsettled capacity, explored more fully in Chapter One, rejects the conceptual dogmas of both modernism and postmodernism while acknowledging the utility of each, conceding final arbitration to the subjective, the situational and the relational, which accounts for the core tenets that Rudrum and Stavris identify in all post-postmodern movements: to “challenge, reject, or debunk the postmodern insistence that the human subject, and subjectivity in general, is a myth” and to “emphasize the importance of sincerity and authenticity ... faith and spirituality,” all balanced against the acceleration of technological change and the homogeneity of globalisation (14). For these reasons, I will be treating metamodernism as an explanatory framework and a stand-in for post-postmodernism as a whole, since, in my view, it is the definitive response to the postmodern – even if it is, by its own account, provisional.

In their seminal text *Notes on metamodernism* (hereafter referred to as *Notes*), Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Akker define metamodernism as an aesthetic of

oscillation: a condition of betweenness and metaxis, producing art that is both ironic and sincere, both formally self-aware yet genuine in its content. Where satire was once used to undermine narrative conventions, metamodern forms employ their ironic remove not as an impediment to the content, but an invitation to relate to it performatively and imaginatively. Even as a text's intradiegetic elements – its inner world of characters and events – are being formally debunked and ironized, this opens opportunities for the reader to willfully embed themselves in the text from the outside, that is, from an extradiegetic position, to 'play pretend' as a reader through an interactive and self-aware suspension of disbelief. Some examples of the metamodern suspension between irony and sincerity include what MacDowell has called 'quirky' cinema, particularly films by Wes Anderson (e.g. *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*) which feature a "combination of the melodramatic with the comedic" that "both lampoons *and* celebrates misguided or shortsighted protagonists on quixotic quests" (MacDowell 29). Even as it draws attention to "the constructed quality of what we're seeing" in its formally elaborate cinematography and cartoonish characters, an Anderson film "nonetheless isn't able – indeed, isn't desiring – to undercut the emotional impact" (MacDowell 38). Another example is the #IAMSORRY performance piece by Luke Turner, Nastja Rönkkö, and celebrity actor Shia LaBeouf, which invited audiences one by one into a private room to sit across from LaBeouf, who wore a paper bag on his head labeled "I Am Not Famous Anymore" (Schwarz). Despite the tongue-in-cheek premise, many described the experience as highly affecting, the intimacy of the setting and the paradoxical familiarity achieved through the masking of celebrity prompting questions about what it means to

enact a ‘sincere performance’ (Schwarz). Where modernism evokes a kind of apocalyptic confidence, and postmodernism tends to become paralytically deconstructive, the current generation moves playfully and creatively between both poles through “a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes 5*).

The blending of irony and authenticity has manifested in such trends as David Foster Wallace’s New Sincerity, various strains of Romanticism emerging in the last decade (“New Romanticism”), and Eshelman’s notion of performatism, all of which share one trait in common: the aesthetic performance of transcendent impossibilities, the “*aesthetic means [of] the possibility of transcending the conditions of a given frame*” (Eshelman 164). In oscillating between cynicism and sincerity, metamodernism “acknowledges that history’s purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it *as if* it does exist [...] the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes 5*). Moreover, while metamodernism’s “as-if” epistemology appears playful and noncommittal on the surface, it seems to be guided by a subcurrent that takes its hypotheticals as serious ethical enterprises – as “*aesth-ethical*” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes 2*). One example where this undercurrent is more apparent is the metamodern architecture of Peter Zumthor, which adopts a stark and introspective style, an “aesthetics of sobriety coupled to the ethics of craftswoman/ship,” moving away from the “formal experimentation” and “Deleuzian folds” of his contemporaries and returning to “functional limitations,” to “ethics” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodern Architecture*). It is this subcurrent, the drift from aesthetics to ethics, which I will attempt to bring to the

surface of metamodernism more clearly – not only to better conceptualise our metamodern moment, but to see what metamodernism might reveal about the relation between aesthetics and ethics more broadly, and as it plays out in contemporary literary practices.

I began with Rudrum’s and Stavris’ “fluvial metaphor” to acknowledge the slipperiness of the categories I will be handling in this project (10). The metaphor of a river, of water in motion, highlights the challenge with periodising any new aesthetic: the problem of granularity. Parsing out metamodernism means separating form from content, like the river from its sediment: to what extent does it succeed as a departure and a new current, and to what extent is it merely a renaming of past problematics? What many purveyors of the post-postmodern seem to agree on is that whatever it is or will be, the successor to the postmodern must necessarily be a change in style, not in essence. Supplanting postmodernism while allowing for its anti-teleological, anti-linear, and anti-narrative tendencies means finding new forms out of existing material – the answer to postmodernism’s insufficiencies will not be in a venture to some uncharted territory but a turn inwards, between its practices, a stylistic reframing and even a self-imposed limitation. Style and form assume a shared substance and are informed instead by the shape of their gestures, what they exclude, their alterities and outer perimeters – what Luke Turner calls a “hidden exteriority” and the performativity this implies to some hypothetical audience (*Metamodernist//Manifesto*). Put simply, metamodernism is the same river, only by different channels; it is the choice of style over substance, implying that the critical practices of the postmodern must fundamentally be succeeded by a kind

of new aestheticism. Although metamodernism shares many postmodern sensibilities, especially a critical reflexivity, it is the performative choice to move forward with and in spite of this ironic detachment that most distinguishes metamodernism as a new direction. So while it is true that “modernism, postmodernism and metamodernism as interpretive systems and philosophical currents” are indeed “overlapping,” they are nevertheless “successive in time” even if they are not pure innovations (Bacciu et al). It is metamodernism’s proposed path of travel rather than some change in essence, its continuation of postmodern sensibilities in new directions, that defines it as a heuristic and opens it to critical study.

Another helpful element of Rudrum’s and Stavris’ river analogy is the parallel it implies between aesthetics and water, equally adaptive and transgressive towards their containers. It may be that the slippery substance shared by all these aesthetic movements – modernism, postmodernism, metamodernism – is nothing more than the human desire for what Northrop Frye called a “more abundant life,” “a form of play or self-contained energy” escaping through whichever openings it can find, flooding over thresholds once they can be encompassed (*Words with Power* 52). Where once the answer might have been the damming up of modernism, its harnessing of elemental energies, or the resulting postmodern overflow, its focus on heterogeneity and non-teleology, the topology of the delta will require new conceptual tools to keep ourselves in a state of flow.

Could motion be the motive behind all these ‘isms’? Metamodernism seems to suggest so; in fact, such an assumption may be definitive of the metamodern aesthetic. Chapter One is an exploration of the metamodern as an aesthetic of *liminality* – that is,

defined by betweenness, transition, movement itself. To make my case, I draw out the many parallels between metamodern discourse and notions of liminality across various contexts and traditions of thought. Northrop Frye's notion of 'excluded initiatives' – the liminal leakages that flow out of the various uses of language – describes the current that will come into play here. Bringing Frye's sequence of linguistic modes to bear on metamodernism seems to position it as the penultimate step in this sequence, namely, the imaginative mode: a heuristic defined by non-committal spontaneity, an auto-generative impulse towards creativity and free movement.

Motion, however – like the onrush of a river – implies also its future existence. In Chapter Two, I will problematize the liminal inclination of metamodernity by contrasting it with the writings of existentialists and what might be called their prophetic aesthetic – the river's passage *defining* its future topology. How to perceive a future to metamodernity without denying its noncommittal oscillations will be the key problematic in this chapter, and one that I propose can be solved by an inclination towards prophecy as seen, for example, in Nietzsche's writings. Chapter Two positions key moments in metamodern and existential discourse in terms of Frye's prophetic mode – the successor to the imaginative mode – and thereby suggests a predictive vision for the kind of aesthetic that might be "hidden around the bend" of metamodernity (Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism* 2). Given that the succession of modernism-postmodernism-metamodernism is not drawn in hard lines but, like Frye's sequence, is overlapping and complementary, early hints of the 'post-metamodern' should become retrievable at the far limits of metamodern conventions. The project will thereby end with a preliminary move

beyond metamodernism: by addressing the excluded initiatives of metamodernity, the alter side of its non-committal oscillations, we come to grips with an embodied, existential, ethical commitment to live out the imagined as true.

Some shortcomings are to be expected from this project: the scope and breadth of the topic, the limited space to address it, as well as my leaning on literary theory over textual practice. As I noted, metamodernism is itself an aesthetic that seeks to avoid circumscription, existing as it does as an in-between modality, which compounds the problem of addressing it head-on. In spite of these challenges, I hope that by dealing explicitly with the internal logics of the metamodern, without a contextual, historical, or material emphasis that seems more suited to its predecessor, we actually do justice to the metamodern hope itself. In elevating synthetics over dialectics, metamodernism presents itself as uniquely (hopefully) ahistorical, inviting a more formal analysis. Its emphasis on transcendent aspirations, on metaxis over parataxis, makes a philosophical, theoretical, even an existential line of inquiry more germane for understanding its currents of idealism and romanticism. Additionally, many writers and cultural critics have done due diligence in recognising examples of the metamodern in material and popular culture, some of which are referenced here; few have critically addressed the logical foundations of metamodernism itself, however. I hope a more formal and theoretic approach helps in advancing an understanding of the metamodern current we find ourselves in, and where its oscillations might lead us.

CHAPTER 1: Liminal Aesthetics

1.1. Defining the Liminal

“1: of, relating to, or situated at a sensory threshold: barely perceptible or capable of eliciting a response;

2: of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition: in-between, transitional”

(Merriam-Webster)

In this chapter, I will make the case that metamodernism is an aesthetic of liminality – an argument which by itself would not amount to much. Every new aesthetic seems to begin with the redemptive or revolutionary promise of a threshold, all while appearing in retrospect as merely transitional, as one form settling into another. To dub metamodernism an aesthetic of liminality in and of itself would be to concede it no substance of its own, as a movement stuck in place. Indeed, Akker and Vermeulen describe it as such in so many words: “[m]etamodernism 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” (*Notes* 5). Criticisms have been leveled against the metamodern for precisely this lack of substance, some unique or identifying quality: the metamodern is problematized either for not being a true departure from the postmodern, given that “postmodernism rejected the thought of closure more than almost any other,” or for being a regression to modernism and its assumption of “sequentiality, chronology, and straightforward succession” (Rudrum and Stavris 14-15).

Ultimately, to posit the metamodern-as-liminal would mean to accept both critiques and admit that it is nothing new. An impulse towards betweenness has been present to some degree in every aesthetic shift before it, inasmuch as modernism

promised an end to thresholds altogether, while postmodernism promised their continual forestalling; indeed, this suggestively implies that aesthetics itself might be characterised as a renewed relationship to the liminal, a re-negotiation with the inevitability of change, transition, and formal dissolution. The liminal as futile – the nonsubstance of the liminal, the impossibility of anything truly ‘post’ or hors-text – is arguably the postmodern stance on liminality, with its apprehension of progress and linear time, of functions and futures, and its move inwards to daily materiality and historical criticism, its “microscopy” of the everyday (Highmore 37). However, even such forestalling of futures has its limits, and as Ben Highmore points out, the objects of such microscopic attention inevitably take on an immaterial air in light of “the very ‘stuff-ness’ that made them urgent problems in the first place” (20). The postmodern attention to the present as historically urgent has taken hold “because at some level it simply refuses to remain at the microscopic scale” (Highmore 25).

Such a refusal is the metamodern objective: to produce art that is both micro and macro, material and mythical, nostalgic and aspirational. Metamodernism abides by the pragmatic recognition made by Richard Rorty that what is immaterial – macroscopic, mythical, narratological – is merely “any state which can only be grasped by relating what is observed to a larger context”; that in practice, if not in rational theory, “nobody finds a perplexing ontological gap between macrostructure and microstructure” (26). As an intuitive alignment of micro and macro, metamodernism embroils itself in a mythic-utopic yet at the same time incredibly practical and local ethos, summed up as a “pragmatic romanticism” (L. Turner, *Metamodernist // Manifesto*) or a “pragmatic

idealism” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 5). Alan Kirby attributes this dual capacity to the emergence of computerised text – hyperlinked, homogenized, yet interactive and reader-inclusive – which sets up exchanges between globalization and locality that cannot be reduced to an either-or: the numberless local paths to a global other means our generation is perennially “suspended between as *someone who could respond*, who *might* respond” (*Digimodernism* 337). Liminality, as a suspended state of thresholds and possibilities, is the metamodern means of putting into reciprocation these traditional oppositions, between “unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation,” which is why the metamodern appears as an affirmation of the contradictions that came before it as well as their transcendence (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 6). So while the metamodern-as-liminal might seem to make it a non-entity, in historical context it appears as an increase in intensity, a condensation of prior dichotomies into denser and more opaque unities, a focus on oscillations rather than poles as what is truly generative. Its strategy of metaxis – existing both “*between*” and “*beyond*” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 2) – abides by Hegel’s notion of *Aufheben*, the interaction of thesis and antithesis which means both to negate and to preserve, thereby creating a third category which is neither a Being nor a Nothingness but a mobile and migratory Becoming (Maybee). It is precisely the point of metamodernism to circumscribe modernist certainties and postmodern cynicisms while remaining itself liminal and un-circumscribable.

Unlike most metamodern theorists, however, I will not be positioning metamodernism as existing beyond any fixed form entirely. Its pretense to being “descriptive rather than prescriptive,” I will argue, does not stand up to scrutiny (L.

Turner, “Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction”). In *Notes*, Akker and Vermeulen are careful to offer up metamodernism as a “structure of feeling” rather than a set of political or philosophical precepts (2), and Turner’s use of “Manifesto” to describe such a structure is merely “the temptation to imagine it as if it were” such a manifesto (*Metamodernist // Manifesto*). In all cases, metamodernism is offered up as a provisional and tentative first step, and yet, its discourse has been so characteristically and consistently provisional that it is tempting to no longer wait for some promissory work lying ahead, and instead to circumscribe that very outgoing anticipation as a fundamental axiom of metamodernity itself. Reluctance towards a committed position is a feature of liminal states, of course, but it also risks being too familiar; hesitancy towards totalizing forms has been a distinguishing feature of the postmodern, always on the verge of becoming a totalizing resistance, a dialectical shadow of master narratives and “an endless search for the progressive within the dominant” as Highmore writes (27). What makes the metamodern resistance to form distinct is that even such a formal resistance has become formally circumscribed – the inward application of deconstructive practices to themselves, or what Ulrich Beck has described as a “[r]eflexive modernization” – which forces us out into a between space, a threshold between form and formlessness with equal chances for sincerity and irony (14). Importantly, this strategy avoids a settled synthesis between the modern thesis and postmodern antithesis, seeking instead a distinctly unsettled state of migration and betweenness – so what might it mean for an aesthetic to be ‘purely’ synthetic, perennially in oscillation, ‘permanently’ liminal?

Metamodernism would not have us settle at all; instead of settling with unsettledness itself (perhaps the paradoxical strategy of its predecessor) I will argue that the liminal and migratory logics of metamodernity indicate a state of transition, one that inevitably implicates it in opaque and unknown futures. By its very provisional foundations, its non-committal oscillations, metamodern art presents itself as an interim. What is most interesting is the radical hope that such a liminal aesthetic would imply: that by circumscribing itself as uniquely and exclusively transitional, the metamodern assumes itself as a *final* transition stage, implying that what awaits on the other end of metamodernism will be, indeed, the final say. Metamodernism, in this view, is an aesthetic that awaits its successor, an aesthetic defined entirely by “future paths [which] have yet to be constructed” (L. Turner, “Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction”). Periodising an aesthetic usually requires the distance of retrospection, but the intensification of time offered up by metamodernism – its expanded capacity for both modernist futures and postmodern historicism – means its historical existence can become uniquely available to us in the present¹. Moreover, if we are to authentically live out metamodernism, as inherently procedural, forward-bound, and praxis-oriented, its hopeful future might be one in the making and not merely forestalled.

For these reasons, I will be taking a position on metamodernism that sees it as teleological rather than rhizomatically diffuse, even (and especially) as it is blind to its ultimate end. The opaqueness of its overarching aim is what enables embodied practice in the present, in contrast to a visionary fixation with an idyllic future, but it is still the

¹ Section 1.4, titled Liminal Initiatives, provides more on the question of periodisation.

future which makes the metamodern what it is. As Josh Toth argues, this hidden teleology is not new; it was present in postmodernism also, and the new contemporary is new only for being more overt about it, accepting that “the desire to deny the possibility of any stable truth, or grand narrative [...] is ultimately animated by some type of (blind) faith, or teleological impulse” that has now found more explicit expression (277). Such a position is contrary to much of the scholarly discourse on metamodernism, which seems to lapse back into the very suspicion of forms, functions, and futures that the post-ironic metamodernist would rescue us from. As Konstantinou writes about “the condition of postirony” that defines metamodern art, from the “postironic Bildungsroman” (e.g. Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*) to what he calls “credulous metafiction” (e.g. Kaufman’s *Adaptation*), today’s artists “must increasingly commit locally and temporarily to the specific speculative endeavour, to the task at hand, which requires a self-subordinating stance we might fairly describe as contingent belief” (102). An aesthetic that claims to be built upon aspirational praxis must believe in its cause, if only for the mobilising value of contingent belief; without its utopic leanings, the metamodern is not a true successor to the postmodern but merely a renaming.

I take this position knowing that, as an aesthetic of the liminal, the metamodern will necessarily supply the tools for its own surmounting: “[t]he essential incompleteness of a system should necessitate an adherence ... perchance to glimpse by proxy some hidden exteriority” (L. Turner, *Metamodernist // Manifesto*). The hidden exteriority of metamodernism (via its ‘adherence’) is what my project will gesture to by its end. By adopting a metamodern approach to its own discourse we might fulfill its liminal logics

and have glimpses of what metamodernism’s “future paths” might be (L. Turner, *Metamodernist // Manifesto*). It is therefore necessary to understand the metamodern on its own terms – the theoretical and formal implications of an aesthetic of liminality. “For the only way to understand the new epoch *from within* – from its *own* position,” as Eshelman writes, “is to jettison practically everything that critics have accumulated up to now in the way of analytical and theoretical tools and start again from scratch within the new monist mindset” (186).

1.2. Liminal Time

The metamodern emphasis on migrations and thresholds, practices and processes, is premised on a different sense of time. As much as we have the rational grounds to doubt renewals or redemptions – a genuine ‘post’-anything – metamodernism realises the irony that we enact utopian beliefs in our very practices nonetheless. Even the outwardly skeptical efforts of deconstructive critique seem premised on opening up alternatives, revitalising the present with new possibilities. Renewal and practice are bound together, and metamodern art intends to exist precisely at the threshold of such an enabling hope, embracing the present as a process unfolding rather than the monadic splices of fragmentary time characteristic of postmodern montage, or the catastrophic “flashes” of Walter Benjamin which capture a total history within singular moments (456). Such catastrophic time always implies a crystallisation and a decontextualization, and while it can be productive as a call to witness histories, as a model for time it risks diffusing its sense of urgency across a never-ending state of arrest. As Michel de Certeau writes,

“speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress” means “remaining within the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content” and that “one can try another path: one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices” that outlive any effort to be administered or suppressed (96). So while postmodernism opposes the march of time via fragmentary flashes or monadic montage – moments which, in being arrested in time, are necessarily besieged by contextual and historical forces – metamodern time is more akin to a heterogenous explosion of vectors and trajectories out of the present, “the simultaneous experience and enactment of events from a multiplicity of positions,” “a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons” (L. Turner, *Metamodernist//Manifesto*) and “divergent temporalities” (Lipovetsky 201). Such a move from flashes to vectors is analogous to a shift from contiguity to continuity, from parataxis to praxis, from spatiality to spacetime.

The metamodern solution to reductive temporalities of progress, one that does not abandon aspirational futures, might be summed up by spacetime: the physical measure of the universe since Einstein’s special relativity theory. Vermeulen and Akker point out as much in *Notes*: “the metamodern should be understood as a spacetime,” neither a futurist modernism nor a postmodern spatiality (12). Briefly, spacetime understands time as a fourth dimension penetrating three-dimensional space, resulting in a spacetime continuum – a continuum being also particularly descriptive of metamodernism as a “sequence” or “progression” (Merriam-Webster). One image of spacetime, the Minkowski diagram, depicts the spacetime continuum as two opposing cones of past light and future light meeting at an observer in space, out of which explodes a ‘hypersurface of the present’

like a horizon splitting the middle of an hourglass (see fig. 1). The spacetime observer has led some thinkers to associate Einstein’s relativity theories with “perspectivism, not relativism” – given that in spacetime there is no “*real* length of physical objects” and no “*real* duration of events,” and yet each observer has access to a cross-section that is ‘true’ relative to their frame (Weinart 67). The ‘real’ four-dimensional object or event is more inclusive than any one perspective, but this inclusivity does not undermine the validity of a single perspective – to the contrary, it makes perspective possible. Any aesthetics of space or of time must contend with such a hybrid and perspectival spacetime, and the meeting point of past, future, and observer does seem to account for the “multi-tensed” proximity of history and renewal, nostalgia and aspiration, that characterises the metamodern affect (Akker, “Metamodern Historicity” 22). A spacetime aesthetic suggests that the meeting of pasts and futures converges upon a renewal of subjective, affective, and relational truths – a return to the observer. Such a view explains why metamodernism operates not as a delimited set of precepts but as an enabling horizon, both immediate and infinitely traveling out of a perspectival present.

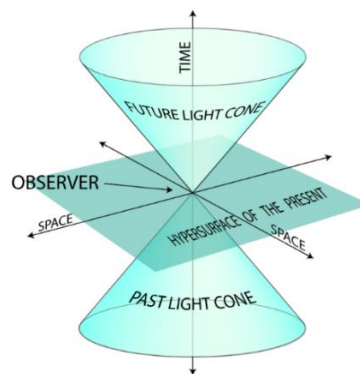


Figure 1. The Metamodern as Hypersurface (Muro de Aguas, *Wikimedia Commons*)

A focus on the present is by no means new, so it is worth looking at how the present has been imagined across modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism, and what makes the latter unique in adopting spacetime as its measure. In an essay titled “Postmodernism Grown Old,” Steven Connor provides the following account:

“Of course, postmodernism shares with modernism its concern with the present, as well as its sense of the long, or enduring present. But modernism’s present was undefinable, a vertigo or velocity rather than a habitat. The presentness to which modernism was drawn was a hair-trigger affair, always on the brink of futurity. By contrast, the perpetual present of postmodernism is mapped, scheduled, dense with retrospection and forecast. The present (as of old) is all there is, but now it includes all time. There is nothing absent from this present, which makes it curiously spectral. This means in its turn that the present can start to age, to become old before its time. The present of postmodernism has come to seem like a stalled present, an agitated, but idle meanwhile.” (77)

If the present of modernism is an unbound vector, a ‘velocity’ rather than a ‘habitat’ and therefore a privileging of time over space, the postmodern present is “a focus on spatiality rather than temporality,” a turn to the concrete materiality of space which is ‘mapped’ and ‘dense’ but encumbered with the consequent weight (Vermeulen and Akker, *Notes* 3).

The postmodern present, in imagining it contains all of time, relies on spatiality as its receptacle. However, in assuming that nothing in time escapes its present, it seems the reverse has also happened, as Connor points out: the present of postmodernism has sunk into history, becoming a kind of complacent presentism which assumes it already and pre-emptively contains all time; it ‘grows old.’ Ironically enough, the microscopic attention to the present described by Ben Highmore – the fact that “[p]ostmodernism ... is concerned almost exclusively with the nature of its own presentness” (Connor 76) – seems somehow to have been insufficient for understanding the present at all.

By contrast, metamodernism recognises that the irreducibility of the present is more fully realised as a transcendent category; the metamodern present is understood as both immanent and outgoing, a concrete present but also a felt presence, a historical-material immediacy as well as an outward-bound and indeterminate mystery. When pasts and futures are put into reciprocation, or oscillation, the present becomes an unfolding process. Such indeterminacy acknowledges the present moment as ever-receding, approximating the spiritual notion of *metanoia* as explored by Northrop Frye: “*metanoia* reverses our usual conceptions of time and space. The central points of time and space are now and here, neither of which exists in ordinary experience,” since “‘now’ continually vanishes between the no longer and the not yet” and “we may think of ‘here’ as a hazy mental circumference around ourselves, but whatever we locate in ordinary space, inside it or outside it, is ‘there’ in a separated alien world” (*The Great Code* 163).

Spatiality has inherently alienating characteristics: separated from time it is rendered static, forbidding migrations, creating irreconcilable distances and unbridgeable others; the metamodern would have us discover ‘here’ as a phenomenological rather than a spatial immediacy, relational and interactional rather than a fixed ontology existing out ‘there.’ Even as it introduces the transience of temporality to space, metamodernism fixes time with the concrete and impermeable properties of the spatial. The new temporality has been described as a “monism,” “emphasizing unity, identification, closure” (Eshelman 154); following the postmodern decompression of time, “the times are hardening again” (Lipovetsky 197). Ihab Hassan suggests the solution to the dilemma of ‘post’ is “to spatialize the temporality implied by the preposition ‘after,’ by adopting

‘beyond’ in its stead” (Rudrum and Stavris 15), a spatializing of time that is equally a spiritual turn towards “seeing the eternal in the temporal” (Hassan 58). Having grown old to the forestalling of time as eternally transient, metamodernism recognises a need for the transiently eternal – that the finiteness of time speaks equally to how it partakes in the infinite in its manifold forms and manifestations. The eternal basis of time manifests as a renewed interest in human universals, Hassan’s recognition that “human beings not only vary infinitely; they also share a portion in the infinite” (54). Turning away from historicism and towards the eternal, the metamodern state of betweenness is uniquely unconcerned with novelty, spontaneously blending history and futurity, hope and melancholy, in a ludic fashion that mirrors the following sentiment by Frye: “Only when we realize that nothing is new can we live with an intensity in which everything becomes new” (*The Great Code* 156). In a utopic sense, a mutuality between space and time brings us closer and closer to the asymptotical and liminal here-and-now, which takes form for us as the primacy of our phenomenology: “the eternal and infinite are not time and space made endless (they *are* endless already) but are the now and the here made real, an actual present and an actual presence” (Frye, *The Great Code* 164).

Such an affinity between spatio-temporality and a transcendental phenomenology features heavily in the existential tradition, most evidently in Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty describes a porousness between observer and reality resulting from the synesthesia of sight and touch, the notion that what we see is essentially what can be touched and therefore what can mutually transform. Such latency renders the distance between seer and seen as replete, a “field of being” as a contrast to a

“lake of non-being” (Merleau-Ponty 149). Akker and Vermeulen have described metamodernism in similar terms: a “both-neither” in contrast to a postmodern “neither-nor,” a field of plural possibilities alive with migrations and negotiations, rather than a canceling out of incompatible perspectives across a relativistic void (*Notes* 9).

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty writes that it is the dual capacity for both embodied presence and outgoing possibility that creates such a reciprocity between self and other: “it is ... transcendence that explains” and through which we achieve “whole selves,” without which “observer” and “observed” do not enter into relation (237); this palpable-visible field is “a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality” (149) which “only by remaining at the distance ... remains itself” (123). To avoid remaining a modernist fantasy of pure vision, such temporal forestalling is premised equally on spatial immediacy, best captured by Merleau-Ponty with the image of a road to the horizon. Being on a road to the horizon is both direct and implicating, both spatially accessible and temporally hypothetical; it is not merely visionary but embodied, since one “for whom the horizon opens” is necessarily “included within it” (Merleau-Ponty 149). Only on a road to the horizon do present, past, and future have equal footing – only traveling by a road do we end up someplace, crossing a distance between two points (even if the points themselves are arbitrarily fixed). A mutuality between space and time is thereby the continuum for aspiration and praxis, mobility and migrations, and, for our purposes, the measure of the metamodern.

By pitting pasts and futures into indeterminate relation, metamodern spacetime unfixes itself from a prefigured material world and apprehends things in terms of their

horizontal existence, their potential and hallucinatory manifestations, which many have associated with a renewed surrealism or romanticism. “If these artists look back at the Romantic,” Vermeulen and Akker write, “it is neither because they simply want to laugh at it (parody) nor because they wish to cry for it (nostalgia). They look back instead in order to perceive anew a future that was lost from sight” (*Notes* 12). Put another way, the heterochronic time of metamodernism is not one in which the present contains all time, an implosion of historical forces as it has been in postmodernism, but one in which a living, immanent present emerges creatively out of all points in time. The past is also alive with vectors and possibilities, a contemporaneous co-creator with the present and the future, explaining why nostalgia has an aspirational rather than a melancholic streak in metamodern sensibility. All this becomes possible in light of an overarching romanticized future, as Akker and Vermeulen write: “[m]etamodernism displaces the parameters of the present with those of a future presence that is futureless”; in other words, the future imagined by metamodernism is itself futureless and, therefore, not endlessly forestalled; instead it is imaginatively realised by fixing it as an end point which, like the arbitrary point on a path, is self-consciously contingent, provisional, but necessary to imagine movement at all (*Notes* 12). Even as it imbeds itself blindly (spatially) in time, metamodernism “displaces the boundaries of our place with those of a surreal place that is placeless,” which, put another way, is to see spatiality unbound from its material limits and realised in its potential forms, its manifold existences in time (*Notes* 12). Achieving such a liminality between space and time is how metamodernism ultimately arrives at the horizontal observer, bringing us face-to-face with a transcendental phenomenology: “the

‘destiny’ of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 12).

The image of an ever-receding horizon is at the heart of contemporary discourse on aesthetics. Nicolas Bourriaud argues “trajectories have become forms” in present-day art, “tracing all lines in all directions of time and space,” unraveling “along receding lines of perspective” (308). Ihab Hassan describes a “*horizon*, seen and perhaps imagined but never reached,” a “*far limit*” and a “dissolution of the distinction between the I and not-I” (60), as the way for postmodernism to “recreate its best self” (58). In *Notes*, Vermeulen and van der Akker provide as an analogy the proverbial donkey chasing a carrot, metamodernism being the donkey which “chases a carrot that it never manages to eat because the carrot is always just beyond its reach. But precisely because it never manages to eat the carrot, it never ends its chase” (5). Finally, Jörg Heiser, author and co-editor of *frieze* magazine, coined the term super-hybridity to describe a kind of spacetime density as defining our current avant-garde. Super-hybridity implies two seemingly contradictory axioms: first, “creating by way of using existing sources [is] not automatically merely unoriginal pastiche”; second, “ultimately *all* new cultural practices – all ideas – are borne out of the sticky mess of existing practices and ideas, even if in their newness they seek to deny that very fact” (Heiser 56). In effect, the pulls between historical materiality and aspirational futures do not negate themselves as oppositional in contemporary artistic practices, but are seen as dialectical, generative, and definitive of the present; however, this requires a hybrid capacity, a wider (horizontal) frame for understanding the present than was in place before.

While previous aesthetics have recognised the same liminal tensions between history and renewal (I have suggested that every aesthetic is a negotiation with liminality), the solution of metamodern time is to avoid collapsing pasts and futures into each other – in other words, to avoid a structural (spatial) unity of time. Collapsing time was arguably the strategy of both its predecessors, which addressed the anxieties of an uncertain existence by reducing time to the inevitable march of progress or an inevitable by-product of history, a choice between “linear” time or “looped” time (Bourriaud 308). In both cases, subjectivity is an illusion, an epiphenomenon of some greater process, and along with it so was the experience of sequence and narrativity. By contrast, metamodernism subscribes to what Heiser calls “non-simultaneity,” a translation of Ernst Bloch’s notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*; non-simultaneity explains why metamodern discourse opts for oscillation rather than synthesis as its guiding metaphor (6). Non-simultaneity and oscillation accept *precariousness* as the connective tissue between pasts and futures, reality and aspiration, converging in the present but never crystallized there. Recognising the present as under-determined, the ‘super’ in super-hybridity refers not to an overcoming of the liminal but to its mass-production and proliferation, to quantity and not some new quality, to excess as a means of novelty in an age defined by “acceleration and accumulation” (Heiser 55). The metamodern intensification of the liminal is a means of reaffirming it, reproducing it, not reconciling it. At the core of this emphasis on betweenness is the recognition that the present cannot be rationally or historically prefigured, inasmuch as we are still actively imbedded and embodied in it.

Conceptualising the here-and-now as horizontal and perspectival, metamodernism brings us to the unit of time most proximal to our own lived experience: that of everyday life. In metamodernism, the quotidian is no longer the site for diffusing the sublime as it once has been; the mundane everyday and its idealised utopian-dystopian extremes are realised as co-emergent, surreally superimposed, which has been described by metamodernist Hanzi Freinacht as “art’s conquest of everyday life” (*Metamodernism: The Conquest of a Term*). Theorists of the everyday have relied on the same liminal logics as metamodernism to argue for everyday life as irreducibly precarious, whether it is Mike Featherstone’s definition of the everyday as “what becomes remaindered after rationalist thought” (Highmore 19), Michael Sheringham’s statement that “the project of rationality” is what makes “the everyday alien to us” (Highmore 141), or Ben Highmore’s observation that all that unites theories of the everyday is a call to urgency, not to understanding, “a refusal [...] to see the realm of the everyday as unproblematic” and little else (18). Such an understanding of the everyday, often realised as fragments or traces in a poststructuralist discourse, begins in metamodernism to resemble more closely Frye’s notion of the eternal: “Eternity is a mental category that, in Keats’s phrase, teases us out of thought: we do not know what it means, but as long as it is there we can never be satisfied with simplistic solutions” (*The Great Code* 157). Such an understanding of the eternal – not as a monodominant imposition from on high but an emergent immanence existing always and everywhere – might lie behind Highmore’s observation of the paradox that “*everyday life might be the name for the desire of totality in postmodern times*” (25). It is only now, in metamodernism, that the postmodern rejection of grand

narratives and conceptual absolutes has been realised not as a wholesale rejection of forms, but itself a grand myth – one of immanence, of the non-rational, of an irreducible and indeterminate mystery.

The writings of everyday theorist Michel de Certeau, especially his chapter “Walking in the City,” can be read as an early primer of metamodern thought. In attempting to describe the everyday urban life of pedestrians, Certeau recognises that the notion of ‘a practice of space’ carries with it an inherent tension, inasmuch as spatiality is premised on a visionary stasis and an ontological distance, forbidding the “vectors, velocities and timing” which constitute what Certeau calls the “dimension of *pratique*” (Highmore 142). As an alternative to “the ‘geometrical’ or ‘geographical’ space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions,” Certeau describes a model of urban life that is not the fixedness of city planning but the creative circulation of pedestrians within: “[t]hese practices of space refer to a specific form of *operations* [...] to “an ‘anthropological,’ poetic and mythic experience of space” and “to an *opaque and blind* mobility [...] A *migrational*, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (93). All these elements in Certeau’s urban spacetime – operation over ontology, migration over spatiality, and opaqueness over knowledge – are characteristically metamodern moves, taking us from a delimited epistemology of space into an embodied engagement in spacetime. What constitutes a primary reality for Certeau is not the planned street but the unplanned walking within it, for the walker “makes a selection ... a discreteness” (98) and the very act of walking means “to lack a place,” an “indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103). For Certeau, phenomenology is

migratory in nature, slipping away from any rational-epistemological discourse of urban planning or administrative power. Mirroring the transcendental phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Certeau suggests for a place to exist means “*to be other and to move toward the other*”: the othering is spatial, and therefore alienating and estranging, but in being spatial it is also shared; it is migration across space (spatio-temporality) which through a self-othering opens to reciprocity and relation (110). Certeau’s urban spacetime expresses the metamodern insight that, however mysteriously, the taking on of a given formal constraint – in this case, the planned city street – can allow for its aesthetic and performative transcendence from within. His is the performatist hope that “subjects have a real chance to orient themselves within [time and space] and transcend them in some way” (Eshelman 185). If the here-and-now is indeed an ever-forestalled, ever-receding horizon as so many thinkers have suggested, then rational delimitations could not hope to capture it: it could only be the vectoring of practices, the migrations made towards an infinitely receding asymptote, that would render the horizontal sensible to us. This is why, for a notion of everyday life as ever-receding, “only practices make it visible” (Sheringham 141).

Echoing Certeau’s pedestrian phenomenology, Ben Highmore recognises the primacy of everyday life by grasping the present not only as an implosion of historical forces, but their very explosive and creative source: “[i]nstead of picturing the world as a drama of significant (and exceptional) events and people, set against a backdrop of everyday life, the relation between foreground and background needs to be reversed” (27). “To treat the everyday in this way,” Highmore writes, “can be seen as a form of

aesthetics” (38) since it is aesthetics which uniquely allows for “two questions simultaneously”: “foregrounding the world as both mental and sensual experience” and “examining the way in which experiences are registered and represented” (19). The posing of both questions – experiential and social – emulates the immediate but outgoing road explored by Merleau-Ponty, the continuum between phenomenological immanence and transpersonal porosity, in which felt experience and the yearning outwards for communion are not unbridgeable contradictions but co-extensive. For Highmore such bridging can only take place as an aesthetic practice, a performance of everyday living – a question therefore of stylistic orientation, of horizontal aspirations achieved via “*aesthetic means*” (Eshelman 164).

Highmore’s metamodern realisation, similar to Certeau’s, is that the affective and relational immediacy of everyday life is where the reductions of modernism and postmodernism fail equally; the goal shared both by metamodernity and everyday discourse is to protect us from any rational ordering which remainder everyday life, experience itself, as a secondary manifestation of outside forces. To achieve a hybrid capacity for both critical reflexivity and utopic aims, everyday theory and metamodernism alike concede the final say to phenomenology, to the precarity and irreducibility of everyday lived experience, a negotiation to be wrestled with in the domain of the phenomenological subject. Such a focus on the orientational and perspectival realities of everyday life is why for Eshelman “the new epoch works first and foremost on an aesthetic, identificatory level, to create an attitude of beautiful belief, and not on a cognitive, critical one” (164).

Implicitly, this is what metamodernism achieves by foregrounding the liminal and the between: an emphasis on the relational, the perspectival, and ultimately on personhood. Although metamodern discourse rarely if ever makes this conclusion explicit, its renewed emphasis on subjectivity, authenticity, all emerge out of its notion of the present as fundamentally orientational, in the same essential sense that one's point in spacetime is not an absolute measure but defined by one's frame of reference, one's means of measuring. The metamodern precarity of being 'between' and 'beyond' gravitates inwards to a phenomenological center, explaining why Lipovetsky identifies a climate in today's culture in which "nothing can be taken for granted any more" and, by the same token, invites an always ambiguous hyper-individualism (203); why according to Eshelman, contemporary art emphasises how "[i]nteriority, then, determines context and not the other way around" (173); and why for Certeau, it is ultimately the "relationship of oneself to oneself [that] governs the internal alterations of the place" (110). There is a rightful caution that opposes this inward direction in metamodernity, recognising in it a modernist or neoliberal strain and all the ethical dangers such individualism might invite; hence the new contemporary is inherently ambivalent, as it "may indeed mark a new phase in the pursuit of freedom and self-fulfilment, while its emphasis on consumerism may just as easily lead in the very opposite direction" (Rudrum and Stavris 194). These dual pulls to metamodern discourse are what render it so non-committal and provisional in nature – precisely for its precarity and ambiguity, it is paradoxically a call to action and ethical responsiveness, and metamodern terms do not make it clear in which direction the pendulum will swing. All that is clear is that the poles

of creative freedom and moral responsiveness, aesthetics and ethics, are reciprocal and interactional – only the oscillation is deemed absolute.

Ultimately, these unsettled oscillations lead to the existentialist strain in metamodernism which I will explore more fully in Chapter Two. For now it is enough to suggest that a mutuality between time and space – achieved via liminality as an ever-receding relation – leads us to the Heraclitan, horizontal temporality of metamodernism. The unwillingness to settle time, to locate a predetermined or structural unity of history, results in a turn inwards to an inclusively hybrid, creatively open, and explosively indeterminate present.

1.3. Liminal Rites

Beginning with betweenness, we arrive at a phenomenology that borders on the mystic; indeed, metamodern discourse is equally characterised by its many references to myth and to ritual, and this section will attempt to account for these in the liminal terms outlined so far. Certeau wrote that myth is what “makes things go” (102) – positing the utopic as necessary to movement and to practice – while Highmore drew from the surrealist tradition as a “science of everyday life that would operate in the murky waters of myth and ritual,” operation and mythology again entering into alliance (47).

Metamodern theorists make this connection explicit when Akker and Vermeulen relate the “*aesth-ethical*” dimension of metamodernism (*Notes 2*) to “myth and metaxis” (*Notes 5*), and when Heiser identifies the ‘myth-making’ tendency of super-hybridity as extending from the fact that “[a]s soon as we can imagine how things could be better, a

principle of progress is implied” (68). Practice and myth turn out to be inseparable: any attempt to influence the world comes with an implied metaphysic about what an ideal state would be, enacted and embodied if not explicit. While myth-making has been traditionally opposed to the primacy of the real, as a political or ideological tool, metamodernism strives for what Levitas calls “self-consciously” utopic thinking (“Discourses of Risk and Utopia” 122), and why utopia for her is “better understood as a method than a goal,” horizontal rather than visionary (*Utopia as Method* xi). Attending to metamodernism might therefore require more than what rational discourse can provide; inasmuch as practice is never wholly reducible to the epistemological and the knowable, the metamodern might have good reason for its self-consciously mythic terms – “to have its postmetaphysical cake and eat it too” (Eshelman 156).

It is no coincidence, then, that folklorist and anthropologist Arnold van Gennep was the first to develop the concept of liminality (from *limen* or ‘threshold’ in Latin) as well as coining the phrase ‘rite of passage,’ and for him the two notions – transitional states and ritual practices – were intimately connected (V. Turner 94). The rationale behind most ritual practices, according to Gennep, is a dynamic of integration and separation between the profane and the sacred (terms he borrowed from Durkheim), with rites of passage forming the intermediate states between the two. The profane and the sacred are not constants in this context but mobilizing variables that ‘pivot’ (or oscillate) during transitional moments in life. Gennep provides the following example: “[a] man at home, in his tribe, lives in the secular realm; he moves into the realm of the sacred when he goes on a journey and finds himself a foreigner near a camp of strangers” (section I,

para. 20). While a homogenized spatial ontology would recognise no fundamental difference between these two realms, to the phenomenological experience of the traveling migrant, it is the oscillation that is absolute. In their pivoting sense, the secular and sacred mirror the known and the unknown, or even epistemology and practice. The state of liminality explored by Genep is the no-man's land between the two: the hopeful expansion or articulation of knowledge, as well as a recognition of what cannot be known, what must instead be precariously lived through.

The practical utility of the liminal is evident in Genep's notion of ritual sequencing: a liminal rite lapses into neither of its sacred-profane poles because it understands a proper *sequence*, one that unfolds across time, abiding by Heiser's concept of non-simultaneity. A sequence of rituals provides a temporal buffer zone between one understanding of the sacred to another, a path of travel between two fixed but incompatible systems of value, "so that society as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury" (Genep, I, para. 5). Such harm does result, Genep implies, from an unmediated or instantaneous switch in sanctity. The narrative arc of passage rites is thereby functional, despite its metaphysical air: rites of passage transition us linearly from one idea of the sacred to another, in response to the demands of a new and as yet unknown environment. The transitional stage is necessary to avoid being confronted by a total simultaneity of sacred ideas and the resulting cognitive dissonance, a self-defeating simultaneity which undermines any idea of the sacred at all. As pointed out earlier, the sacred is simply the important, the pressing, which is necessarily a relative value, necessarily an ethical-social-legal category, and necessarily fluid, though not *enacted as*

such once it is, however temporarily, settled. The danger of not performing the rites of passage, it is suggested, is a total diffusion of everything and nothing as important – a radical relativism in which assigning value to anything is necessarily an unwelcome imposition upon an alienating world. Solon T. Kimball, writing the introduction to *The Rites of Passage*, claims there is “no evidence that a secularized urban world has lessened the need for ritualized expression of an individual’s transition from one status to another” (Introduction, section IV, para. 2). Without the ritualized transitions between notions of the sacred, we are always in the land of strangers – with all the paralytic and anxieties implied.

What Gennep makes clear for our purposes is that the state of liminality is never a fixed one, but always framed by passage between two settled states. Liminality cannot avoid being teleological, even its final outcome remains ambiguous; in fact it is precisely the ambiguity of its future, but still its future, that defines a liminal rite as such. Metamodern discourse is continually preoccupied with its heterochronic and ambiguous futures, except that their plurality has now become exciting as well as anxiety-inducing: Lipovetsky’s idea of hypermodernism suggests “[t]he climate of epilogue” is being supplanted by “the awareness of a headlong rush forwards [...] heavy with threats as well as promises” (197); Kirby’s notion of digimodernism is characterised by “*Onwardness*” and “*Haphazardness*,” creating texts that are on-going, procedural, and “up for grabs” (330); Bourriard’s altermodernism sees contemporary art as involved in “a course, a wandering” (304) and why for today’s artists-turned-nomads “[t]he line is more important than the points along its length” (309). For Alan Kirby, this hopeful open-endedness and

concern with practice is why “[m]etamodernism might better be seen not as supplanting the postmodern but as engineering a structural transition process” (364).

Genep’s rites of passage are themselves subdivided into preliminary rites of separation, liminal rites of transition, and postliminal rites of incorporation; mapping metamodernism as the middle liminal rite in this sequence – the transition within the transition – is suggestive (section I, para. 16). The blend of ironic sincerity and high and low culture which has been attributed to the metamodernists with what Victor Turner wrote on liminal rites: “[w]hat is interesting about liminal phenomena ... is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship” (96). The language of oscillation also aligns with Genep’s description of the liminal: “[w]hoever passes from one [territory] to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds” (section II, para. 8). The ‘special situation’ of the metamodern – between territories, for a certain time – casts it forward into a new world yet to be seen. The internal congruence of its oscillatory principle, as a rite of transition within a broader rite of passage, depends on such a promised discovery – its as yet “hidden exteriority” (L. Turner, *Metamodernist // Manifesto*).

To make the connection more convincing, it might be worthwhile to frame postmodernism as a rite of passage. The move from separation, transition, and integration implies that what came before metamodern liminality must have been a rite of separation, and postmodern practices seem to align with Genep’s account of such rites. Rites of separation are also known as ‘preliminal,’ and so far I have ventured to describe

postmodernism as a stance that forestalls liminality as a means of apprehending it – a critical halting through monadic moments and deconstructive critique. Bourriaud similarly defines the postmodern “as a period of pause and levelling” (314), while Kirby suggests for postmodernism “[t]here is no given reality ‘out there,’” that is, beyond itself, and therefore no privileging of movement (350). If we consider postmodernism a set of ritual practices like any other, we are confronted by its similarity to separation rites in its preoccupation with purifying, cleansing, ‘deconstructing,’ as ways of separating ourselves from an old order that had previously recognized no impurities. Notions of interpellation, for example, prominent in Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze, reveal how the subject is secretly and unconsciously pervaded as a material and historical object. While this may seem to be the reverse of purity – an assumption of total impurity – it appears to be premised not on a rejection of purity but merely a higher standard for it; not a denial of modernism’s basic tenets but their inward application, Beck’s “reflexive modernization” (6). Even as interpellation posits the subject as being networked within material conditions and ideologies, implied therein is the possibility of distilling a pure subject, of totally decontaminating our perspectives from any cultural conditioning through the work of cultural critique. As Heiser points out, “concepts of purity – not least those of historical avant-gardes – have a tendency to become obsessive with denying their ‘impure’ origins” (56). The metamodern-as-liminal is therefore concerned with pointing out how the postmodern antithesis to purity is only one pole in such a dialectical interplay.

Postmodern and post-structural criticism have analogues in two other dimensions of passage rites used by Gennep: contagious and dynamistic. Contagious rites are based

on a belief that “natural or acquired characteristics are material and transmissible” (section I, para. 10). One example Genep provides is that of an aboriginal Australian society who wiped their arrowheads on rocks, believing the rock’s essence to be transmitted to the arrow. Belief in the transmissibility of material characteristics features in notions of interpellation, intertextuality, and intersectionality, critical practices which approach their object of study via its networked existence as political or historical objects; a prime example being Foucault’s delocalisation of the mechanisms of power, as traveling not only top-down but laterally until there is no longer “any theoretical or analytical discourse which is not permeated or underpinned” by discourses of power (Foucault 18). As well as this contagious aspect, the dynamistic element applies here too: dynamistic rites assume “the impersonal theory of mana,” a monistic worldview which holds everything as a transmission of one irreducible essence, in Foucault’s case, the totalitarian imposition of power (section I, para. 20). Genep contrasts such dynamistic rituals with those defined by animism, a “dualistic” and “personalistic” theory which personifies the world as a non-reducible multiplicity of beings, anthropomorphic or amorphous forces, which seems to be true of the hybrid non-simultaneity of the metamodern (section I, para. 20). And the metamodern emphasis on oscillation is undoubtedly a switch from contagious rites to what Genep called sympathetic rites: “those based on belief in the reciprocal action of like on like, of opposite on opposite, of the container and the contained, of the part and the whole, of image and real object or real being, or word and deed” (section I, para. 7). Along all three dimensions of Genep’s rites of passage – dynamistic/animistic, contagious/sympathetic, and pre-liminal/liminal –

metamodernism seems to be the negative (what Frye might describe as the typological ‘antitype’) of its postmodern predecessor: an animistic and sympathetic set of rites, situating us not in a state of separation and opposition but in a provisional state of transition and mediation.

Positioning the postmodern as a rite of separation, and the metamodern as a rite of transition, we are confronted by what must follow: a rite of incorporation. This would be a rite defined (as the etymology suggests) by a turn into the body; at the very least, a higher degree of embodiment and phenomenological imminence, strains of which have been already been hinted at in the notions of liminality explored so far. According to Genep, rites of incorporation can be seen in practices such as “the consecration of the various parts of the house,” “the sharing of a meal,” or the outward demonstration of new ties: the new identity is necessarily communal, premised on belonging and collaboration; the embodiment is as much to a social body as a phenomenological one, a consolidation of the dual capacity we have seen repeated throughout metamodern discourse (section II, para. 18). If an aesthetics of betweenness and liminality is one that is indeed moving us towards incorporation, it is no accident that Nicholas Stavris makes the following claim in *The Anxieties of the Present*: the primary aim of 21st-century writers has been “to convey a *transition*” which in the same move is “a positive desire on the part of the subject to reclaim *wholeness and selfhood* in a globalized culture that is clouded in uncertainty” (410; emphasis added).

Genep’s rites of passage make for an admittedly broad framework. At the least, I hope it suggests that the anthropological state of being “betwixt and between” (V. Turner

95) and the metamodern “metaphor of *metaxis*” as both ‘between’ and ‘beyond’ (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 6) might be more than the coincidence of a shared metaphor; or rather, that a shared metaphor might be more than ‘mere’ metaphor but, as Northrop Frye has often argued, the groundwork for rational-conceptual thinking. To reinforce my suggestion of a teleological drift to the metamodern, I would like to present one last sequence of ritual-like behaviors, Frye’s linguistic levels, which similarly contextualises metamodernism with its antecedent movements – and positions it as a forerunner to the next aesthetic.

1.4. Liminal Initiatives

If metamodernism is linear or, more accurately, a plurally linear (horizontal) experience of time, it gels with what Northrop Frye wrote about the pre-critical reading experience. Northrop Frye argued that literary criticism requires two distinct stages if it is to maintain its relation to the arts as well as its integrity as a distinct field: a pre-critical reading stage, which experiences the text as a *sequence*, followed by a critical re-reading with the whole structure in mind as an instantaneous image (*The Great Code* 78). Sequentiality is part and parcel with an opaque embeddedness in time, an experience of mystery and unknown futures, which is why narrative and myth share affinities: “myth to me means, first of all, *mythos*, plot, narrative, or in general the sequential ordering of words” (Frye, *The Great Code* 52). While both critical and pre-critical stages are important, each comes with a notion of time that is incompatible with the other if attempted pre-emptively, that is, simultaneously. The pre-critical sequential phase imbeds

itself faithfully and migrationally in the intradiegetic experience of the text, and “until all the words have been read” it anticipates no claims to knowledge (Frye, *The Great Code* 88). Only once the text has been read and reread in such a manner, it “freezes,” becoming no longer a sequence but a crystallized image frozen in time, a structural unity that opens itself to dissection and study (Frye, *The Great Code* 88). It is perhaps the pre-critical reading that has lacked emphasis in a post-structural criticism, which tends to assume a text’s structural, contextual, and historical moment – the text frozen in time, as it were – as primary and definitive, while its intradiegetic existence, what Frye considered its actual ‘evidence,’ becomes remaindered as stylistic, incidental, or at worst complicit in obfuscation. Like the urban planning in Certeau, a spatial ontology of distancing is at work in such an exegesis, blind to the inner migrations that inform the text as an experience over and above a production. Frye expresses that a pre-emptively critical reading of a text is a deterministic fallacy, a choice to make the text convenient to a non-literary field, likened to “a scholar with a special interest in geography or economics [...] putting his favorite study into a causal relationship with whatever interests him less” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 6). In contrast to deductions from the outside-in, Frye presents a literary criticism that rises inductively out of the object of art it studies.

If anything, the metamodern turn has been such a turn inwards – a romantic, pre-critical and intradiegetic heuristic that imbeds itself opaquely in time, accepting uncertain futures to better enact an active engagement with the present. The desire for such a bottom-up approach to textuality is increasingly felt by literary critics, not least by Linda Hutcheon who has “never felt comfortable moving from a predetermined theoretical

stance to its ‘application’ in the analysis of texts”, writing that “in (perhaps perverse) reverse order, I’ve always sought to theorize from – to learn from – texts” (37); a sentiment matched by Alan Kirby, whose proclamation of the death of postmodernism follows out of a mindset “radically superseding the hyper-consciousness of irony” which he dubs “the *trance* – the state of being swallowed up by your activity” (*The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond* 96). Instead of the “neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism,” our new modernism “*takes the world away* ... You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded”; the pre-critical trance begins with an imaginative freedom, embeds and embodies us in the text, out of which we can move beyond, superseding the text’s limitations from within (Kirby, *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond* 96). Frye argues that as much as literary criticism should situate its text historically, it should equally allow for the logics of a text on its own terms, imaginatively accepting its premises and only thereafter gesturing to its insufficiencies inductively, that is, from within. Like Luke Turner’s adherence to a provisional metamodernism, in order to ‘glimpse its exteriority,’ Frye suggests that adhering to a text’s premises can help us break out of their formal mold and predict what future forms may hold.

Frye’s inductive criticism might therefore be an apt one for understanding metamodernism and the felt need for a bottom-up literary criticism in post-postmodern times; the metamodern link becomes especially fruitful when we consider Frye’s use of the word “metaliterary” in describing Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Kafka – all existential writers – as “trying to get past the limitations of literature” (*Words with Power* 115).

Frye's notion of the metaliterary is especially relevant now, given how the prefix 'meta' is seeing an increase in cultural currency as is the attempt to rediscover ethical urgency in the work of literary and cultural criticism, to 'get past its limits.' Somewhere in this 'aesth-ethical' overlap between existentialism, literature, and metamodernity lies the relation between ethics and aesthetics which I hope to end this chapter with. However, it will first be necessary to briefly outline Northrop Frye's *Words with Power*, as it informs the modern-postmodern-metamodern sequence explored thus far and will lend the project its central framework from here on out.

I began by drawing attention to how aesthetic movements begin as revolutionary, become formally circumscribed, and reveal themselves in retrospect as historical transitions – in other words, they have both formal and historical dimensions. For Frye, every text invites such a dual relation: a centripetal pull outward, to the contexts of the text as a historical and material object, and a centrifugal pull inward, to the text's ahistorical existence as its own internal realm of formal and diegetic logic. Such an understanding of criticism is one of the reasons that Frye outlines his schema of linguistic levels in *Words with Power*: five different levels or heuristics of language, each with its own way of interpreting and evaluating a text, which in the same move is a way of interpreting and evaluating language itself. The entire schema approximates a spectrum across the formal-historical divide: on one end, the heuristics are more historical and contextual, assessing a text (and language) in relation to some reality external to it; on the other end of the spectrum, the heuristics are more ahistorical and formal, delving inwards into the principles and premises of the text and of language itself. Movement through

Frye's scheme – what takes it from an inert conceptual structure to a dynamic sequence in time – is premised on his idea of excluded initiatives. Traveling centrifugally through the linguistic levels, that is, inwardly and formally, means to uncover a level's excluded initiative: the underlying presupposition or 'initiative' upon which a heuristic is based but which remains opaque or 'excluded' from the terms of the heuristic itself, becoming the explicit focus of the level which succeeds it. In other words, Frye's scheme illuminates how pointing out a heuristic's formal structure, its paradigmatic commitments, is also necessarily to historicize and supplant it.

The excluded initiatives exist as thresholds separating the five linguistic levels, but as we move further inward, these thresholds become more and more the explicit concern of the linguistic levels themselves, until we arrive at what Frye calls the imaginative level: arguably the heuristic most aware of the existence of excluded initiatives at all, the possibility of something always escaping our interpretive frame, and therefore as a heuristic it is most concerned with freeform language and creative expression. If this resonates as familiar, it is because Frye's excluded initiatives occupy the state of liminality and of thresholds – they are the promise that a given form can be transcended, in some sense, from *within*, by some forgotten assumption lurking under the surface, even if it remains only a promise. I will therefore be making the case that Frye's imaginative level, the heuristic most concerned with such spontaneous creative eruptions, is the means for understanding metamodernism and its liminal status. Interesting to note how the term 'subliminal' has double meanings as a latent or 'pre-liminal' state that is prior to change, as well as an unconscious process, embodied but not yet articulate; in a

sense, moving centrifugally through Frye's sequence of heuristics is not only to articulate the formal boundaries of each heuristic, but to progressively uncover our own subconscious commitments upon which these heuristics stand.

Read as a sequence, Frye's levels of language can therefore be mapped onto time as well as being spatial in structure, a succession of heuristics in which the structural limits of one mode will imply its succession by another. When applied in this way, Frye's sequence provides a framework that is equal parts formal and historical, lending itself particularly well to a history of aesthetics as well as to this project's attempt at periodising the metamodern. As a dynamic sequence in time, it gains predictive power, implying the possibility of periodising a future literature based on the formal dimensions of a current one. Although Frye did not go so far as to present his sequence as a way of historicizing (or predicting) literary movements, his theory was at least partly inspired by Giambattista Vico's three ages of "*langage*," a cyclical reading of history as a revolution of metaphoric, conceptual, and democratic languages (Frye, *The Great Code* 23). Moreover, reading a historical genealogy into what is otherwise a formal account of language conventions would align with Frye's dual pulls to criticism: it suggests that literary movements succeed each other not only due to the historical (non-literary) contexts surrounding those movements, but out of the internal and aesthetic properties of those movements as well, as literary conventions are carried out, exhausted, and reveal their formal insufficiencies for future movements to supplant. "As well as participating in history as a whole, literature has its own peculiar history," Frye wrote, "and the center of that history is not biographies of authors or dates of publications, but the modifying of

conventions and genres to meet varying social conditions” (*Words with Power* 56). The conclusion is that “[t]he real literary tradition has to be established in large part from a comparative generic study, which may sound speculative or even eccentric because of the absence of normal documentary evidence” (Frye, *Words with Power* 57). Such speculation on a purely formal basis constitutes this project’s framework. A formal evolution as a historical genealogy would operate much like the notion of paradigm shifts explored by Thomas Kuhn, in which abiding by a scientific model is the surest way to encounter exceptions to the model via experimentation, and thereby to induce a new model; why “research under a paradigm” is a “particularly effective way of inducing paradigm change” (Kuhn 52). A provisional adherence is, in other words, a way to faithfully and formally play out an aesthetic to its natural ends, helping us see more clearly the thresholds which promise future forms.

Whether Frye’s sequence suggests a cyclical chronology (like Vico’s three ages) or a teleological one raises interesting questions, but at the very least, it provides a local map for literary criticism, situating us at the proper level of analysis for whatever mode of language our textual object happens to partake in. Like Genep’s rites of passage, an interpretation of metamodernism through Frye’s linguistic scheme might therefore shed some light on what the metamodern-as-liminal implies formally, historically, and in its foreseeable future. I will end the Chapter by outlining the five levels, and attempt to (loosely) historicize them, providing a lineage from modernism to metamodernism and potentially beyond.

Frye's first level of language is the descriptive, arguably the most conventional idea of language we hold. Language at the descriptive level abides by Locke's metaphor of reflection, as Frye puts it, in that the primary function of words and thought is to passively and impersonally reflect the environment. The descriptive is democratic inasmuch as it strives for maximum clarity and accessibility, and its concerns are scientific, inasmuch as its focus is to index the objective world. I would venture to attribute descriptive-objective language, at least in part, to the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment era, given the output of scientific cataloguing which characterises that period. The excluded initiative of descriptive language – that is, what it fails to account for, and therefore what it will naturally tend towards – is that much of our language is premised on structural, grammatical and conceptual conventions that have little to do with the immediate outside world. Turning inwards, away from the environment and into the verbal itself, Frye brings us to the next level in this sequence: the conceptual level, which for our purposes seems to describe the modernist strain of thinking, its move away from Enlightenment certainties about an outside reality even as it begins searching for them inwards, delving into social and cultural mores.

Conceptual (or dialectical) language is characterised by a focus on concepts, models, logic and abstractions. Like the descriptive it is still concerned with 'the real,' but its concern is less with empiricism and more with formal rules and methodology. The conceptual-dialectical level is the language of philosophy, "expressed in such terms as time, nature, substance, being, all of which are necessarily abstract, related immediately to the verbal construct itself and withdrawn to some degree from the external world"

(Frye, *Words with Power* 23). If the Enlightenment era abided by a descriptive-objective language focused on the external, we might imagine the modernist era as the inward application of the descriptive impulse into the social, positing dialectical and Hegelian notions of history and other humanistic ‘grand narratives.’ However, at the furthest limits of the conceptual level we arrive at a disillusioning realisation: our ideas of truth, of time and nature and other supposedly axiomatic concepts, are prefigured by our positionality, our motivated interests as human beings. This sobering and disarming fact ushers us into what Frye calls the rhetorical or ideological level, and for our purposes is mirrored by the onset of postmodernism.

Rhetorical language foregrounds what conceptual language does not recognise, “the inseparability of the personal factor” in a text; how in considering an argument “our attention is directed away from the fact that the argument is what the person constructing [it] wants to be true” (Frye, *Words with Power* 26). What the rhetorical level considers primary is language’s purpose as a tool for persuasion, the vested interest of the speaker implicit in everything they express. This is the mode of “Machiavelli and Hobbes and Marx and the late Nietzsche,” a vision of the world in which “material or other forces of power are effective and words are not, and where the use of such a word as justice means chiefly that someone who holds power is rationalizing the fact that he is going to go on holding it” (Frye, *Words with Power* 26). Ideology is “the delta which all verbal structures finally reach,” and like the postmodern delta pictured by Rudrum and Stavris, it also implies slow-moving waters in which “[f]act and concept can never be divided from ideology” and all efforts at intellectual honesty “when dealing with people of different

commitments are ultimately futile” (Frye, *Words with Power* 31). This is not to wholly problematize the rhetorical strain, since like all languages it supplants the insufficiencies of those before it, but it is precisely the insufficiencies of rhetorical-ideological language which are made most explicit by metamodern critics. Frye ends his account of the ideological level with what we can recognise as a metamodern initiative: “the fact that no ideal goal can ever be reached in human life does not diminish the importance of turning in the direction of that goal” (*Words with Power* 31).

Finally we arrive at the imaginative level, and what I hope to reveal is the heuristic of metamodernism. What imaginative language supplants in rhetorical-ideological language is the fact of creative expression at all, the understanding that predetermination cannot account for the creative play within parameters which we must also contend with and which, like Certeau’s pedestrians and Highmore’s everyday life, is more proximal to lived experience. If in the first three levels “there is an emphasis on compulsion,” then at the imaginative level – as in metamodernism – the emphasis is on contingency: “anything in the imaginative can be assumed to be true for the duration of the individual work” (Frye, *Words with Power* 116). As Frye writes, imaginative language follows out of the alienation resulting from the non-human descriptive, conceptual, and ideological levels, and strives to be “more inclusive” with possibilities, to value mystery and psychic states: “[t]he criterion of the imaginative is the conceivable, not the real” (*Words with Power* 33). Frye provides as an example the notion of an ‘I-Thou’ relationship outlined by Martin Buber (like Merleau-Ponty, another existentialist) in which the world is not populated by ‘Its,’ or by objects, but by relationalities and

subjectivities, a mutual vectoring between entities which collapses the divides of the rational mind. Similarly, imaginative language abides by Merleau-Ponty's field of being, in which the primary constituent of reality is potential – the always-extant possibility of mutual contact and of transformation, the fact of possibility itself.

The imaginative recognises that the excluded initiative of rhetoric and ideology – the unrecognised assumption upon which they stand – is “myth” (Frye, *Words with Power* 34). What the ideological level does not make explicit is its own mythic and imaginative status, its own creative participation in the grand narratives and metaphysical notions which it perceives and critiques in others. As Eshelman writes about the state of critical discourse, “[n]o one wants to get caught practicing ‘metaphysics’ [...] The result has been a partly hypercritical, partly defensive discourse that tries above all else to minimize its own participation in ‘metaphysics’ while maximising everyone else’s” (153). Aligning with what Toth has written about the hidden faith of postmodernism, Frye proposes that all ideology is an attenuated and outward articulation of its underlying myth; even as it seeks to denounce the falsehood of mythologies, it does so only to separate itself from its mythic underpinnings, to denounce all other myths and reinforce itself as definitively true. For this reason, Frye points out that “an age dominated by clashing ideologies” is characterizable by “a good deal of suspicion of myth as the inspiration of bad ideology” (*Words with Power* 36). Ideology is “applied mythology,” and therefore its mythic underpinnings can only ever be implied (Frye, *Words with Power* 35). By contrast, the imaginative – steeping itself in mythology and mysticism – “asserts nothing but simply holds up symbols and illustrations,” and thereby “it calls for a suspension of judgement

[...] that, left to itself, could be more corrosive of ideologies than any rational skepticism” (Frye, *Words with Power* 35).

Crucially, Frye reveals how the non-rational, the mythic and the aesthetic become *critical* tools, as effective at dismantling the ideological as the ideological was at undermining the conceptual and descriptive. Given such a progression, we recognise that a non-critical (or pre-critical) stance can have revolutionary and transformative outcomes as well, and is not always and necessarily a kind of conformism. The pressing question, then, is what the normative criteria for such a pre-critical imaginative language would be. More broadly and importantly, it raises the question of what constitutes good criticism at all – one that does not lapse into what Highmore called a “premature” criticism but also does not forfeit its ability to be critically self-aware (27). This question lies at the heart of metamodernity and its liminal status between pragmatism and idealism – its dual move both outward, to the ideological and historical realities recognised by postmodernism, and inward, to the imaginative, phenomenological, subjective realm that seems to be remaindered by them.

Previously I suggested that metamodernism is a focus on style over substance – an aspirational gesture towards a promissory transcendentalism, a focus on vectors and trajectories over some fundamental change in nature from the movements that preceded it. Even metamodern critics seem convinced that metamodernism is impossibly utopic, that its belief in transcendent aims exists more for its utility than its reality. However, this admittance is a concession to an ideological sensibility that, by its nature, problematizes the mythic and aesthetic as ‘merely’ stylistic or illusory; Frye notes how it is actually a

feature of the rhetorical level that ‘style’ and ‘content’ are held as separable, assuming of a text that it says something (i.e. some moral or ideological content) in a certain way (i.e. aesthetically and formally). Such a distinction inherently renders the aesthetic a secondary medium, even a limitation or a distraction, and would have us rush centripetally outwards to the rhetorical, conceptual, and objective levels, i.e. the external. Hence “if a distinction of style and content seems to be essential, it means the writer has not escaped from the rhetorical orbit” (Frye, *Words with Power* 38).

Frye emphasises, however, that the literary is defined by a move inward, and does not rely on form or style as a secondary medium since its primary concern is not to “say things”; rather, literary works communicate “in mythical wholes” in which style *is* the content, simply put (*Words with Power* 38). As in metamodernism, it is the hopeful gesture, the performance, the self-consciously utopic, the fact of expression at all that is primary and not reducible or reactionary to some external factor. The imaginative is thereby one of the bedrock modes of discourse, a language which “incarnates a mythology in a historical context,” rather than being only the reactionary reverse, the expression of historical forces through mythology and subjectivity (Frye, *Words with Power* 5). In *The Great Code*, Frye describes this collapse of form and content as a definitive impulse of the literary, and, at the bottom, true in part of every linguistic structure and verbal utterance: “whatever the external reasons, there has to be some internal basis even for a compulsory existence [...] That unifying principle, for a critic, would have to be one of shape rather than meaning” (7). Inwardness, a deliberate turn away from contextual compulsions and into form, turns out to be the basis also of style, of

aesthetics, and of imaginative creations. The imaginative level requires the kind of switching of foreground and background that for Highmore defines the irreducibility of everyday life, and renders it a fundamentally aesthetic question.

Frye's imaginative language is the language of poetry and literature. The function of literature is not to describe reality 'as is,' a concern better suited to the prior modes, but to describe possibility, the "as if," resulting in an ecstatic transpersonal experience in which "the individual" (i.e. the subject and the subjective) "is not solitary or isolated" but exists in "an *oscillation* between a feeling that [the reader] is part of a larger design and a feeling that a larger design is a part of [the reader]" (88, emphasis added). If the imaginative is indeed such an oscillation, between mythological designs and phenomenological fragments, aspirational and unsettled, it is the proper language for understanding metamodernism. Here the metamodern horizon and the aesthetic impulse are revealed to be one and the same: the necessary pursuit of transcendent impossibilities, as Frye makes clear with the following quote by Italo Calvino: "Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement" (*Words with Power* 13). This would also imply that metamodernism, as a discourse at the imaginative level, is a set of aesthetic assumptions which enables aesthetics itself – a kind of new aestheticism. By abandoning a predetermined set of precepts and foregrounding the intermediate, as *Notes* and Turner's manifesto would have us do, metamodernism becomes an aesthetic that allows for aesthetics at all: the possibility of creative intermediations, of reimaginings of the liminal, of creativity as such. It might not be too glib to suggest metamodernism as generating a kind of meta-art, explaining why today's

artworks are often framed as a self-aware performance, or what Eshelman has identified as a “double frame”: a coercive, arbitrarily imposed form which draws us self-consciously into its contents yet through a sincere performance allows us to transcend it (154). Without allowing for such double framing, any degree of conscious or critical awareness threatens to make creative and aesthetic interventions impossible; metamodernism allows for an intentional aesthetics, ‘conscious commitments’ to ‘impossible possibilities’ (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 5).

By performatively embracing the coercion of arbitrary forms, we become privy to the many arbitrary coercions and performances we are caught up in daily, the many ways our freedoms are limited both inwardly and outwardly; and it is precisely the lack of distinction between inward and outward that reveals these limitations at all, that makes them visible and actionable as features of ourselves, without which they remain external to us and unacknowledged. Hence the mythical-imaginative, both in Frye’s account and in metamodernity, always entails a collapse of subject-object and self-other (“with the imagination there is a journey upward into a world where subject and object are at one”) and a reversal of foreground and background (“[i]llusion, something created by human imagination, is what becomes real; reality, most of which in our experience is a fossilized former human creation from the past, becomes illusory”) (Frye, *Words with Power* 88). The imaginative is the mode of everything from Zen Buddhism to Warhol’s pop art (Frye’s examples) which acknowledges, in Merleau-Pontian fashion, that “things are not fully seen until they become hallucinatory,” that is, until they are recognised as projected rather than predetermined, potential rather than prescribed, horizontal rather than visionary

(Frye, *Words with Power* 91). The imaginative casts everything as latent transformations and liminal thresholds, and thereby reintroduces them to us as creative and collaborative choices.

The imaginary is all well and good, until we acknowledge its own limitations: a lack of commitment or rigour. Saying ‘anything goes’ is no different than saying ‘everything is decided,’ except perhaps qualitatively – the outcome is the same, a lack of motive to do any one thing. This concern with outcomes would seem to give the imaginative no ground but to force it back outwards to rhetorical language, which evaluates the mythic and imaginative in terms of their social utility, their upshot, but over time would again pit us against language-as-power, sophistry, and the paralytics of relativism between competing interests. Metamodernism in its current state exists somewhere within these paralytics: the hopeful possibility of spontaneous creative eruptions, and the all too obvious determinations that seem to confine them. For this reason metamodernism appears as a half-measure, indecisive and ultimately unsatisfying in its noncommittal attitudes, explaining why its discourse is so provisionally laid out; the problem plagues most attempts to supplant the postmodern, as they “appear to radicalize the postmodern rather than restructure it” (Rudrum and Stavris 3). To take metamodernism further would require us to go beyond its non-committal liminality or, more accurately, to carry it to its ultimate conclusions.

Applying Frye’s understanding of criticism as both inductive and deductive, inwards and outwards, we can carry this concern with outcomes *into* the imaginative, delving into its non-committal, spontaneous oscillations to find some assumptive

principle with which to settle it from within. Assuming a world in which we are all imaginative creators, would a principle not emerge in which we ought to recognise and foster this creative capacity in others? Wouldn't our creative arbitrations be bounded by the degree to which they limit the creative choices of others? Becoming aware of our indivisible creative capacity also means recognizing it in others, restoring the dignity and wonder with which we treat our fellow human beings, as co-creators rather than products of culture or historical symptoms – the very result of dehumanisation. Such a view posits a radical 'hyper-individualism,' to use Lipovetsky's term, which is not contradictory or even supplementary but synonymous with a radically collective ethos. An underlying ethic to what is otherwise a spontaneous aestheticism begins to come to light. This move inwards in search of some deeper ethical axiom to metamodernism – the pivoting point of its oscillating pendulum, perhaps even its state of equilibrium – forms the remainder of this project.

1.5. Liminal Ethics

The 'aesth-ethical' duality in metamodernism, identified by Akker and Vermeulen, appears to occupy a different threshold than that separating its aestheticism from the political and ideological. Metamodernism, in fact, is almost entirely lacking in political rhetoric, yet moral language is abound; a metamodern aestheticism might occupy the very cleavage between the two. Luke Turner's mock manifesto makes the point that the "pragmatic romanticism" of the metamodern is "unhindered by ideological anchorage" (*Metamodernist // Manifesto*). Lipovetsky argues that if "[t]he first version of

modernity was extreme in ideological and political terms; the new modernity is extreme in a way that goes beyond the political,” extreme in “hyperbolic and sub-political processes” (200). Childish and Thomson believe in recovering that part of modernism which rejects “political dogma and which sought to give voice to the gamut of the human psyche” (146). Even in the ambiguity and open-endedness of metamodern axioms, there remains a call to action, a felt sense of urgency difficult to pinpoint in any terms except to call it ethical, which at the same time appears antithetical to any predetermined moral, social, or political axiom at all.

For Toth, our age is identified by an “ethics of indecision” (266), “the ethical imperative that any decision or narrative act *must* endure both aspects of indecision, that any decision *must* respect both the possibility and the impossibility of the spectral promise” (284). To identify with both the decision and the indecision is also the attempt to “get over” the paradox between representation and reality, which has plagued earlier discourse, “by embracing it” – which, put another way, might mean to incorporate that paradox as features of our phenomenal selves (Toth 266). At the bottom of metamodern liminality, the precarity of being engaged in ongoing creative intermediations, is the question posed by Bruna Latour in his take on the digital humanities: “why can’t we say of something that it is ‘true’ and ‘made,’ that is, both ‘real’ and manufactured, in a single breath?” (xxv). Robert Samuels’ notion of automodernism is premised on the realisation that “digital youth usually do not distinguish between real and virtual identity” (241), undoing “the traditional conflicts between the public and the private, the subject and the object, and the human and the machine” (216). In the deepest realms of experience, there

is no distinction between artifice and the natural, between fiction and reality, or between the individual and the universal; it is only “when experience has become a reliable guide once more” that we shall free ourselves from the prison “of the Subject/Object division” (Latour xxv-xxvi).

To take our creations as ‘real’ is to imbue reality with a ludic and creative indeterminacy, but what is lacking in metamodernism is that this also entails the reverse conclusion: that we have no choice but to recognise all our creative endeavors as having the gravity of the real. Supplanting the non-committal oscillations of the imaginative, its on-the-fence liminality, is a sense of commitment: a coherence with and correspondence to one’s creative output. If the imaginative blurs rational categories in order to free up possibilities, it is the promise that such possibilities will be followed through in reality that gives value to freedom at all. Frye attributes this realisation to his final mode of language, which he dubs the prophetic, the proclamatory, or the kerygmatic, and for him it is the bedrock linguistic form out of which all forms of language spring. If, as Frye writes, “the imaginative and its freedom to create must be the basis of whatever goes beyond it,” then “[w]hat does go beyond it is the ‘myth to live by,’ a myth which is also a model for continuous action, and which is the distinctively kerygmatic feature” (Frye, *Words with Power* 116).

Prophetic language, more than being a forecast of the future, is a radical form of existential identification with one’s words, collapsing any gaps between the expression and the speaker. If in imaginative language “anything can be juxtaposed, or implicitly identified with, anything else,” then prophetic language “takes this a step further and

says: ‘You are what you identify with’” (Frye, *Words with Power* 116). Prophecy, simply put, is the meeting point between words, speaker, and reality, a convergence in which none of those categories is wholly reducible to the other but exists as its own entity: the kerygmatic force of a text is the “resurrection of the original speaking presence in the reader,” in which “[t]he duality of speaker and listener has vanished into a single area of verbal recognition” (Frye, *Words with Power* 114); we are in a “genuinely kerygmatic realm” at “the point at which the cleavage between active speech and reception of speech merges into unity” (Frye, *Words with Power* 117).

Unlike the ungrounded aestheticism of the imaginative, in which unmitigated freedom and creative expression are the highest aims, creativity and consequence are coextensive in prophetic language. It is at the level of a proclamation, as in the pronouncement ‘Let there be light’, where language exists wholly outside of predetermination as an *ex nihilo* force, but because it also perceives the consequences of incarnating its reality, is driven to moral and existential ends (Frye, *Words with Power* 111). If anything is possible, as per the imaginative, why not commit to the best and most sublime? Properly received, the kerygmatic is the most powerful and potent use of language, according to Frye, and is the language of spiritual and religious traditions: “An utterance of this sort is one charged with such intensity, urgency or authority that it penetrates the defenses of the human receiving apparatus and creates a new channel of response” (*Words with Power* 111). This new channel of response has a life of its own: where language in the other modes has an instrumentalist or utilitarian streak, designed to serve our ends, in the prophetic mode it isn’t clear who is in control, the speaker or the

utterance: “We are close to the kerygmatic whenever we meet the statement, as we do surprisingly often in contemporary writing, that it seems to be language that uses man rather than man that uses language” (Frye, *Words with Power* 116). The prophetic is thereby language’s point of departure from human awareness into the non-human or post-human world, where language takes on an independent life and we may only imagine where it may go, or where it may take us. But not knowing only increases the felt sense of ethical urgency, the need for coherence with one’s words, since the proper existential commitments become our only and best guarantee. These commitments are deeper than rational discourse, political rhetoric, or even an imaginative freedom – in some sense, they are the choice implied within a choice, what the existentialist Kierkegaard describes as “the reality of freedom as possibility anterior to possibility” (*Dread and Freedom* 101). If the imaginative reveals a degree of freedom in our choices, the prophetic reveals the deeper ethical commitments our choices imply. Any degree of possibility is also “possibility [which] indicates a possibility as its consequence,” the implications of which are ever-receding and infinitely traveling, and the reach of which depends on how willing we are to gaze down into possibility and experience its dizzying sense of dread (Kierkegaard, *Dread and Freedom* 104).

The deeper existential basis of our language is a thread that runs through the entirety of Frye’s linguistic scheme. Conceptual language emerges out of the recognition that there is a deeper, unacknowledged structure to the surface of empirical and observable reality; rhetorical language emerges out of the same recognition about conceptual structures, that they are more proximally a feature of our own social positions;

imaginative language is the further recognition of the creative and individualistic leeway we have with our perspectives; and prophetic language recognises that such creative leeway implies its purposefulness, a responsibility for our positions which becomes suprapersonal, “a personal but not subjective presence” which impels us to live the imagined as true (Frye, *Words with Power* 80). Frye’s typology gives us intimations of what might follow out of metamodernism’s commitment to betweenness, to liminality and creative possibility: an extension of those virtues past their limits towards their antitype, a myth to live by.

Earlier I raised the question of what constitutes good criticism, and how to reconcile criticism with the pre-critical or imaginative stance. Not only does the prophetic power of language appear to be the basic constituent of language; it appears to be the driving purpose behind criticism as well. For Frye, criticism is a practice which can operate at any level of language as well as across it; a practice which mirrors the metamodern metaxis in its capacity to be “‘with’, ‘between’, and ‘beyond’” all at once (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 2). Good criticism is one which can read a text in one mode of discourse and be equally capable of recognising its excluded initiative; in essence, the real directive of criticism is mobility across heuristics, the discovery of possibilities that have been previously foreclosed. If “language is a means of intensifying consciousness,” as Frye claims, then criticism is what “marks out the direction of advance in consciousness” (*Words with Power* 38-39). Importantly, however, criticism cannot be a modernist “hair-trigger affair ... always on the brink of futurity” in which we preemptively anticipate a critical position (Connor 77). Rather, Frye suggests that arriving at

the excluded initiative of a text is the secondary consequence of faithfully reading it in full, accepting the world which it imagines, provisionally and for a time. Criticism is therefore imbedded in time and in text; it is not a spectator's position, evaluating its object from the safety of a predetermined stance, but one that identifies with the artist and imbeds itself within the art, in some sense at face value, all while knowing that a successful reading – and a successful piece of art – will uplift us towards new possibilities beyond its initial constraints. Criticism therefore requires an existential identification with the text, which, according to Frye, is what realises the very power and source of linguistic expression at all.

Metamodernism's emphasis on migration, the horizontal road both immediate and infinite, recognises that what is required is a dual capacity: to both identify subliminal assumptions while also co-habiting with them, without precluding engagement and participation in those very assumptive myths, i.e. a metamodern 'post-irony'. Even a critical stance ought equally to be an open naivety towards the next best thing: "After your precarious alliance dissolves, whether in success or failure, you must exhibit the flexibility, openness to contingency and self-ironising capacities to move on to the next endeavour. Such is the condition of postirony" (Konstantinou 102). Metamodernism abides by Frye's understanding of a continually traveling criticism by foregrounding, first and foremost, possibility: Bourriaud begins his account of the new modernism by claiming that "[k]eeping the ball in the air and the game alive: that is the function of the critic" (305), while McGowan identifies this instinct for freedom as the one forgotten commonality of the postmodern writings of Foucault, Derrida, and Habermas, "the

reader's always being able to map the details back to whether here freedom is being advanced or retarded. The standard of measurement (even if only implicit) can always be wheeled into action" (McGowan 104).

More than the pursuit of freedom, however, migration inwards through the increasingly formal and self-aware heuristics brings us closer and closer to recognising our own existential commitments, the basic assumptions which constitute the world for us. The prophetic level implies itself as the end game for criticism in Frye's sequence; arriving at the existential bedrock of language, the point of absolute 'intensity of consciousness' in which language and reality blur together into actualised possibility, we arrive at the meeting point of our inward choices and our outward reality. For this reason, we continually rediscover the prophetic basis of language not as an end point, but that which impels us back into the world, back into action, to reconstitute and live out our imagined ideals; this occurs indefinitely "until we reach the limit of what words can do for us. But what looks like a limit from a distance often turns out to be an open gate to something else when we reach it" (Frye, *Words with Power* 39). The rest of the project will attempt to articulate what this limit at a distance looks like from a metamodern position – the much-prophesized end of the metamodern horizon.

CHAPTER TWO: Prophetic Aesthetics

2.1. Defining the Prophetic

Having argued for metamodernism as an aesthetic of liminality, I will devote Chapter Two to outlining what I take to be its future paths: an aesthetic of integration, in Genep's terms, of prophecy in a Fryean sense, or in my own understanding, a historical recourse to existentialism. For Frye, prophecy appraises language in terms of its tendency to become incarnated in reality. What oscillation lacks is an existential commitment to realise its freedoms, an integration of liminality not only as a promised horizon across time but a lived reality in the here-and-now, and the philosophy of radical accountability that extends out of its freedoms. No longer a boundless creativity, it is a practical or a lived aestheticism – a “pragmatic idealism” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 5). The rest of my project will therefore be a speculative extension of metamodernism's core tenets as they seem to manifest in Frye's understanding of the prophetic and the metaliterary, and more broadly in the existentialist tradition.

Frye attributes his notion of the ‘metaliterary’ (mentioned in the preceding Chapter) to language in its prophetic form, identifying it with the existentialist movement of the 1940s and such writers as Dostoevsky, Buber, and (the early rather than the late) Nietzsche. For Frye, what united the existentialist writers and ‘metaliterature’ was the following question: “How do I live a more abundant life?” (*Words with Power* 115). The metaliterary, for Frye, “begins with the process of perceiving some kind of ‘that's for me’ detail in one's reading” (*Words with Power* 113); this existential identification constitutes the underlining aim of all writing and authorship, “something to do with making [their]

reader a different person from what [they were] before” (*Words with Power* 81). The key features of existentialist writing might be summed up by the following axioms:

- 1) a call to embeddedness in the text, which is also embeddedness in the world;
- 2) to authentic identification on the part of the individual reader with the author, constituted as a dissolution of difference between author and text, text and reader, ultimately the cosmic and the individual;
- 3) an ethos no longer of indecision but of responsibility, the real question of any ethos.

At the point of collapse between the possible and the lived, the promised future is no longer forestalled to a far limit or a horizon, but imbeds us in it as a contemporaneous presence, becoming an existential unfolding in the *metanoia* of the here-and-now, what Kirby calls “contemporaneity placed in the long term” (“Digimodernism” 358).

Existentialism would have us recognise an alignment between our practically lived lives and the metaphysical myths they imply – a recognition of action, faith, and embodied ideals as the genuine and pre-cognitive foundation to our rational constructions.

Existentialism is loosely defined by Walter Kaufmann in the following way: “The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life – that is the heart of existentialism” (12). Inasmuch as metamodernism sees itself as beyond systemisation, it has so far aligned with the existential impulse. Like metamodernism, “existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets” (Kaufmann 11); rather, it “is a

timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past; but it is only in recent times that it has hardened into a sustained protest and preoccupation” (Kaufmann 12). More than a repudiation of rationality, however, which would align it more closely with the anti-teleological and anti-narratological, existentialism affirms, to a radical and often terrifying degree, human freedom: “freedom does not look like the glorious liberty of the Enlightenment; it is no longer the gift of God”; rather, the human “stands alone in the universe, responsible for [their] condition, likely to remain in a lowly state, but free to reach above the stars” (Kaufmann 47). What tends to be neglected in the metamodern emphasis on freedom, migration, and aspiration are the entailing questions of ethics and accountability; what settles the perennial state of oscillation at any given time, if not us? Freedom and responsibility necessarily collide, even as they logically imply one another – and it is this problematic, rather than the existence or nonexistence of freedom which metamodern discourse is troubled with, that most occupies the existential worldview. It certainly seems the case that an existential strain is growing more prevalent in culture and in academics, as a restlessness with the established canon, a sustained sense of urgency and a renewed preoccupation with ethics, ecological and social consciousness, and the felt need for a more vital, more ‘meaningful’ life. It is equally possible to say, without paradox, that such a sensibility has always existed; perhaps only now is it a matter of such scale.

So far I have described the drift towards existentialism as a pervasive thread in the metamodern discourse, but this was only as a result of some pre-emptive unpacking. As a subcurrent it remains subliminal; the existential reach of metamodern metaxis has not

been touched upon except in a small number of cases. In *Notes*, Vermeulen and Akker hint at the broader psychological context of metaxis: “Literally, the term metaxis ... translates as ‘between.’ It has however, via Plato and later the German philosopher Eric Voegelin, come to be associated with the experience of existence and consciousness” (6). Those connections are then foreclosed to delimit the scope of their project: “For our purposes, we intend the concept not as a metaphor for an existential experience that is general to the *condition humaine*, but as a metaphor for a cultural sensibility that is particular to the metamodern discourse” (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 6). It is unclear, however, whether the two could or should be separated, save for a fear of practicing metaphysics, as Eshelman calls it, in the shadow of postmodern rhetoric. If metamodernism is to believe in its own discourse, it must be capable of generalising its conclusions at least in part to the broader human condition. This is more readily embraced by Luke Turner, who has no metaphysical qualms in bidding us to “recognise oscillation to be the natural order of the world” (*Metamodern // Manifesto*).

Eshelman’s notion of performatism comes close to making the existential implications of contemporary art more explicit. For Eshelman, the emergent aesthetic sensibility distances itself from the project of “pursuing an endless, irrefutable otherness,” endemic to what Eshelman calls “the split concepts of sign” – the unbridgeable dualism between signifier and signified (154). The problem of otherness arises out of the split itself, Eshelman claims, in that it assumes a state of “belatedness” as the “Last Word in this back-and-forth contest,” not realising that a dualism is equally and dialectically informed by a monism. Paralleling Frye’s sequence and Vico’s cycle, Eshelman claims

that history “switches from Romanticism to Realism” whenever one type – a dualist sign which splits language from reality, or a monist sign which integrates them – “begins to exhaust its descriptive and creative possibilities” (153). Contemporary art has been a return to a Romantic monism between sign and signified, employing semiotic strategies “emphasizing unity, identification, closure, hierarchy, and theist or authorial modes of narration” and leaving behind “essentially dualist notions of textuality, virtuality, belatedness, endless irony, and metaphysical skepticism” (Eshelman 154). To invoke the spacetime terms applied earlier, the current monist trend embraces the sign-signified duality as a unity unfolding *in time*, rather than the sign and signified forever separated in fixed space, impossible to reconcile.

The monist unity of the sign echoes a pragmatist notion of semiotics, that of Charles Peirce or William James, for whom the precarity of the sign-signified relation is already assumed in the sign itself, the sign being a linguistic *action* and not an ontological structure; a sign “is not characterized by any inherent properties [...] but by its function”; “a sign mediates between an object and an interpretant [...] it is their *dynamic unity* that is the sign proper” (Johansen 26, emphasis added). The truth-value of a sign is premised on an on-going reciprocation between the speaker, the interpretant, and the object, which must unfold precariously in time – to assume a failure pre-emptively is, in this sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, to take the sign as a monodominant imposition upon reality is endemic to a *misuse* of signs, not to signs themselves – intention and consequence become definitive of the sign and its success or failure in communicating with others. Such a view of semiotics as a dynamic process, in which we are imbedded, is

definitive of Frye's understanding of prophetic language; it explains why the language of religious texts is best understood in terms of "what some scholars call '*language events*,' brought to us only through words; and it is the words themselves that have the authority, not the events they describe" (*The Great Code* 85, emphasis added). Put another way, at the deepest levels of language, we are imbedded in the sign and the semiotic process, and have to play our part in realising its truth.

To explain the current monist trend towards a dynamic unity of sign and signified, Eshelman provides the concept of a "double frame," evoked earlier in the project and worth unpacking here (154). Double framing uses "a blend of aesthetic and archaic" devices: a coercive frame, which "cuts us off, at least temporarily, from the context around it and forces us back into the work"; and an imaginative frame which, once inside the work, makes us "identify with some person, act or situation in a way that is plausible only within the confines of the work as a whole" (Eshelman 146). The following passage demonstrates the dual effect of such embeddedness in time and in text:

On the one hand, you're practically forced to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame – to *believe* in spite of yourself – but on the other, you still *feel* the coercive force causing this identification to take place, and intellectually you remain aware of the particularity of the argument at hand. Metaphysical skepticism and irony aren't eliminated, but are held in check by the frame. At the same time, the reader must always negotiate some kind of trade-off between the positive aesthetic identification and the dogmatic, coercive means used to achieve it. (Eshelman 156)

Eshelman highlights how contemporary artworks, by casting us into the work as a leap of faith, "attempt to make viewers or readers *believe* rather than convince them with cognitive arguments," considering a performance successful "when a reader's belief pattern is changed in some particular way, and when he or she begins to project that new

belief pattern back onto reality” (184). Again, the focus on belief over cognition – the call to deeper existential commitments which are, at their core, creative and non-rational – becomes the selfsame commitment to a pragmatic change in reality.

On the surface, it seems obvious that we cannot usher any change of circumstance without believing also in the possibility of a change in orientation; the work of criticism would be futile without it. However, rational discourses which would explain the human condition as a symptom are equally obvious and convincing – the trick is to always leave room for both accounts, which is to occupy the space of a paradox, while recognising that it is precisely the space for our own intermediation and intervention. Open to both a sincere and an ironic reading of a text, “we are now being offered a specific *choice* as to the outcome of a reading or viewing rather than being condemned from the start to a misreading or misprision” (Eshelman 157-158). It is the pragmatic outcome, then, that is the definitive criteria of a performatist work, though the settling of outcomes remains up to the reader and viewer; if postmodern practices manipulate us into a state of “undecidability,” the performatist narrative recognises the same indeterminacy yet forces our hand into a creative decision (Eshelman 170).

Ihab Hassan, one of the foremost theorists on the topic of postmodernism, comes even closer than Eshelman in recognising an unabashedly spiritual turn as the means for postmodernism to “recreate its best self” (58). Hassan is quick to retrieve a metamodern strain within postmodernism, using his neologism ‘Indetermanence’ to designate the postmodern as premised on “two decisive antithetical, but *not* dialectical, tendencies: indeterminacy and immanence” (51). As a non-dialectical split, however,

‘indeterminance’ also entails paralytic and stasis: existing neither as opposites nor as a reconcilable synthesis, the two concepts of indeterminacy and immanence leave us chiefly with a sense of ambiguity. Hassan’s recommendation for moving beyond such paralytic is to outline a vision of truth that can unite us in spite of indeterminance, what he calls an ‘aesthetic of trust.’ “If truth is dead,” Hassan writes, “then everything is permitted – because its alternatives, now more than ever, are rank power and rampant desire,” or, in Frye’s terms, the cynicisms inherent to the rhetorical mode (Hassan 53). Without recovering some unifying foundation to human action, we have no choice but to move externally and outward in our heuristics, assessing all human motives in terms of material forces, sophistry, and relativizing struggles for power – and reacting to them likewise. Hassan’s aesthetic of trust is therefore one that “reclaims maligned universals. Both social determinism and cultural constructionism find them anathema. Yet universals, not Platonic but empiric, abound. For instance: languages; human emotions; marks of status; ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death; gods, spirits, taboos and their rituals” (Hassan 54). A turn towards the mythic is likewise a turn towards the common; as the work of Genep and Durkheim have shown, myths, rituals and rites of passage appear to be a fundamental feature of all human societies. Hassan’s search for an absolute “Truth” is nothing more than the search for a common foundation to all people, life, ecology and “Reality”; and it echoes William James’ statement that “truth rests not on transcendence but on trust” (Hassan 53).

Trust is revealed to be the true connective tissue between sign and signified, the real determining factor in the power of words and how we relate to the world. But trust,

as always, must be earned, and therefore the search for a common foundation to reality becomes synonymous with a deepening of moral sense, of consistency with one's words, of altruism, and of what Hassan refers to as *kenosis*:

“more than consensus, trust depends on self-abnegation, self-emptying, something akin to *kenosis*. It requires dispassion, empathy, attention to others and to the created world, to something not in ourselves. But, ultimately, it demands self-dispossession. That is why truth and trust remain spiritual qualities – not simply psychological, not merely political, but, above all, spiritual values.” (55)

Hassan's 'spiritual turn' to postmodernism is one premised on *kenosis*: “self-emptying, yes, but also the self-undoing of our knowledge in the name of something more fundamental than deconstruction” (Hassan 59). Like Ulrich Beck's extension of modernism into itself, a 'reflexive modernity,' Hassan suggests that it is the application of postmodern principles to themselves that will bring about the next revelations: a self-deconstruction on the part of the critic, which emerges “as a spiritual value, inward with self-dispossession, and in its postmodern form, familiar with the void. For only through nihilism is nihilism overcome. Our second innocence is self-heedlessness, and beyond that, 'unknowing'” (60). Frye likewise evokes the concept of *kenosis*, identifying it with prophetic language and with existentialism, particularly the work of Nietzsche – perhaps the existentialist most concerned with the topic of self-heedlessness. Frye attributes Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God not to an end of all that is divine, but to a self-emptying that allows for one's divinity: “what is really dead is the antithesis between a human subject and a divine object” (*Words with Power* 130).

Finally, in an essay titled *The Cosmic Artisan*, Sjoerd van Tuinen makes a compelling case for such a collapse of human subject and divine object as definitive of

current aesthetic trends, a “resingularisation” or “new minimalism” which he explores more deeply as a convergence of design and handicraft, a return to a craftsmanship ethos (82). The ‘artisanal turn’ in contemporary culture (evident in the growing popularity of such things as cooking shows, knitting cafes, and the hand-made) is one in which art “has been emancipating itself from the intimacy of the studio and the closed guild mind,” no longer opposed to but “synonymous with our engagement with matter and everyday life” (Tuinen 70). The new artisan “is cosmic precisely to the extent that he inhabits this interstitial self-reflective space” (Tuinen 79) – the interstitial space being the space of the liminal, the precarity of which pulls us deeper inward to phenomenological choice and self-reflection, amounting to “discipline, or the convergence of design and use” (Tuinen 80). Not settling with unsettledness, as many metamodernists have the tendency to do, Tuinen realises the existential implications of a liminal aestheticism – the ultimate artisanal craft gravitates towards the production of personhood, “art as a form of life” (Tuinen 70). What makes the virtue of craft different from ‘art for art’s sake’ is that “a virtue’s only mode of reality is that of virtuous use,” a “performative coherence” to an intended design through actions and gestures (Tuinen 81). Moving from pure aestheticism, the ethos of the cosmic artisan is “not just about making things ... it is also about making ourselves in relation to the world” (Tuinen 80). The notion of a cosmic artisan is cosmic in its designs and ambitions, and practical in its execution and craft – it is the cosmic artisan which makes aspiration and reality meet, and in that alchemical convergence, it must “get rid of the classical conflict between necessity and freedom” (Tuinen 79). Realising “the plastic relationality of the Self” as the ultimate “metamodern

sensibility,” Tuinen makes the existentialist underpinnings to metamodernism most evident (71).

Beyond these writers, the existential impulse upon which metamodernism is based is still only tentatively gestured towards, as a hopeful horizon, an impossible possibility. However, the impossibility of commitment is itself symptomatic of the liminal and transitory stage – the unsettled synthesis between aspiration and reality. To truly move past the metamodern-as-liminal, the literature of the future must be post-synthetic – incorporated and embodied, wholly committed to a life well lived, as a reality rather than (or as well as) a remote possibility. The new existential literature will belong to authors who, to paraphrase the existentialist Kierkegaard, want to serve the communication rather than have the communication serve them; authors who take their aspirational words as the rule rather than their creative license, a foreground to the world’s background. If all this sounds idealistic, it is only a further extension of the “informed naivety” to which metamodernism gravitates: a recognition that belief, even naive belief, more than being reactionary or epiphenomenal is itself action, with concrete outcomes and courses to the future and therefore laden with moral weight (Akker and Vermeulen, *Notes* 5). At the very least, a post-liminal aesthetic suggests an emphasis on the moral and existential implications of what we do and believe, in art as well as in everyday life – in art as life. It will be an aesthetic taken up aesthetes who are equally apostles, “with no other proof but [their] own assertion, and at the most by [their] willingness to suffer everything for the sake of the doctrine” (Kierkegaard, *Authority* 109).

2.2. Prophetic Time

All these predictions are admittedly speculative, but hopefully not ungrounded. I took the risk of assuming a directional movement to literary conventions in making a historical reading of Frye's language levels, which will not be palatable unless the terms of metamodernism laid out earlier have been (at least provisionally) accepted as a natural evolution of the postmodern sensibility. This progression is not to undermine a historical lens or any of the modalities that came before it; just as modernism and postmodernism continue to exist and influence our thinking, remaining retrievable as heuristics, so the metamodern sensibility will likely remain and reoccur. The idea of novelty or straightforward progression is dubious, although as metamodern critics have pointed out, the cyclical is equally liable to become an imposition, about the impossibility of time or of the future. The solution is perhaps the image of a spiral, revolving in a predictable pattern which nevertheless does not cross the same places, spinning us towards the uncharted in familiar ways, rejecting neither history nor eternity and, as spirals do, hinting at depth. Frye's sequence of linguistic levels suggests that it is such a spiraling inward, deeper into our practices rather than a break away from them, that seems to promise us new forms and a 'more abundant life.' As Frye writes, "[t]he real world is beyond time, but can be reached only by a process that goes on in time;" quoting Eliot, "only through time time is conquered" (*The Great Code* 103).

The notion of a return in history, one that is still somehow 'new,' is explored by Akker et al as the definitive temporality of our current cultural moment. Akker et al rely

on Arquilla's notion of a '(b)end of History' to describe such a non-linear yet nevertheless evolving temporality:

“A bending of History may simultaneously imply forcing History into a different direction or shape as well as causing History to deflect from the more or less straight line of teleological narrative. It also captures the increasing awareness across culture that there is something at stake, yet we are still very much unsure what this something – hidden around the bend, as it were – might be (and we will only really know in hindsight).” (Akker et al, *Metamodernism 2*)

Such a bend is both an intentional forward progress, inasmuch as history is forced into new forms, and a rejection of teleological narrative, in that the assumed direction of history has changed. The bend (a bend in the spiral, perhaps) is therefore both intentional and cyclical: it is not a radical break from history, in the way linear progress suggests, nor does it confine us to a purely historical account, as in a closed cycle. Such a reading of history, unfolding with a forward-going valence, is how I've sought to explain metamodernism and the sense of teleology it has recovered: the formal-historical, inner-outer divide, which again has been revealed as a multiplicity, entails an ongoing process and not a structural unity.

Previously, I described the fixation with horizons in metamodern discourse as abiding by a plural linearity rather than a fixed and singular line. Such a widening of linearity into 'horizontality', along with the notion of 'bends', can be technically explained by at least two directions in our spatial metaphor for history – horizontal and vertical. Frye accounts for these two directions as causality and typology: “Causality ... is based on reason, observation, and knowledge, and therefore relates fundamentally to the past, on the principle that the past is all that we genuinely or systematically know. Typology relates to the future, and is consequently related primarily to faith, hope, and vision” (*The*

Great Code 109). Causal thinking “tends not to move out of the same dimension of time,” premised on a horizontal force that pushes us onwards in the same direction, whereas typology “points to future events that are often thought of as transcending time, so that they contain a vertical lift” (Frye, *The Great Code* 110). The combination of the two forces – horizontal and vertical, historical and aspirational – grants us a wider degree of movement and ironically enough, what appears to be a fuller account of history. It is the irreducibility of the present which implies these two forces, the ‘pulls’ towards imagined futures as well as the ‘pushes’ of causal determinism, and therein the implication that one cannot be collapsed or reduced to the other – that the relationship between human intentionality and causality is, at the very least, dialectical.

This vertical lift – the ahistorical aspect which many have ascribed to metamodernity – is quite simply a rejection of causation as the sole principle guiding human action and behavior. Therein is its call to freedom. Metamodernism bids us to admit that there are ‘attractors’ as much as there are ‘drives’; we are pulled towards futures as much as we are pushed by histories. The postmodern discourse continually recovers the many ways we are replaying the past, that history is a presence in the present. By contrast, the stylistic-aesthetic performativity of metamodernity, its emphasis on pragmatics and processes, is a recognition of the future as also being an active presence in the here-and-now. To arrive at such a recognition, however, we must let in the speculative, the imaginative, and the mythic as valid heuristics again, for these are the entry points for aspirations to become actual. Josh Toth explores the presence of

aspiration in terms of Derrida's 'specter of the promise' and Nietzsche's use of the word 'perhaps,' since "[f]or Derrida, the future to come is the future of the perhaps" (290):

"The perhaps thus defers the possibility of the promise while simultaneously opening up, yielding to, hoping for, the possibility that the deferral is only temporary ... that there will occur, that there *can* occur, a finally right decision, a finally right narrative and/or interpretive act. On the other hand, this promise promises the perhaps itself; it promises the possibility that we can, finally, accept the 'dangerous' irony of the perhaps." (Toth 289)

The messianic sense of 'perhaps' is here realised as prophecy – it is self-ironizing, aware of its precarity, but precisely thereby achieves its confidence. "The ordeal of indecision *must* be endured," the liminal state must be inhabited in full, before we can have the chance to mediate between our aspirations and reality (Toth 291). The prophetic 'perhaps' understands that belief can have pragmatic outcomes that make it self-fulfilling, that a belief can be true *in time* if not in the immediate present or in historical causality, and that faith in our aspirations is the path to our aspirations: "*Perhaps*, then, we might argue, the future is already here and now?" (Toth 290)

Prophecy and existentialism might seem like disparate terms. I propose that the predictive powers of prophecy – unlike the kind that is a scientized patterning of the outside world – is premised on an inner revelation that constitutes both the prediction and what is predicted: an experience which empowers and feeds into itself by foreseeing its own continued existence in time, gaining an undeniable phenomenal immediacy and, precisely thereby, an ever-receding futurist quality. The prophetic feeling constitutes the meeting point of aspiration and reality which, up till now, metamodernism has been so tentatively approaching – and in its tentativeness, also delaying. Because such a definition of prophecy is neither wholly materially predefined nor wholly freeform and spontaneous,

it exists as a recursive dynamo (and not a collapse) across the subject-object, self-other divide – it requires *both* the divide between inner and outer worlds *and* the dynamic interplay between them, implying the often painful but necessary crossing between subjective processes and objective outcomes. The integration therefore exists, in its most fundamental sense, as a (subjective, experiential) acceptance of precarity, which, existing as it does on the boundary between inner and outer, sublimates itself to a cosmic principle – and it is this universal precarity of existence which constitutes the foremost conclusion of existentialism. Metaphysical implications abound, but it is clear that Hassab’s “spiritual turn” is playing out here: as Childish and Thomson conclude in their essay titled *Remodernism*, “[l]et there be no doubt, there will be a spiritual renaissance in art because there is nowhere else for art to go” (148).

2.3. Rites of Integration

To elevate liminality as a universal is no longer to become ludic with it, as players who can opt out of the liminal at any time. Instead it means to integrate its precarious freedom as a fundamental reality: to incorporate betweenness into ourselves and, in enacting a constant negotiation, achieving the closest state to a dynamic equilibrium. Inhabiting betweenness is no longer to oscillate ad hoc, but to achieve an existential state which is “a conception of identity that goes far beyond ‘juxtaposition’” (the realm of the imaginary) “because there are no longer two things, but one thing in two aspects” (Frye, *The Great Code* 104). As stated earlier in Chapter One, Genep explains that what follows out of liminal rites are rites of incorporation, and incorporation suggests a turn

inwards, into phenomenological embodiment, continuing the formal turn away from the historical and contextual. Discourses of the prophetic and the existential are likewise preoccupied with the language of integration and incorporation, alignments between inner and outer, or what in the existential tradition is often referred to as authenticity – a genuine dissolution of inner being and outward reality. Such a re-centering is not a solipsism or individualism but a rediscovery of the basic constituents of life that remain true for all. To become embodied in such a way is equally to become embedded in the reality of our lives and those around us. Therefore the emphasis on phenomenological primacy and subjecthood, characteristic of metamodernism, can ultimately cast us back into the world in a fuller and more holistic way.

Embeddedness can be understood as an ethos of embodiment, an enacted union with one's environment, or what in spiritual traditions might be referred to as incarnation. Like the existential convergence of aspiration and reality, prophecy is a proclamation of the future which depends on us and therefore centers us in our present surroundings. What makes such an embeddedness an ethos, however, and not a readily assumed reality, is that it remains up to us and our orientations to enact our role in realising the prophecy. Modernist futurity was visionary; it continually cast us out of the present as less real than the prophesied or the promised. By contrast, an existential commitment makes its future promises inexorable to the very extent that we are willing to remain opaquely imbedded in the present, as mediums for incarnating that vision. It is a matter of faith, but as an enacted, embodied, embedded faith rather than a visionary or a horizontal deferral, it is a faith that proves itself in the making – a self-fulfilling prophecy. Embeddedness – in time,

in space, in the phenomenological present – is how the prophetic and the existential remain both precarious and certain all at once, without regressing into a purely aspirational modernism or the pure historicism of its postmodern antithesis. The certainty of precarity is, as Kierkegaard put it, “[a]n objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness [...] the highest truth attainable for an existing individual” (*Truth is Subjectivity* 117). In postmodernism, the focus has been on an objective uncertainty; in metamodernism it is in the appropriation process, the creative assimilation; what ought to follow, then, is something resembling the passionate inwardness of the existing individual.

Embeddedness was initially a sociological concept put forward by the economic historian Polanyi (itself derived from Habermas’s notion of lifeworld), as a way of interpreting economics via the study of society; embeddedness posited “the social sphere as necessarily primary to the economic sphere” (Schmidt). Like the inward move from conceptual-objective discourse to more primary questions of society and power, embeddedness provided scholars with an important switching of foreground and background. The focus on social relations and institutional interdependencies also has its limits, however, and embeddedness can lead to relativizing disagreements about its exact forms – “relative to what is embedded in what and to what consequence” (Schmidt). What tends to be forgotten in critiques of the concept is that embeddedness is meant to be distinguished from “both under- and over- socialized accounts”: as much as it strikes out against neoclassical accounts of rational actors and atomised agents, embeddedness equally challenges “strong structural positions, where social conditions exist a priori to

behaviors” (Schmidt). The key to embeddedness is its liminal status: “relationships between the embedded unit and its contextual world are neither fixed nor determinate or directly causal” (Schmidt).

The foregrounding introduced by embeddedness may be taken even further inward, to the primacy of experience itself, more generally human and more phenomenologically proximal than even societal arrangements. Frye refers to such phenomenological primacy as ‘primary concerns’: the need for “food and drink, along with related bodily needs; sex; property (i.e. money, possessions, shelter, clothing, and everything that constitutes property in the sense of what is ‘proper’ to one’s life); liberty of movement” (*Words with Power* 51). Primary concerns, it turns out, are bodily and experiential in nature, becoming the bedrock for ‘the social body’ and everything else about human life. Frye contrasts primary concerns with secondary concerns of social contracts and ideologies, which emerge out of the interaction of individuals and their primary concerns. This creates no false dichotomies between the two, and “there is no real boundary line between them (Frye, *Words with Power* 50): “In origin, primary concerns are not individual or social in reference so much as generic, anterior to the conflicting claims of the singular and the plural” (Frye, *Words with Power* 51). Such a generic and anterior substratum is required to make possible any synthesis between individuals and their communities; it is the anterior position, the common source, that integrates the two. Embeddedness suggests that, rather than being a closing off from the communal, to live more closely in tune with our shared baseline of primary concerns – to be more fully present to our individual lives and surroundings – can be the means to the

communal: “What is true of the individual expands into a society” (Frye, *Words with Power* 123).

To integrate the liminal means to embrace its polar extremes as true and co-extensive, to render such dichotomies as individual-society, inner-outer, subjective-objective as *continuums* rather than contradictions. Akker et al recognise the continuum as the fundamental assumption of oscillation: “To speak of metaxy, thus, is to speak of a movement between (opposite) poles: not a binary so much as a continuum that stretches from one to the other” (*Metamodernism* 11). However, in saying that such a continuum “is not a balance but a pendulum swinging between various extremes,” Akker et al risk confining us to the continuum’s peripheries, to privileging its extremes and becoming caught between binary and continuum (*Metamodernism* 11). A wholehearted acceptance of the continuum over the binary achieves that underlining sense of peace and optimism which undergirds us even in times of uncertainty – without collapsing time or foreclosing movement. Tuinen recognises that, as a continuum, our relations can only be realised by remaining steadfast to a process, a commitment that is aesthetic in nature: “From the earth to the brain, we inhabit a plastic continuum of interdependencies. On each of its levels, networks or planes, consistency isn’t just a matter of subjective attitude or objective structures ... it is produced in and through gestures and acts, the performative coherence of which is aesthetic as much as it is technical” (81). Without traveling by a continuum, which recognises faith in a coming future as well as encouraging embodiment in the present, time becomes a succession of contradictions: the oscillatory in its extreme.

In its pathological form – that is, separated from its underlining existential source – the oscillatory becomes its own greatest enemy, an obsession with the extremes of freedom and possibility which paralyzes itself into immobility, ambivalence, and indecision. Perhaps the ultimate example of such *disintegration* – the antithesis to embeddedness and commitment, a disconnection from all surroundings – might be the famous protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. Dostoevsky’s protagonist is continually doubting and reconstituting himself, unable to find a foundation which he cannot undermine (“I felt them positively swarming in me, these opposite elements”) and achieves a perverse pleasure in his contradictory existence (*Notes from Underground* 54). What becomes clear is that the source of these contradictions is inertia, his critical inwardness becoming no longer purposeful but an end in itself: “the direct, legitimate fruit of consciousness is inertia, that is, conscious sitting-with-the-hands-folded” (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* 64). As the story progresses, the narrative undergoes a tonal shift, becoming less frivolous and more focused in introspection; even as the narrator posits the human “as a frivolous and incongruous creature” which “loves the process of the game, not the end of it,” he goes on to articulate this axiom of freedom to its paradoxical extreme: “it seems there must really exist something that is dearer to almost every man than his greatest advantages, or (not to be illogical) there is a most advantageous advantage ... which is more important and more advantageous than all other advantages, for the sake of which a man if necessary is ready to act in opposition to all laws” (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* 69). What appears necessary, by this estimation, is a broader ethic for his freedom to be nested in – an advantage greater than

his own, a concern with outcomes over and above conscious awareness, a commitment to a cause greater than himself. *Notes from Underground* is often taken as the ultimate in existentialist writing, but more accurately, it exemplifies the paroxysms of the existential when its freedoms are separated from its moral bedrock, its perception of consequence, without which it remains “in that hell of unsatisfied desires – turned inward, in that fever of *oscillations*, of resolutions determined for ever and repented of again a minute later” (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* 60, emphasis added).

2.4. Prophetic Ethics

What many existentialists observe is that in a climate of global precarity and interdependence, the call to individual culpability only intensifies. Frye observes as much in his foregrounding of primary concerns: “All through history secondary concerns have taken precedence over primary ones. The twentieth century, with its nuclear weaponry and its pollution ... may be the first time in history when it is really obvious that primary concerns must become primary, or else” (*Words with Power* 52). By this logic, the primacy of primary concerns is only truer today in the twenty-first century – even as everything has become more networked and interlinked, entangled in globalisation and ecological crises, existentialist thinking appears to on the rise, perhaps as a necessary recompense. Accountability becomes more diffuse, but such a scattering is being met with its equal but opposite force in a radical concentration of responsibility on the part of each individual, ever-receding and impossible to delimit, captured in the illuminating quote by Dostoevsky: “in truth, we are each responsible to all for all ... In truth, perhaps,

I am more than all others responsible for all” (*The Brothers Karamazov* 352). The asymmetry is the mystery here, since every ‘I’ is expected to identify with Dostoevsky’s ‘I’, and yet, to not expect the same of others, for that would undermine the initial ‘I’. While Dostoevsky is usually most recognised for *Notes from Underground*, and its account of an ultimately bleak and bottomless existence, the story is too often taken outside the context of Dostoevsky’s other works, which provide alternatives and solutions to the problems raised in *Notes from Underground*. The character Zosima from *The Brothers Karamazov*, for instance, inspiring the above quote on responsibility, provides a model for radical freedom that is no longer a bottomless abyss but a higher calling to live out the ideal in one’s own life. What the existential unveiling of a radical freedom makes clear is that we are likewise, each of us, burdened with the utmost responsibility for one another. Admitting any degree of creative freedom is likewise an ethical calling to instantiate it in the best possible ways for all around. For this reason, Kierkegaard called our freedom a “trammled freedom,” a freedom we are forced into, not one arrived at by choice (*Dread and Freedom* 105).

Martin Buber recognizes this bounded interplay, between the commitment made freely and the faithful search outwards to make it true, as fate and freedom: “Fate and freedom are promised to each other. Fate is encountered only by him that actualizes freedom ... It is not his limit but his completion; freedom and fate embrace each other to form *meaning*” (102). Buber reveals how a sense of meaning and significance is achieved through a pursuit of freedom that is likewise a responsibility for the future. Meaning – both in the sense of the signification of words, and in the sense of personal significance –

is in some important way the perception of purposefulness and intention. To find an utterance or an event meaningful is to understand the intention behind it, requiring an assumption of agency, an independent life which creatively wills and desires and is not merely symptomatic or reactive. At the bottom of language, Frye's prophetic level, is such an initiative towards intention – the fact of language and expression at all speaks to an intervention in the world, an onwardness, and a capacity for meaning-making and world-building. If the descriptive end of language understands language as wholly reactionary, the prophetic end understands it as wholly intentional. Buber's claim that fate and freedom together form meaning is to say that meaning cannot be achieved without both free intentionality and a bounded embeddedness in the world. To be intentional about one's creative utterances is at the same time to take responsibility for their ripple effects into the future and the lives of others, which makes the utterances meaningful to begin with. Such an intention is personal but also suprapersonal and transpersonal, inasmuch as language has an independent existence from the speaker and therefore its intentionality 'travels.' This co-extensive existence of agency and responsibility is why, in prophetic writing, "what is read exists both *en soi* and *pour soi*, in itself as well as for itself," in the tradition of Sartre's existentialism (Frye, *Words with Power* 113). We cannot be free agents if we are not able to respond to the world, and we cannot respond to the world if we are not free agents; our existence is both separate and networked, in other words, embedded. To become a free agent capable of changing one's surroundings requires first and foremost to believe in the paradox of one's freedom; it is a leap of faith

and a stylistic performance, evident in the recursion that “to gain freedom from the belief in unfreedom is to gain freedom” (Buber 107).

Along with their condemnation of systems, and their call to both radical freedom and radical accountability, existential writers are characterised by one essential attribute: “their perfervid individualism” (Kaufmann 11). The individual, as the prerequisite for agency and therefore responsibility and ethics, is the basis of existentialism; it is not, however, an individualism ending with rampant desire or power, an antagonistic or transactional stance towards the social. The move towards the individual is ultimately the pursuit to achieve *kenosis* at the individual level – only at the level of the individual can the notion of the individual be genuinely turned upon its head, freeing us from atomism or solipsism by locating their roots in the universal within us all. Hence, Frye observes that “a sustained attempt to express primary concerns can develop only in societies where the sense of individuality has also developed” (*Words with Power* 51).

Nowhere is the individual basis of existentialism clearer than in Kierkegaard’s writings. Kierkegaard claims that the experience of disintegration definitive of modernity is due in large part to the commonplace existence of anonymity in daily life, via the press and the media: “anonymity, as the most absolute expression for the impersonal, the irresponsible, the unrepentant, is a fundamental source of the modern demoralization” (“On His ‘Mode of Existence’” 88). Having no connection to the author, no contract of trust between reader and writer inherent to the form, the anonymity of media weakens a sense of responsibility – in both parties – “reducing it to a fraction” (Kierkegaard, “On His ‘Mode of Existence’” 95). The individual must remain an individual for responsibility

to remain, but since all individuals are individual, Kierkegaard's is not an ethos of exceptionalism – to be individual is to be in tune with all. The solution, for Kierkegaard, is neither an isolated solipsism nor the groupthink of the crowd but the maxim to love one's neighbour, an ethos of the local focused on face-to-face relationships and living altruistically, which for him, like for Dostoevsky, is the only genuine and lasting means to a universal ethos:

“the ‘neighbour’ is the absolutely true expression for human equality. In case every one were in truth to love his neighbour as himself, complete human equality would be attained ... this thing of loving one's neighbour is self-denial; that of loving the crowd, or of pretending to love it, of making it the authority in matters of truth, is the way to material power, the way to temporal and earthly advantages of all sorts” (“That Individual” 99).

The move from material advantages to relational ones is recognisably the move inwards through Frye's levels, from objective discourse to social discourse; this move inwards continues, into Kierkegaard's discussion of freedom and his even deeper notion of an existential dread, “the reality of freedom as possibility anterior to possibility” (*Dread and Freedom* 101). Echoing Frye's prophetic mode, dread is the feeling of the never-ending reciprocation between freedom and consequence, choice and responsibility, innocence and guilt: “the transition here from innocence to guilt be correspondingly so dialectical that, whatever it is, it evidently must be psychological, as it ought to be” (Kierkegaard, *Dread and Freedom* 102). Believing it impossible to defer the line between innocence and guilt anywhere else, Kierkegaard concedes the domain of ethics to phenomenology and psychology, a positing of consciousness as ‘conscience’; “Further than this psychology cannot go and will not” (*Dread and Freedom* 105).

In sum, if metamodernism is to recognise oscillation as a natural order, then our perennially liminal status would render us as intermediaries. Responsibility for settling the oscillation is deferred to each of us, and in that dizzying sense of dread and freedom explored by Kierkegaard, we recognise our ever-receding, infinitely traveling, networked responsibility for one another – the urgent need to actualise the possibilities for a better world, locally and practically. Such a call to action appears to be the underlying impulse to the seemingly ludic and creative spontaneity which metamodernity sets out to retrieve. Until the existential underpinning to metamodernism is made evident, however, oscillation will remain purely metaphorical or rhetorical. The ‘aesth-ethical’ impulse undergirding metamodern aestheticism awaits a discourse for its ethical counterpart.

CONCLUSION

In this project, I attempted to characterise metamodernism by a turn towards mobility and myth, towards liminality and betweenness, and the enabling of new possibilities and aspirational horizons. This it has in common with many of the other post-postmodern movements arising in the last decade – a concern most of all with potential, with aspirations, and what amounts to the irreducibility of the present. Recovering the present appears to have been the concern also of the movements that preceded it: modernism and postmodernism had the same revolutionary ethos in their time and place, a search for more abundance where previously it had been delimited. It is difficult, beyond these truisms, to be certain and definite about anything else. What I hope my project has demonstrated is that we can be more consistent with this bottom-up impulse to freedom, and that the works of Northrop Frye, the existentialists and the metamodernists are exceptionally good articulations of what such a consistency might look like, formally and as a lived practice. What I hope is also clear is what metamodernism might need to move beyond its current liminal state – a prophetic aesthetic which enacts its future, and a focus on existential embeddedness, signs of which we might see further along the horizon.

It is worth pointing to a caveat when it comes to the existential tradition, as somehow being ‘a final say.’ If existentialism, as Walter Kaufmann writes, is “the passionate concern with questions that arise from life, the moral pathos, and the firm belief that, to be serious, a philosophy has to be lived,” it is also the case that “analytical philosophers, on the other hand, insist ... that no moral pathos, no tradition, and no views,

however elevated, justify unanalyzed ideas, murky arguments, or a touch of confusion” (51). Existentialism needs its checks and balances like any heuristic; inasmuch as it is a final say, it is only so as a mobilising and motive force for compelling us back into action, analysis, and world. Kaufmann’s “two timeless tendencies” – existentialism and analytics – brings to mind the formal-historical divide, and the constant dynamo across the inner-outer and subjective-objective continuums, and we would do well to leave the open-endedness of existentialism open to foreclosure as well. For the existentialist Jaspers, the path of truth is to be found “in unfanatical absoluteness, in a decisiveness which remains open” (232). As Kaufmann points out, “if the feat of Socrates is really to be repeated and philosophy is to have a future outside the academics, there will have to be philosophers who think in the tension between analysis and existentialism” (51).

Unfortunately, I was not able to arrive at a practiced reading of these theories in metamodern literature, which was one of the initial premises of this project. The writings of David Foster Wallace, the poetry of Seth Abramson, and the anthology *YOLO Pages* have all been recognised as metamodern works, and would make good launching points for carrying out the theories laid out here. To what extent could an existential embeddedness be recovered as the driving impulse undergirding these texts? To what extent are their aesthetic practices fundamentally moral in nature, without necessarily being recursions into rhetoric or ideology and all the trappings of a dogmatic position? More broadly, via a Fryean literary theory and with recourse to the existentialists, what further work could we do in outlining an ethical substructure to aesthetic and literary

practices – again, while avoiding reductions that delimit the aesthetic? These are some of the questions which are left unanswered and could be pursued in further work.

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