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Shared Tensions: High Modernist Poetry as the Precursor of Extreme Metal Artists' Cultural
Engagement and Critique

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of English

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Jacob Mensinger

May 2021

Dedication

Dedicated to Helen and Gary Mensinger, for always standing by me, and for teaching me the meaning of Faith, both in myself and others. I love you, Nana and Uncle Gary.

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Nothing in this document could have come to fruition without the constant support of my peers and mentors at West Chester University.

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Abstract

The first half of the 20th century is one characterized by the fatigue of war, as World War I came to a close, the rising tension that would eventually explode into World War II overwhelmed the aesthetics of art and culture. Poets and musicians have responded to this anxiety through their art. Where modernist poets' work responded to the stresses of living through such trying times, musicians across the genre of heavy metal have responded to a continuing atmosphere of western conflict, from nuclear proliferation and the civilization ending threat of the Cold War, to the Vietnam and Korean Wars, and the conflict in the Middle East. Additionally, the industrial and technological shifts that would take place across the century changed the speed and cultural orientation of western society, which many artists have struggled to accept. This common unrest informs numerous points of contact between these genres, with heavy metal echoing modernists through a proletarian, rebellious image and high modernists through the composition of their lyrical and instrumental work, the romance with mythological allusion in the content of their art, and an often direct and multi-faceted response to socio-political discord. These reactions to cultural and political strife strongly inform each of these artforms, causing heavy metal artists, particularly those working under the genre umbrella of "extreme metal", to engage in a similar cultural ecosystem as high modernists, despite the distinction made between them by certain traditionalist forces in scholarship. In spite of this canonical differentiation, the similarities between these genres demonstrate the potential of low and popular cultural to engage with historical and cross-cultural material. Additionally, these points of contact draw attention to the socially and academically enriching properties of extreme metal, while also reminding us of both movement's problematic elements.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the shadow of World War I, poetry took a distinct shape in America. High modernist poets infatuated with politics and mythology produced works that were obsessed by the rapidly changing world that surrounded them. As World War II ensued, the world continued to transform, entering into a global political and military paradigm that would play a pivotal role in defining the art of the second half of the 20th century. Constantly open to the war-torn world stage of the 1960's and forward with the onset of the Vietnam and Korean War and the ever-present threat of nuclear obliteration during the Cold War, modernist and high modernist poets expressed the fear and tension through which they lived as socially and artistically disruptive approaches to form and content. As the years dragged on, however, these cultural tensions that modernist poets addressed began to be expressed through different mediums. Many of the themes and subjects remained the same – mythology, war, mortality – but the poet's lyrics came to be backed by changes in form, diction, and meter as well as thunderous drum rolls and electrical, distorted chords. It is my contention that the anxiety experienced by modernist poets influenced the evolution of a popular musical genre, heavy metal, that shares a similar aesthetic core: it has since come to express that underlying, apocalyptic, wartime anxiety with a rush of post-industrial sound seemingly alien to its predecessor in poetry, but encompassing many of the same interests, orientation, and thematic content.

Key to the content of American modernism is the social and chronological positioning of the poets as they wrote their work, and the environment that propagated the kind of art they created. Peter Howarth, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry*, answers the question of what exactly influenced modernism as movement. He writes:

The broadest answer is that many felt there was something badly unbalanced about 'normal' life itself, if by normal we mean industrialised, Western modernity, with its timetables, empires, machines, bureaucracies and banks. Despite the 'modern' in 'modernism', a good number of its artists felt contemporary civilisation was a recipe for personal and social disintegration, which is why the new art had to upset the status quo. [...] With the divorce of mind and body in a rationalised culture [...] come individuals self-protective to the core, unable to know what they feel, or to feel for anyone else: the anonymous crowd and the petty individual are both aspects of the same problem. To the second-generation modernist David Jones, it was a society where ends dominated means. (10-11)

Howarth notes an industrialized, socially destructive paradigm as a critical element of modernist motivation. In a world concerned entirely with power and production ('ends'), the heart and soul of the laborer, the citizen, and the artist ('means') are left to decay. It is this disassociation with and abandonment by the social structure which at least partially spurred modernists to "upset the status quo". Since the first generations of modernism, industrialization has become no less omnipresent, leading musicians of the present day to face many of the same social challenges as the modernists of the 20th Century. From World War I, to the Cold War, all the way to seemingly continuous western intervention in the Middle East, the confluence of industry and war have been a frank reality for artists across generations for over a century. With that in mind, it is little wonder that contemporary metal musicians react similarly to many social and cultural tensions that modernists faced in the early 20th century.

Also key to this discussion is a working understanding of the elements of modernism beyond its positioning around World War I and II. In the introduction to *High Modernism*:

Aestheticism and Performativity in Literature of the 1920s, Joshua Kavaloski looks to define the specifics of modernism and high modernism as literary and cultural movements.

[T]he 1920s was the period when modern literature entered a central or mainstream phase that largely renounced the caustic and destructive spirit of the avant-garde, according to the narrative of many literary historians. [...] For Lewis and other like-minded scholars, the prewar avant-garde is an early stage of modernist literature that began in the late nineteenth century and continued until the end of the First World War. It encompasses diverse historical schisms such as symbolism, aestheticism, and decadence as well as futurism, vorticism and expressionism. For its part, late modernist literature emerges in the 1930s in response to the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe. It is often characterized as satirical and overtly political. Although the term “high modernism” clearly contains semantic slippage, both primary associations—aesthetically refined literary works which were published during the early interwar period. There is therefore an implicit yet widespread understanding that high modernism involves the artistic culmination of modern literature during the 1920s. (1-2)

According to Kavaloski, high modernism is less of a distinct movement and more of a term to specify certain elements and shifts within modernism as a whole. His point that high modernism “involves the artistic culmination of modern literature during the 1920s” (2) helps to elucidate his point. While modernism as a whole is concerned with renouncing or disrupting particular traditions or literary movements, high modernism is the movement at its “peak”, or at its most culturally saturated, “culminating” the various elements of the movement during the 1920s. Because of this, it refers often to the most canon of the modernists, who contend the most often with the intellectual aspects of the movement. Though the “lower” modernist movement informs

certain aesthetic elements that are important to my analysis (specifically the proletarian, working class point of contact it shares with heavy metal musicians), I have chosen to close read works written by high modernist American and British poets between the years of 1910 and 1950, most specifically e. e. cummings, H.D., T.S. Eliot, Mina Loy, and Ezra Pound. I have chosen to focus on these high modernist's works because of their intellectual and abstract elements, especially in those pieces that contend with the direct effects of World Wars I and II, and many of the technological and socio-economic changes that precipitated from them.

In pursuit of this topic and given the scarcity of academic discussion surrounding underground metal music, becoming acquainted with relevant terminology is critical. The definition of the music I will be using also requires some demarcation of the social and structural elements that inform them. "Rock and roll" is a broad term that encompasses electric, guitar based music and a focus on percussion from 1960 to the present, and serves as a contextualizing genre to the heavy metal genres I will be exploring. As heavy metal is in many ways a more rebellious and counter-cultural outgrowth of rock and roll, it warrants noting that its form and content helped to inspire much of heavy metal's enduring musical strategies.

"Heavy metal" refers to another subject of rock and roll that evolved in the late 1960's which is characterized by heavy, complex composition and aggressive percussion. Similar to another pre-cursor genre, "punk rock", heavy metal concerns itself with rebellious, combative themes, but across a broader spectrum of subjects. Keith Kahn-Harris mentions that among metal scholarship, there is "no unanimity of terminology" but that the sub-genre of "extreme metal" specifically refers to "black metal, death metal or thrash metal" (9). In addition to this, I would also consider "doom metal" a piece of the extreme metal scene, especially in the case of more abstract, conceptually laden bands. Other relevant genres include "folk metal" and "power

metal”, which are important for their inclusion of cross-cultural mythology and fantastical themes. Notably, while each of these sub-genres primarily refers to certain formative elements (such as their approach to music writing, tone, and sound), each one has certain pre-dispositions towards lyrical content as well, such as death metal’s engagement with mortality, or black metal’s exploration of evil and anti-Christian themes. Present in my argument specifically for the close relationship of their allusive and intellectual content are the folk metal band Eluveitie, the death metal band Amon Amarth, the doom metal band SUNN O))), and the black metal artists Gorgoroth and Burzum. These artists are chiefly western European, being principally from Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway, though SUNN O))) is from the United States. It is also important to note that they are all roughly contemporary, becoming active from the early to late 90’s, and each of them except for Burzum is still active. Following these artists, though I will often use heavy metal as a general term (seeing as my discussion will often intersect with broader metal history), the content and form of extreme metal is my foremost concern.

This relationship between music and literature exists within a cultural ecosystem that regards these artforms very differently from one another. While the study of high modernist poets across the world is grouped in with an intellectual discipline, heavy metal exists as an element of pop culture that is often defined by academics as being separate from the focus of their criticism. This phenomenon applies to other genres as well, with Mikita Brottman of Oxford University introducing the concept of separate cultures by writing “The identity of any form of culture as an intellectual discipline has always been dependent for its existence on the Other that occupies the space outside the academic enclosure” (XI). By this definition, academia plays a significant role in demarcating the differences between cultural content by separating these texts via traditions of scholarly inquiry. Brottman, on this subject, also writes:

Moreover, of course, the very label itself, “popular culture,” needs a fixed scale of differentiation in order to exist, since it is mostly defined in terms of what it is not—opera, theater, poetry, classical music, and so on. And yet it is well known that writers such as Samuel Richardson, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and James Fenimore Cooper have now been accorded “classic” status, despite their one-time popularity and their use of such “low” cultural tools as melodrama, scandal, burlesque, stereotype, and violent action. The “classic” status of these writers is now defended through reference to the familiar terms of literary criticism (structure, irony, tragic consciousness, and so on) and, ultimately, through their association with other “literary” figures and artifacts. (XII)

Through Brottman’s analysis, it is easier to reckon the fashion by which “high” and “low” culture have a socio-academically enforced structure of identification. Concerned, understandably, with the stability of a literary canon, scholars historically safeguard the status of certain texts as being academically relevant. Other works, such as the genres noted by Brottman, and heavy metal specifically, while not regarded as culturally irrelevant, do not traditionally fall beneath this canonical umbrella. Wrapped up in the minutia of canonization, however, is an implicit focus on categorization by perception of value. Though it is not the intention of demarcations of high and low culture to imply an inherently more relevant or valuable cultural contribution, by critically positioning certain texts academically, those texts become privileged for engagement and criticism. In this light it is important, especially in advance of this protracted engagement with extreme metal, that we fully consider and engage with the intellectual content of what some may categorize as “low culture”, and all of its cross-pollination and intertextuality with traditionally high cultural texts.

Among these forthcoming considerations, key to the foundations of this discussion is the literary academic focus on high culture and low culture. Through this examination of two apparently disparate artforms, I hope to underscore the importance of re-evaluating the process of criticism and canonization in literature and media. A frequently occurring phenomenon is rather to pick and choose more populist, proletarian works for “elevation” to high culture. Rather than approach extreme metal in a similar fashion, I hope to elucidate how some of these cultural boundaries serve to cramp any criticism of texts across media. Disregarding the cultural effects of a genre such as extreme metal leaves us ill-equipped to address the social and academic context which it influences and draws influence from in turn. In this vein, I will address what puts metal on the fringes of media and study while modernist poetry, a movement that has much in common with it, is closely regarded as part of the canon of English literature. By drawing upon the similarities between a set of canonical texts and a cultural movement that is more of an outlier, we can see that these “different levels” of culture echo each other in key ways, and ignoring one such movement in favor of another arbitrarily robs us of clearer cultural understanding.

Chapter 2

The Mechanics of Modernity; Post-war, Post-industrial Sound, and Taking Pleasure in Disruption

Crucial to an understanding of the link between high modernist poetry and extreme metal music is an awareness that both are defined by their placement in “modern” historical and cultural contexts. These contexts are heavily defined by a sense of constant social and technological change, especially related to the rapid and transformative progress in post-industrial societies. Contributing to this link between the two artforms is the concept which Tim Armstrong, professor of Modern English at the University of London terms “Sonic Modernity”. This idea includes the development of recorded sound, a fundament of musical technology that intrinsically influences our relationship to sound. To underscore this, Armstrong considers the implication of recording music in his article titled “Player Piano: Poetry and Sonic Modernity”. In that discussion, he writes:

Music carries the secret history of the self. Helmholtz thus has a conception of music, I would argue—and I am aware that this is simplifying a complex body of thought—in which the mechanical and ideal interlock around the notion of resonance and tone: tone is embodied music; feeling can be carried across time by music. If the interlocking of these ideas can appear forced, it is into the gap between them—between recording and production—that the pianola might be inserted. The player piano is important because the piano provides, as we have already seen, a way of thinking about tone and resonance which is tuned to the human apparatus, and because it is a device which offers to store a transcription of the human response to the world of the kind suggested by Schopenhauer.

(7)

Armstrong's discussion gets to the heart of how modernity affects sonic artforms like poetry and music, and by extension their engagement with modernism as a literary and aesthetic movement. The consideration of recorded sound as being intrinsically modern in nature drives us to consider the role of sound in both genres.

Both music and poetry have influence over their audience when spoken or played aloud that they do not have otherwise, especially being that music's entire purpose to be heard, while often poetry's visual appearance can lend it power. However, Armstrong's notion of the "player piano" calls to attention the nature of technology, with recorded sound providing a chronologically alien interface with a concept: to listen to the "transcription" of a song, or even a poem, provides an anachronistic look at the content thereof, which transcends even the subject matter. In essence, where poetry finds its link to the modern in its depiction on a page, music finds that link in the nature of its recording, an element of the production process that metal musicians often use to great effect. In considering the role of this technology, it becomes important to note how modern tools drive the techniques used by high modernist poets. Though much high modernist and extreme metal artistic content is concerned with criticism of modernity, each artform uses distinctly modern tools for the purposes of transcription. The poet may use printed type or audio recording, while metal musicians use various electrical amplifiers, and sometimes digital editing and production tools to achieve certain sounds or fidelities. This renders each artform intrinsically modern, as they use implements only available in a post-industrial, modern setting. This helps to underscore the tension of their work, as they make use of tools that are elements of the modern paradigm in order to critique it, and in doing so become part of the anachronistic and abstractly modern aesthetic which Armstrong describes.

Sam Halliday discusses some of the musical history that has led to the development of modern music as a whole. His thoughts on the subject are applicable to my forthcoming dissection of extreme metal's intentionally dissonant tones and difficult sounds, especially insofar as it is relevant to the artistic details used by such musicians in recording and producing. In chapter four of *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts*, Halliday defines "tonality" as "the principle ubiquitous throughout much of western musical history, whereby each piece of music is governed by or written 'in' a given key or sequence thereof" (125). He goes on to note that the extreme ubiquity of tonality in music has obscured the fact that it is in every capacity an artificial restriction enforced by culture. According to Halliday, as far as music itself is a cultural product, conventional tonality must be part of its composition. Many metal and punk rock musicians at least attempt to actively defy the tonality which Halliday here describes, with artists such as Burzum and Gorgoroth working with seriously distorted electrical amplification that obscures the notation of their music. This defiance takes place across several extreme metal sub-genres and is one of the key pieces of the artform's rebelliousness. Moreover, while this tonal shift is a uniquely sonic manifestation of the artist's intentions, it is notable that poets practiced a similar rebellion against traditional form through the structure of their poetry.

From this discussion of modernity's mechanical impact on these artforms, it is important to consider how the aesthetics of disruption and transgression are informed by the tensions of modernity, and by extension what links extreme metal to modernism in general. Kahn-Harris argues:

Transgression is one way of surviving the fraught experience of modernity. It is one of the few sources of almost unrestricted agency in modernity. While modernity

disempowers individuals within alienating systems and structures, transgression allows individuals to feel utterly in control, utterly ‘sovereign’ (Bataille 1993) over their being through practices that resist instrumental rationality. (...) whereas pre-modern societies contained spaces for transgression, such as the carnival, transgression has been pushed to the margins of society in modernity. This marginalization has made transgression all the more alluring and consequently all the more threatening. Transgression can produce complete exclusion from mainstream society, and those who practise it risk state and other surveillance. At the same time, the opposite process also occurs in which transgression is assimilated to the point where it is no longer transgressive. (158)

This aesthetic of transgression that Kahn-Harris describes isolates the comforting impulse that motivates it. “[T]ransgression allows individuals to feel utterly in control, utterly ‘sovereign’ over their being through practices that resist instrumental reality” (158). This transgression allows artists to engage in a process of reclaiming art for themselves from within a broader, ever modernizing cultural context. Though this transgression exists at its most aggressive in extreme metal, it is also a motivating force behind high modernist poetry as well, as we will see.

Following the discussion of recording, tone, and transgression, a close reading of written poetry and recorded music shows that American high modernist poets were similar to extreme metal musicians in the shared eccentricity of their work. The unusual eras of their work contributed to a conscious breaking of tradition, and a concentrated effort to disturb their readers and listeners, either by jostling established form, or by creating and organizing uncomfortable content. Take “timeless” (1961), by e. e. cummings, for example.

timeless

ly this

(merely and whose
not

numerable leaves are
fall
i
ng)he

StandS

lift
ing against the
shrieking

sky such one

ness as
con
founds

all itcreating winds

One of cummings' more extreme examples, "timeless" defies all but the vaguest notion of structural coherence, demanding a close and careful reading to apprehend. The incredibly short stanzas that break often and divide words create a stilted, strange, and unpleasant effect. Combined with this is the imagery of the content, of a man standing amid "shrieking" winds and falling leaves. With "timeless", cummings conveys a sense of anxiety that goes beyond the imagery of wind and decay, impacting the reader at the very first level of perception. Simply to look at the format of the poem is to feel some level of discomfort, as it rebels against traditional formal considerations and aesthetic pleasure.

cummings' active shirking of traditional form mirrors the defiance of tonality that is present in extreme metal music. Take for example the black metal movement from the mid 1990's, which embraced a low-fidelity recording quality and levels of electrical distortion that make the music itself very difficult to listen to, especially for those who are not accustomed to

the sub-genre. Even upon closer inspection of the instrumentation of the bands black metal artists such as Gorgoroth and Burzum, a key feature is a consistent use of minor chords in the guitar composition. This generates an intentionally difficult listening experience, as minor chords create a downward, depressing, or even threatening sound that bucks traditional tonality, even among other extreme metal sub-genres. Combined with traditional aspects of heavy metal including dense composition and screaming vocals, it is not uncommon at all for the casual listener to find black metal extremely unappealing or even unlistenable. In the same way that high modernist poets buck tradition as a form of social rebellion and more accurate expression of their central idea, extreme metal rejects musical tradition and tonality, and by doing so even sometimes repels potential mainstream listeners. By doing this, extreme metal musicians attempt to ensure that those engaging with their work are willing to confront its difficulty and meaningfully interface with it, and perhaps even enjoy it for that same difficulty.

This delineation of visual format into an auditory medium reflects the fashion in which modernist art often bears an intertextual relationship to its most closely related genres and other artforms. In her introduction to Chapter Three of *Relational Designs in Literature and the Arts: Page and Stage, Canvas and Screen*, Teresa Louro addresses this phenomenon early in her writing on visual elements in modernism. She argues, “Within the social, cultural, and political *milieu* of the early decades of the twentieth century, avant-garde aesthetics are [...] characterized by a tendency to transgress demarcations between genres and disciplines. The literary text is a visual object. Poetry provokes and allows for acoustic and sensory representations” (215). Here, she addresses the sensory role of these modernist artforms, noting that text is a “visual object” before it serves any other role. This visuality is precisely the phenomenon we can identify in Cummings’ work, with a striking and unique appearance that knowingly sets itself apart from

more traditional poetic writing. Louro, for her part, asserts that this understanding of sense in art causes a natural overlap between genres of modernist art, which she refers to as “rich cross fertilization” (215).

Louro’s critique of aesthetics and the avant-garde apply also to the sonic nature of cummings’ writing. To perform “timeless” aloud for an audience is a matter of practice and familiarity, as the poem’s unconventional approach to rhythm defies the application of traditional meter to any reading of the poem. As his division of the poem pulls the syntax apart while words crash together on the page, the speaker is challenged to maintain the musicality of a poetic reading. Such a reading of “timeless” is typically stilted and awkward by necessity and the poet’s design, due to the relational design that Louro points out as being vital to the high modernists’ transgression of traditional style. The visual layout of a poem also contributes to a reader’s understanding of its rhythm, meter, and musicality. By defying the reader’s expectations on a visual level with “timeless”, Cummings is also disrupting the expectations of any audience or speaker on a sonic level. This example of cummings’ poetry blurs the lines of demarcation between the visual and the auditory by sounding very similar to how it appears.

Considering sensory response to art in the manner that Louro describes, there are other potent examples to draw from. “Patriarchal Poetry” (1927) by Gertrude Stein is one such model, being a poem many pages in length with an organizational theme that consists of constant repetition and a stream-of-consciousness voice. This voice seems to adopt a continuous affect, which by the visual format of the poem alone, goes on for long periods of repetition with no punctuation, with no apparent traditional structure or format in its composition. A brief excerpt from the poem follows thusly:

Let her be to be to be to be let her be to be to be let her to be let her to be let her be to be
when is it that they are shy.

Very well to try.

Let her be that is to be let her be that is to be let her be let her try.

Let her be let her be let her be to be to be shy let her be to be let her be to be let her try.

Let her try.

Let her be let her be let her be let her be to be to be let her be let her try.

To be shy. (120)

Stein's poetry can here be seen drawing upon the same kind of transgression and discomfort as Cummings with "timeless", but she summons it to generate a somewhat different effect.

"Patriarchal Poetry" is visually striking, but rather than the scarcity of type that Cummings evoked, Stein utterly overwhelms the eye with a vast sea of repeated phrases and words, "let her be" and "let her try", choosing very specific moments of the poem to convey new ideas with different words, especially noting the change "to be shy", at the very end of the quote. Also in contrast to "timeless", "Patriarchal Poetry" is dauntingly long at roughly forty pages. This distinct style of presentation challenges the reader to apprehend the poem in its entirety, to search for the unique thoughts in a swamp of repetitive diction. By engaging with this style of poetry, Stein is adopting a constant tension, while the language "let her be let her be let her be" emphasizes a quandary of existence, communicating the phrase as though instilling urgency. In this fashion, "Patriarchal Poetry" is a rebellious piece that uses repetitive aesthetics to simulate the experience of a woman navigating a patriarchal environment or experience, seemingly begging simply for the chance to exist, or to act on her own merit.

Stein makes use of very specific elements of craft and choices to achieve this effect. First and foremost, she pushes the outer boundaries of free verse and its traditional definition. Even by the standards of a poetic tradition with no particular rules or restraints, Stein's poem is a transgressive explosion of seeming randomness. With "stanzas" that are at times very brief, while other times taking up full pages of the anthologies that reprint them, "Patriarchal Poetry" is

apparent in its attempt to frustrate a casual reading, first requiring that the reader accept its visually confusing style before it can be fully digested. Provided the reader can bear to read it closely, they will rapidly find that punctuation is only used strategically, with long strings of repetition pervading every corner of the poem. “Let her be to be to be to be let her be to be to be let her to be let her to be let her be to be when is it that they are shy.” Only occasionally does Stein present a concise thought to her audience. “Very well to try” (120). A competent reading involves both reading and understanding many of the poem’s longest and confusing diatribes, but also locating and digesting these shorter sentences. This style also interferes with any attempt to read the poem out loud. An apparent absence of rhythmic structure and a use of punctuation only to separate different series of repetition or demarcate poetic climaxes should make verbal recitation grueling and difficult to execute correctly, let alone to follow along with.

Some of the techniques used by Stein and Cummings are common to heavy metal as well, as it partakes of many of the same themes and ideological concerns as high modernism. Rather than the visual nature of text, heavy metal translates the uncomfortable visual stimulus of the foregoing poetry into an auditory experience. Extreme metal bands are especially prone to engaging in this structural rebellion. Take for example SUNN O))), and their song “It Took the Night to Believe” (2005). The song is characterized by almost torturously repetitive guitar riff writing, accompanied by no percussion. Meanwhile, the words “vibrate”, “believe”, and the phrase “cry yourself to ash” are re-used and repeated throughout the song, as if to leave the listener with more of a vague impression than a detailed idea of the music’s content or inspiration. This arduous instrumental is broken up solely by extremely low-fidelity spoken-word lyrics and screams that use stereoscopic mixing to sound different in each of the listener’s ears. In some ways, SUNN O)))’s songwriting can be construed as a challenge not just to traditional

musical structure, but a defiance to musicality itself. The defiance of the audience's expectations of traditional tonality and musicality creates a sense of unfamiliarity and discomfort, conveying a sense of sheer auditory anxiety.

"It Took the Night to Believe" applies musical equivalents of the techniques used by Stein to frustrate readers with "Patriarchal Poetry". Most obviously, the sheer volume of repetition present in each work achieves similar effects. Where such phrases as "Let her be" are common to the extreme in Stein's piece, "cry yourself to ash" repeats incessantly throughout SUNN O)))'s more contemporary analogue. Stein's use of a visually overwhelming style translates to the feelings of auditory unease created by constant and oppressive guitar playing, creating a drone that overwhelms the audience's senses similarly to getting lost in the sheer length and breadth of "Patriarchal Poetry". Moreover, the utter lack of percussion in "It Took the Night to Believe" can be compared to Stein's sparing use of punctuation. More common punctuation would allow the reader an easier sense of the poem's rhythm, which Stein cleverly denies. Similarly, the musicians of SUNN O))) understand that the beat of a drum or the crash of a cymbal functions as a release of tension for the audience, and permits no such relief. They opt instead to allow the guitar playing to build tension throughout the song. This droning sound echoes the repetitive diction of Stein's writing, where such lines as "Let her be to be to be to be let her be to be" create similar, unrelieved tension and anxiety. As noted with extreme metal previously, both of these pieces challenge the audience to continue engaging, and seek out readers and listeners with a taste for difficulty. A patient or experienced audience can extract the meaning in the choices made by Stein or SUNN O))), and identify how these abrasive styles of writing and playing contribute to the piece's message or ideology.

In similar fashion as it echoes the unbroken build-up of anxiety in “Patriarchal Poetry”, the constant atmospheric noise generated across different sub-genres in metal also simulates the poetic technique of “enjambment”. Enjambment is the continuation of sentences beyond traditional ending points such as lines, stanzas, couplets, or other climactic structural elements. In Cummings’ foregoing poetry, enjambment is used extremely liberally and in active defiance of typical poetic structure. For example, from *Timeless*: “timeless/ly this/(merely and whose/not/numerable leaves are/fall/i/ng)/StandS” (1-12). Here, Cummings uses extreme enjambment to divide a single thought across nine lines and 4 stanzas. For him, this technique manifested in the poem as an utter disregard for “traditional ending points”, much less any sort of emotional or structural climax. By using enjambment, Cummings creates a more difficult reading experience for his audience to navigate, defying the poetic elements with which he knows his readers are familiar with. Artists such as SUNN O))) use continuous sound to achieve a similar effect, where oral recitation produces a continuous through line, building the audience’s emotional response and constantly stimulating the senses. This constant stimulation is informed by its atmospheric quality and the constant repetition of instrumental content. Because of this repetition, SUNN O))) creates an auditory equivalent of the “white space” which Cummings exploits with “timeless”. In audiences of both poetry and music, such techniques provoke an unbroken conscious engagement with the content of the work, serving to build and release tension strategically at the behest of the artist.

Eliza Rodriguez touches on a term for this vein of techniques in “‘Tat Your Black Holes into Paradise’: Lorna Dee Cervantes and a Poetics of Loss.” During her analysis, she terms the effect of such choices “poetic deferral”, on account of its effect of delaying and procrastinating a poem’s climactic content, putting off crescendos and turns in favor of a dragging, continuous

interface with the sound and image of the text. By doing this, the content of the poem defers meaning and interpretation (144). On the effects of such a strategy, she writes:

This strategy of poetic deferral is created by both poetic form, the manipulations of enjambments and of the apostrophe, as well as content, the structuring tropes of love and hunger that embody recurring cycles of want and fulfillment. This deferral of certainty helps conceptualize historical loss and portray the absence of a clear, unbroken relationship to the past; yet rather than monumentalizing the dead, the poetry reimagines the significance of such a loss. (139)

According to Rodriguez, the application of poetic deferral is effective in creating a symbolic relationship with the historical, specifically “embody[ing] recurring cycles of want and fulfillment” (139). This theme resonates with the modernist elements that are present in World War I and II era poetry as well as contemporary extreme metal. The rejection of the traditional in both artforms, as well as a conscious disruption of experiential expectations in their audiences, reflects an anxiety about the cyclical nature of history and global events. It is for this reason that modernists produced such anxious texts, while metal musicians for their part create work that is aggressive and unfriendly. The overwhelming atmosphere and continuous oppression of the audience’s senses generates a tension and emotional response that echoes the angst experienced by both high modernist poets and metal musicians, living in the shadow of war and social collapse.

Rodriguez’s definition of these techniques as embodying recurring cycles and feelings of desire links the structure of modernist poetry to its thematic content. The anxious times in which high modernists and contemporary artists live inspire them, and for many artists, create a tension that is reminiscent of past civilization’s triumphs and struggles. To this end, the very anxiety of

societal collapse which these artists experience draws their work towards allegory and myth, focusing on the friction and disruption that is caused by ideological and physical conflict. These forms of conflict each have been experienced by these artists, and are channeled further by their transformation into mythological narrative, which these authors and musicians use to represent their own experiences through allegory. For the high modernist poet, this penchant for allusion manifests itself as an infatuation and identification with mythical figures such as Eurydice in the Orphic tradition of Greek myth, or Thor throughout Norse mythology, or various aesthetics within J.R.R. Tolkien's fictive mythology. Furthermore, this identification comes with a tendency towards the disruption and re-imagination of such figures to fit the context of the artist's lives and inspirations. By a similar token, the shadows of war and omnipresent social disruption in contemporary times draw metal musicians, already given to a violent and over-the-top style of performance, to tales of legendary conflicts throughout mythological environments. In each case, by re-telling and adapting these myths to formats that attend an ever-evolving performative paradigm, these artists re-contextualize and re-energize myth and tradition over time via the unique, contemporary structures of their arts.

Chapter 3

Mythologizing Modernity

The function of mythological allusion in literature and popular culture serves the audience with a pre-existing sign, which they can apprehend as they engage with the work. This interaction allows the audience to draw meaning from the sign alluded to, or to make contact with it for the first time in many cases. Andrew Scheil of the University of Minnesota discusses the role of mythological allusion in western culture. In *Babylon Under Western Eyes: A Study of Allusion and Myth*, Scheil introduces several components of allusion while discussing what he terms the “Matter of Babylon”.

I use three key terms to describe the dynamic mechanisms of the Babylon myth in this study: displacement, adaptation, and transformation. I will often speak of ‘displaced’ Babylons or ‘displaced elements’ of the Babylon myth. *Displacement* refers to the way “mythical structures continue to give shape to the metaphors and rhetoric of later types of structure,’ [...] The process of *adaptation* allows elements of the displaced Babylon myth to replicate across centuries, cultures, and local environments [...] and finally, *transformation* is a useful term for the “result” of the process begun by displacement and adaptation, because the word “transformation” suggests a result that encompasses both continuity and change. When a cultural tradition is transformed, it implies not a replacement or an utterly new genesis, but rather the incorporation of the old into a new configuration, the retention of prior structures in new forms. (5-6)

Scheil capably distills the most important elements of allusion and its function with this analysis. Displacement, adaptation, and transformation are each discussions of the placement of myths and other old traditions into new contexts. With displacement, myths and other alluded-to texts

remain relevant in contemporary culture, giving shape to figurative language through the application of their themes and meanings. Through adaptation, artists “replicate” myths through the creative use of different contexts, recreating mythical traditions with new settings and elements. Finally, transformation refers to the re-configuration of the myth as a sign, and the fashion in which moving the elements of an allusion to a new medium change the allusion itself. Scheil’s discussion of allusion will be a useful tool in dissecting how modernists and musicians both have incorporated mythology into their works.

High modernist American poets were often known to weave mythological threads into their writing. Indeed, there seems to have been a thrumming fascination with pagan mythologies and faiths that affected poets such as H.D., who often channeled Greek myth into her writing, most notable in “Eurydice” (1903). An excerpt from section VI of the poem follows:

Against the black
 I have more fervour
 than you in all the splendour of that place,
 against the blackness
 and the stark grey
 I have more light;

and the flowers,
 if I should tell you,
 you would turn from your own fit paths
 toward hell,
 turn again and glance back
 and I would sink into a place
 even more terrible than this. (1-14)

H. D. uses the mythic figure of Eurydice as an examination of struggle and change, evoking the modernist’s wartime anxiety by embodying Eurydice’s reflection in hell. H. D.’s Eurydice stands resolute in the face of forces that are long since out of her control, both her condemnation to the underworld and the realities of her new existence. This reconciliation in the face of despair

mirrors the circumstances under which H. D. writes, enduring the global trauma of World War I as well as the mounting tension of the forthcoming conflict. With “Eurydice”, we see a clear example of allusive transformation. By purposefully inhabiting a mythological structure, H. D. explores the sense of uncertainty that permeated modern life at the time of her writing. However, the use of a pre-defined narrative with a certain ending indicates a desire for security, and comparing the myth of Eurydice to contemporary events, H. D. conveys to her audience a sense of certainty, and perhaps even hope in the face of inevitable adversity. Additionally, the repositioning of Orpheus, the traditional center of the Orphic myth, and recontextualizing that center as his lover Eurydice is a knowing subversion of the audience’s expectations. Via this subversion, H. D. executes a transformation of the myth by re-telling it from an alternative perspective, and perhaps changing the audience’s perceptions of its events and characters. In addition, it allows the audience to experience the Orphic tradition from an alternative perspective, in particularly the role of an otherwise supporting female character.

Modern heavy metal musicians demonstrate a great interest in mythological narratives as well. The Swiss folk metal band Eluveitie incorporates a vast breadth of Celtic myth into their music. This includes songs like “Tarvos” (2008), which narrates the myth of its namesake. By a similar token, the Swedish death metal band Amon Amarth occupies their discography entirely with Norse myth, building retellings of the stories Ragnarök into modern narratives and musical critiques. Heather Lusty, who often writes about the links between heavy metal and classical literature, asserts that heavy metal has deep ties to the bildungsroman, the coming-of-age story. This link between the two is predicated upon the fantastic, and the development of the genre itself reflects it. On this subject, Lusty argues:

The development of heavy metal is closely aligned to this arc. Rising after the age of the superpower, in which Western civilization was highly developmental, metal musicians considered themselves highly evolved in a “humanistic state of liberal democracy which benefitted the individual more than any system previously on record.” In contrast to the “peace” movement of the post-war era that embraced pacifism and egalitarian individualism (its own counterculture movement), metal music emphasized morbidity and glorified ancient civilizations as well as heroic struggles. (103)

Lusty’s analysis of the psychology behind metal’s use of myth illustrates the medium’s use of disruption via allusion. Through the adaptive element of allusion, extreme metal is able to exult and celebrate the heroic struggles of figures and paradigms that they view as being ancestral to them, or at least as having deeply identified with. In a sense, metal’s re-telling and re-cycling of mythological elements allows artists to re-contextualize and re-imagine contemporary struggles through the lens of legendary triumph and struggle. Both high modernist poetry and extreme metal follow this arc in the fashion that Lusty suggests, stipulating on the mythological by idealizing narratives of the past.

Amon Amarth is an example of an extreme metal band that bases their entire identity and presentation on the practice of allusion. With a heavy focus on Norse mythology and culture, the band’s music examines experiences of morbidity and death, drawing strength and confidence from the mythical tradition’s focus on conflict. Among their most well-known music is “Twilight of the Thunder God” (2008), a death metal ballad which re-tells the story of Thor’s death in battle. “Thor! Oden's son, protector of mankind/Ride to meet your fate, your destiny awaits/Thor! Hlödyn's son, protector of mankind/Ride to meet your fate, Ragnarök awaits” (Hegg 1:00). The chorus of the song drives home a distinctly celebratory aspect of the god’s

passing, and a security in the knowledge that such a death is the work of fate. In this fashion, Amon Amarth's widespread adaptation of Norse culture to an unorthodox musical medium can be viewed as a grasp for power, agency, and security during an uncertain contemporary period. By invoking the mythological structure of Ragnarök in songs like "Twilight of the Thunder God", they consciously examine a struggle and death which is prophesized and anticipated. Rather than feeding the morbid anxiety which is the motivation for much of this art, the artists instead embrace it, and take comfort in the context thereof.

Take the aforementioned tone of H. D.'s "Eurydice", in which at first the titular character laments her imprisonment but strives either by spite or by willpower to thrive and endure throughout her punishment. Compare that then to the lyrics during the conclusion of Eluveitie's "Tarvos":

Three cranes returned
 Pouring out the blood
 To the ground of Tarvos' death
 And out of nothing
 The soil sacrificed, the divine bull was reborn
 Under a newborn sun nature rejoiced
 Thus spring came back on earth
 Overcame the brumal reign
 Through Esus came back
 To fell the bull, the eternal cycle has begun

Tarvos - will always be slain
 Tarvos - ever to be reborn again (Glanzmann 3:27)

Similar to H. D.'s allusion to Eurydice to achieve a sense of certainty, Eluveitie's lyrics here focus on a resolution. As per the myth, Tarvos' death is inevitable, but so is his resurrection. This use of myth generates a cyclical aesthetic that conveys, similarly to the myth of Eurydice, security in the face of terrifying events. As can be seen through this lens, both poetry and music use mythology to contend with an omnipresent sense of anxiety. By invoking these ancient

narratives and stories, poets and musicians alike relive and resolve the tension they depict, and by doing so, they explore the nuance of that same tension that they experience it contemporarily.

This use of myth is a continuation of these artists' quest for identity. For metal musicians, the formation of a community is a facet of the security granted by the use of mythical allusion, which itself is possessed of a specific cultural and often folkish, ethnic quality. In "The Construction of Heavy Metal Identity through Heritage Narratives", Karl Spracklen *et al* concludes "[i]n essence, a number of imaginary communities intersect the black metal scene in which these musicians make their music, each with their own boundaries, symbols, discourses, traditions, imagined histories, myths, and edgework" (61). Via study and analysis of a sample of black metal bands north of England, specifically Winterfylleth, Wodensthron, Old Corpse Road, and Oakenshield, Spracklen finds that these musicians use the mythological allusion to construct and reinforce a specific identity, often with very specific lyrical references to the endurance of their heritage (54). Noted researcher of contemporary esotericism Kennet Granholm, writing the article "'Sons of Northern Darkness': Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music" references this tendency as an activation of heathenism in black metal genres.

...[R]eferences to Old Norse, pre-Christian myth, religion, and culture are plentiful in early Norwegian Black Metal. Burzum's self-titled debut album from 1991 contains an ode to the Babylonian god Ea and seemingly a cry of sorrow for an imagined lost pagan past (in the song "A Lost Forgotten Soul). [...] The song "Cromlech" on Darkthrone's debut album *Soulside Journey* (1990) refers to prehistoric pagan tombs, the river Styx, and a 'Heathenish realm.' [...] *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* (1992) contains several

explicit references to paganism, and both of these albums are infused with a similar longing for a pre-Christian past as apparent in Burzum's "Det Som en gang var." (529)

Both Spracklen and Granholm's scholarship helps to illustrate the predilection among black metal and folk metal bands, who are closely related, to romanticize the past as a method of attaining or defending a masculine (and often in the case of extreme metal artists, very white, and very Eurocentric) identity. In this way, it becomes obvious that these artists use allusion not merely to reference a mythological past, but also to construct their own mythological narrative. Spracklen also writes "[a]ll the band members in the research are aware of their communicative freedom in extreme metal to write about whatever motivated them. All invoke stories of heritage and the past, and link belonging in the extreme metal community with an acceptance of a masculinized, heroicized, warrior past" (61). This conception of the craft elucidates the manner of security that musicians and metalheads extract from a heavy focus on mythology, one that is predicated upon a sense of community and belonging. By constructing these mythological narratives, metal musicians combat the defensive loneliness which Howarth describes as characterizing modern society. An additional function of these mythological and ancestral narratives being so strongly idealized, as we will see later, is a fixation upon authoritarian aesthetics among certain extreme metal artists, and at least one high modernist.

For heavy metal specifically, this practice is long codified by J. R. R. Tolkien, from whose writing the bands Oakenshield and Amon Amarth take their names (Oakenshield being the clan name of Thorin Oakenshield from *The Hobbit*, and Amon Amarth being the Sindarin name for Mount Doom in *The Lord of the Rings*). In many respects, the efforts of metal bands to re-engage with the mythological, and indeed construct their own myth narratives, is similar to the broad arrangement of legendary tradition expressed as Tolkien's Middle-earth setting. Indeed,

scholarship on the matter points to myth and the spiritual nature of religious tradition, the shared elements and aesthetics of various spiritualities, being a key element of this artistic phenomenon. Phillip Irving Mitchell, in his article “Legend and History Have Met and Fused” for the journal *Tolkien Studies*, writes:

At the same time, rituals precede cognitive reflection because at one level we all believe “fairy tales,” that is we all give assent to dogmas in that our day-to-day actions are based on beliefs that we accept without any detailed examination. Reality at its most thick is experienced mythopoetically. Desire and danger, naturalness and wonder, are in our fairy tales: “The flower with which God crowns the one, and the flame with which Sam the lamplighter crowns the other, are equally of the gold of fairy-tales”. The religious impulse is a core epistemic faculty. (9)

Mitchell determines that, as “[t]he religious impulse is a core epistemic faculty” (9), the fantastic elements that Tolkien utilizes are a fundamental component of perceiving and understanding reality. This aligns with the allegorical use of mythology utilized by metal bands, both in the case of classical myth traditions, and Tolkien’s own modern mythological narrative. By applying myth to the tension of heavy metal’s social and epistemic critiques, musicians are presenting the difficult, anxious realities with which they contend by using a fantastic, metaphorical lens. This resonance is not lost on metal musicians, who have a high frequency of homages made to Tolkien throughout their work. With this in mind, it is clear that heavy metal artists identify uniquely with the constructed myth structure of Middle-earth, with references as oblique as Oakenshield’s name, to earlier allusions such as the allusions present in Led Zeppelin’s (who are prominent progenitor to early heavy metal) “Ramble On” (1969).

Even absent the heavy influence of a single figure like Tolkien, high modernist poets have been known to participate in this exercise, using mythological reference in conjunction with their lived experience to create their own narratives. Perhaps the most famous example of this practice is T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" (1922), a work that in itself is predicated on being a nexus of mythological allusion, combining Arthurian allusions with elements of Greek myth. At the same time as he draws from various myths, however, Eliot maintains a modern aesthetic via frequent vignettes and imagery that conjure up a modern England. This is particularly present in the sections *I. Burial of the Dead* and *II. A Game of Chess*, which at first create images of, appropriately, a wasteland covered by dead roots, followed by what are apparently memories of the speaker's past, filled with interactions with those he seems to have lost. This transition creates a tension between past and future, possession and loss that is characterized in the following stanza from section *III. The Fire Sermon*.

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of lea
 Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
 Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
 Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
 The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
 Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
 Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
 And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;
 Departed, have left no addresses.
 By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .
 Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
 Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
 But at my back in a cold blast I hear
 The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear. (1-14)

With only a small reference, Eliot here weaves a complex and anachronistic aesthetic into “The Wasteland”. Mentions of “empty bottles, sandwich papers”, “Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends” (6), and “city directors” (8) conjure up an image of a modern, industrial England. Meanwhile, Eliot’s preponderance of the Thames, which he notes as being clean and free of the trappings of modernity, is a geographic signifier of England’s cultural past. Moreover, the mournful tone of the stanza is marked by the departure of the nymphs of Greek mythology, as “The wind/Crosses the brown land, unheard” (2-3). Eliot equates many of the modern objects, especially the products of industrial mass production, with waste, while lifting up the Thames as an object of purity. By a similar token the disappearance of the Nymphs, who in Greek mythology are traditionally stewards and symbols of the natural world, as a tragedy to be mourned.

The imagery that Eliot summons in “The Wasteland” serves two key functions. For one, it is not at all dissimilar to the romantic tension that many metal bands, specifically of the folk and black metal persuasion, maintain with a narrative of their cultural past. The invocation of this cultural mourning by the river Thames alongside Eliot’s explicit mention of nymphs serves as another example of transformation via allusion, as he merges the chronological aesthetics of modern and classic England with a mythical image of the Greek nymph’s wild perfection. Doing so re-contextualizes the significance of the nymph as a sign, and communicates a distinct desire to return or at least channel a pre-modern tradition. Engaging with this imagery also brings Eliot into confluence with another poetic phenomenon, previously noted within my argument as being among its mechanical functions. For Eliot, the river Thames represents a symbolic connection to Cervantes’ “poetic deferral”, as a device which forms an unbroken tether to the past and the future. Though Eliot here does not engage directly in a typographical deferral, the speaker’s

mourning by the Thames, the final symbol of a pure England untouched by industry, creates its own brand of deferral. With this mourning, Eliot expresses a rejection and disruption of modern conceits, focusing on the Thames which, being a river, itself calls to mind a moving connection over a great distance. For Eliot, two points on this continuum are England's "purer" past, and an ever-inexorable flow towards modernity and the future, ever the source of anxiety for these high modernist artists.

A characterizing element of this mythological adaptation in both artforms is a tendency towards a didactic discourse within the audience, and a re-engagement with the sources of allusion within the works. By consciously exposing their audience to retellings of cultural myth traditions, both fantastic and mundane, these artists demand that their audience comprehend the allusive reference. In order to fully tap the myth's function as a sign, the audience must recognize and understand the context of the allusion. In many cases, H. D.'s re-engagement with Eurydice may be a reader or listener's first brush with the Greek Orphic tradition, while a listener of Eluveitie may have come first into contact with the Celtic myth of Tarvos via their music. In the interest of fully understanding the art, these poems and songs insist that one comes pre-equipped with a certain historical and cultural knowledge, or that they seek out that knowledge tangentially after being exposed to the concept. Herein lies the cultural and socially transformative power of allusion activated by these works. These artists place the responsibility of enrichment on the shoulders of their audience, asking that they educate themselves in the interest of fully engaging with their art. This dynamic encourages the audience to re-engage and re-activate cultural and historical modes of thinking, and resurrects the resonance of existing traditions and stories. Moreover, it invites the audience to draw strength from these traditions in

the same fashion as these metal musicians and high modernist poets, to identify with and apprehend comfort and security from them.

As these artists reach for security that is couched in the past and their associated genealogy of greatness, the connection between the social elements that inform them takes a clear shape. Both high modernist poetry and extreme metal are activated by a sense of socio-cultural anxiety and dissatisfaction. In both artforms, this manifests as a disruption of form as well as content, with artists consciously making choices that run counter to traditional poetic craft and musical writing techniques while imposing a certain degree of challenge upon their audience. Meanwhile, as foregoing examples demonstrate, these artists also engage with and reconstruct prior cultural narratives via allusion. This use of mythological and cultural reference creates a formation of elements that serves to challenge the very nature of the movements to which these artists belong. The cultural disruption present in each movement runs counter to many elements of western modernity, be it the growing shadow of the atom bomb or the constant genesis of industrial modes and aesthetics. In each case, these artists engage with allusion to mythology as a method of constructing and invoking narratives that transgress the social paradigm that informs their art itself. Both extreme metal musicians and high modernist poets engage in this transgression as a reaction to socio-cultural disruption, using their work to engage with and critique contemporary events and tension.

Chapter 4

The Role of Social Unrest in High Modernism and Metal

Socio-political unrest was a frequent feature of modernist poetry as it took shape in the United States. This should come as little surprise to those familiar with the genre and the era, being as the literature of the period was often characterized by the shadows of two terrible wars. In keeping with some of the mythological elements of poetry of the time, this sense of unrest was often mixed with faith, and it was also frequently characterized by issues of gender. Mina Loy, noted for her radicalism to begin with, wrote one such poem that qualifies as an example of such mythological and social dissatisfaction. These stanzas, selected from “Religious Instruction” (1958), serve as an example.

This misalliance
follows the custom
for female children
To adhere to maternal practices

While the atheist father presides over
the prattle of the churchgoer
with ironical commentary from his arm-chair

But by whichever
religious route
to brute
reality
our forebears speed us

There is often a pair
of idle adult
accomplices in duplicity
to impose upon their brood (1-19)

(...)

Oracle of civilization
‘Thou shalt not live by dreams alone
but by every discomfort
that proceedeth out of

legislation' (115-120)

Loy expresses a broad discomfort with religious authority in these stanzas, especially in terms of the role of religion as an instrument of indoctrination. She paints a derisive picture of the churchgoer “from his arm-chair”, and the “adult accomplices” who “impose upon their brood”. This almost grotesque imagery seems to allude to a disturbing, institutional reality, with which Loy seems to convey a sense of experience. Also telling is the final stanza, foreshadowing “Thou shalt not live by dreams alone / but by every discomfort / that proceedeth out of / legislation” (116-120). Here, Loy links the experience of indoctrination by faith with a distinctly political message, expressing no small amount of chafing underneath the law and leaders, who have an oppressive relationship to “dreams”, and perhaps freedom.

Music, for its part, has always been a staple of social critique and political rebellion. Lars Kristiansen of James Madison University contends that such art has played a role even as far back as ancient Greece, particularly due to Plato’s apparent opinion of it throughout *The Republic*. In “‘Not My President’: Punk Rock and Presidential Protest from Ronald to Donald.”, he argues:

Even the ancient Greeks expressed unease about the potency and political influence of popular music. In *The Republic*, cautioning leaders of civil society to keep an ever watchful eye on popular music, and on musical innovation in particular, Plato warned that any change in the landscape of popular music holds the promise of swaying the minds of otherwise dutiful citizens, seducing them away from their civic virtues. If not vigilantly policed, Plato reasoned, popular music’s potential for social upheaval and revolt could easily extend “its course of wanton disruption to laws and political institutions, until finally it destroys everything in private and public life”. (52)

According to Kristiansen, music has always had political sway over its audience, and as such has always been an intrinsically political art form. Because of this power that it holds, music is transformative and well-suited to protest. Musicians themselves are more than aware of the idea Plato describes, even if perhaps they find it now to be somewhat exaggerated in the modern day. The fact of the matter is, however, that Plato is correct about the changing nature of music and its relevance to the political landscape. It is no surprise that musicians have always channeled their unrest into their most prolific artform; it is the simplest way for them to convey a message. For extreme metal, that message is often one of dissatisfaction and rebellion.

The forthcoming musicians share this socio-political anxiety with their poet predecessors. The musical themes of heavy metal bands such as Iron Maiden and others are strongly concerned with war and an ever-more industrial society around them. Iron Maiden's "Two Minutes to Midnight" (1984) is one such example in song, a protest anthem that rails against war, weapons, and increasing global tension. The very name of the song is based on The Bulletin of Atomic Scientist's "doomsday clock", which during the nuclear tension of the Cold War struck "two minutes to midnight" (Rabinowitch 294-298). One notable stanza from the song is as follows: "The body bags and little rags of children torn in two/And the jellied brains of those who remain to put the finger right on you/As the madmen play on words and make us all dance to their song/To the tune of starving millions to make a better kind of gun" (4:19). Iron Maiden's focus on anti-war sentiment is clear to see, with imagery that is intended to invoke the uncomfortable and violent reality of war, complete with a systemic accusation. Iron Maiden lays the blame for war and violence at the feet of world leaders and corporate "madmen". For this foundational heavy metal band, it is the machinations of those in power that created the tense and terrifying

decades of the atomic age, and “Two Minutes to Midnight” is a knowing proclamation of their guilt.

A great deal of high modernist poetry and extreme metal music’s social positioning concerns the status of each as products of countercultural movements. As can be seen from foregoing examples, artists from each movement have been influenced by cultural tides, and their work is partially defined by a rejection of socio-cultural expectations. For high modernist poets’ part in this dynamic, the academic and cultural frameworks within which they worked qualify as pre-cursors to the development of countercultural divides that would arise after World War II. Specifically, the effects of mass print on the dissemination of information helped to separate high modernists from mainstream society and inform the shape of their social and intellectual interaction with one another and the world around them. Bartholomew Brinkman of Framingham State University touches on the beginnings of this divide in *Poetic Modernisms in the Culture of Mass Print*. While discussing Lucy Britton specifically, and her habit of keeping a scrapbook for archival practice, he writes:

One of the more notable (though not at all unusual) features of Lucy’s scrapbook is the inclusion of hundreds of poems that, in addition to participating in intricate webs of association with other texts and genres, were placed into a personal anthology highlighting such topics as motherhood and soldiers returning from World War I—exemplifying a “poetics of scrap-booking,” as Mike Chasar terms it, in which everyday readers would become both critical readers and producers of meaning through the deliberate collection and juxtaposition of poetic texts. Although Lucy’s scrapbook roughly corresponds to the period that literary critics generally refer to as “modernism,” typified by such figures as Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, the works of these writers do

not grace its pages. A few of the names might be familiar: James Russell Lowell, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Edgar A. Guest, and Rudyard Kipling. Most of the poems Lucy includes, however, are sentimentally rhymed and anonymous—or might as well be. Lucy’s scrapbook (like that of many other compilers) privileges an all but critically ignored and forgotten canon of poems, even as it makes the fierce case for poetry as a special means of understanding private life. (2)

Brinkman’s discussion of Lucy Britton’s archival practice helps cut to the heart of what defined high modernism as a literary counterculture. The function of this archival impulse allowed modernists to engage in what Brinkman calls “cultural preservation”, and to invoke a form of canonicity for themselves. By engaging in the creation and the archive of these cultural moments, both historical and artistic, modernist poets codified themselves as artists and as people, separating their work and their thoughts from a culture of mass print. This is a critical function of both modernism and high modernism, as each includes elements to set it culturally apart from traditional or mainstream structures. Modernism often accomplishes this through a proletarian, class-based rejection of class, social, and structural paradigms. High modernists, for their part, often engage in abstract cultural and creative processes that invoke anachronistic elements to create contrast with contemporary artistic dynamics. In Britton’s case, as Brinkman notes, this brand of archival practice did not necessarily even include names which we might consider eminently recognizable amongst modernists; in this way, Britton engaged in a distinct rejection of broader cultural tides, an act that characterizes countercultural movements as a whole. That she did so by utilizing the technology of mass print (keeping printed copies of poetry via scrapbook), she also matches the aesthetic of certain extreme metal musicians whose

content and production rebels against certain recording technologies, but often make use of them or similar tools in the interest of achieving a sound or aesthetic.

This archivism hearkens back also to my discussion of the forms of cultural and mythological allusion that heavy metal artists across sub-genres engage in. This is an especially prevalent aesthetic amongst extreme metal musicians, particularly in the case of black metal and its related sub-genres. Often amidst these artists there is a preference for low fidelity production and, where it can be attained, access to analogue media over digital. These preferences create a modal segregation among these artists which separates them by their commitment to the practice of maintaining these older (or at least *older sounding*) media paradigms, which is not unlike Lucy Britton's poetic scrapbooking practice in its simultaneous utilization and rejection of text's mass production. Additionally, such practices ensure a sense of communal intimacy in engagement with the work; for Britton, this manifested as the private and exclusive nature of her personal scrapbook, while for musicians, this appears as the tight knit enthusiast communities, and archival practices such as the sharing of demo tapes and analogue recordings. As with any rejection, these stringent practices of archivism amongst these artists represent a baked-in criticism of the paradigms from which they separate themselves. In the same fashion that high modernists in an era of mass print would often resort to more archaic modes of recording art and culture, so too do extreme metal musicians resort to age-coded practices in rebellion against a mass-produced archetype of digital media. This is another fashion in which these artists characterize modernism by disrupting or transgressing modern practices in favor of more traditional aesthetics.

This archaic aesthetic survives among musicians who obliquely participate in social criticism via their lyrical content, Amon Amarth blends this mode with the foregoing aesthetics

of mythological construction. The following is lyrical content from “Slaves of Fear” (2011), from the album *Surtr Rising*.

They nurture prejudice and hate
 To them the wars that they create
 In the name of one ample god

They gladly sacrifice your life
 Increasing power is their price
 Without regrets, they'll spill your blood

They're feeding you lies
 With calculating smiles
 With slaves made of the human mind
 As long as you kneel to their authority
 Religion, it's what makes you blind (Mikkonen 1:02)

Based on a notoriously Norse-centric and anti-Christian theme in the band’s discography, the proper target of Amon Amarth’s criticism in “Slaves of Fear” appears to be traditional religious hierarchies, specifically in the vein of the Catholic church. Having established the romantic aesthetics with which extreme metal musicians regard a pre-Christian narrative, we can see the lyrics as rather pointedly attacking a mainstream religious paradigm through two separate lenses. On one hand, they are attending to the mythological impetus that activates their interest in Norse spiritualism, while actively criticizing Catholicism as a social ill. In this way, we can see Amon Amarth as embracing a form of modernism that simultaneously rejects and embraces certain traditions and social institutions, and in turn, participating in a countercultural dynamic which will come to define much of the genre’s characteristics.

The rejection of mainstream religion throughout various sub-genres of heavy metal is one of the most crucial elements to the thematic and aesthetic components that various metal musicians make use of. An anti-Catholic or anti-Christian stance is a common theme amongst extreme metal musicians, especially those of Swedish or Norwegian heritage, such as Amon

Amarth or a plurality of “second wave” Norwegian black metal bands. The blunt rejection of mainstream religious paradigms strongly informs the subsequent development of heavy metal musicians and fans as a breathing counterculture. In many ways, though some may be loath to admit it at times, the identity and image of many extreme metal bands is defined dialectically by a rejection of the Catholic church as an institution. For many, the evil imagery, intentionally difficult structure and sound of extreme metal is a negative reaction to the possibility of cultural submission. The use of these themes throughout extreme metal music functions to shock and dismay mainstream listeners, especially those with a relationship to the organized religion being rejected. Amon Amarth’s previously discussed “Slaves to Fear”, as well as “Where is your God?” (2008) feature both a romantic vision of a pre-Christian past, but also conjure up images of violence and derision aimed squarely at the Catholic faith.

This paradigm of rejection can be observed nowhere better than among examples from the “Second Wave” of black metal in Norway. Taking the title of the genre from Venom’s “Black Metal” (1982), a song that would go on to mechanically influence much of the genre, young musicians in Norway at the time set out to produce music that would culturally challenge mainstream authoritative and religious paradigms. Among the most well-known artists who embody this aesthetic of rejection are Gorgoroth and Burzum (both of which are named in even more direct reference to *Lord of the Rings*), the latter being the solo project of the contentious Varg Vikernes. Much of Gorgoroth’s lyrical content strongly resembles the usually exaggerated Satanic aesthetic sometimes used to characterize extreme metal. The opening lyrics to the aptly named “Possessed (By Satan)” (1996), read like so: “Standing proud in the never-ending glare,/Of the churches burning in the name of Satan.../Like a thorn in the eye of God” (Tiegs 0:16). The lyrics continue on in painstaking description of war against Christianity, and indeed,

“good” itself. These lyrics are delivered, per the sub-genre’s most popular conventions, as screams backed by shrill and unsettling guitar playing. The musicians of Gorgoroth, by participating in this heavily Satanic aesthetic, intentionally confirm their critical target’s perception of them. The knowing engagement in a controversial image solidifies the convention as being born out of the band’s rejection of Catholic religious culture. Styling themselves as stewards of a dark lord, these musicians contend with the institution of Catholicism by positioning themselves as ideologically opposed to it, intentionally creating and maintaining counter cultural elements in their art and identity.

Varg Vikernes of Burzum adopted a different avenue of criticism than Gorgoroth, focused more on using lyrics to make symbolic attacks on Catholicism. The translated lyrics to one of Burzum’s most well-known songs, “Jesu Død” (1996) (“Jesus is Dead”), read as such. “A figure lying on the hill/So evil that the flowers around withered/A gloomy soul was lying on the hill/So cold that all water turned to ice/A shadow then fell over the forest/Then the figure’s soul withered away/The figure’s soul was a shadow/A shadow of evil power” (2:09). Though the lyrical content of the song occupies a different critical aesthetic than Gorgoroth’s example, Burzum’s lyrics are a concise accusation that Christ and his death were negative forces, and an indictment against the Catholic church’s institutional power. Both of these examples are key in understanding the key countercultural elements of extreme metal; similar to examples from high modernist poetry, the extrication of heavy metal from mainstream culture and thought results from the artist’s extreme reaction to broad cultural phenomena that characterize the mainstream. For poets like Eliot and bands such as Amon Amarth (or more extreme examples in Burzum and Gorgoroth), this extrication occurs on a primarily cultural level, with social and religious transmogrification playing a key role in the tension of the art.

Christopher Gair asserts that counterculture as we know it came to be as a result of various technological and cultural shifts that took place in the 50's and 60's. He writes:

Finally, the permeability of the culture/counterculture divide was facilitated by the prosperity of post-war America: a great deal of the music, literature, art and film that challenged mainstream values was a product of, rather than a reaction against, the material wealth enjoyed by much of the nation in what was widely believed to be a 'postscarcity' economy. The expansion of the college and university sector resulted in large numbers of relatively highly educated young people living in close proximity to one another on and around campuses, with considerably more freedom than they had experienced at home. Many of these college (and even high school) students had high disposable incomes, which could facilitate record-buying, travel, experimentation with drugs, and other activities not necessarily endorsed by parents. They also had more leisure time than was the case for earlier generations, where a higher percentage of the school-leaving population would move straight into full-time work. (4)

Gair's examination of counterculture's sublimation in American culture highlights the role of academic exposure in cultural development, and underscores the role of historical, mythological, and political themes in heavy metal. As he writes, broadening access to higher education and increasing social independence contributed to a growing traditional rejection in post-war generations. Gair also cites the role of this shift in contributing to counterculture in popular music as well, specifically rock 'n' roll: "The advent of rock and roll accelerated the adoption of African-American musical forms by white youth, a process that had already been set in motion by the popularity of jazz before the war, and contributed to what many official voices referred to as the 'juvenile delinquency' of the mid-1950s" (4). This perspective on the social aspects of

metal's most immediate pre-cursor genre helps to illuminate how the genre's social positioning has informed its heavy use of allusion and cross-cultural interface.

The social impacts and implications of these genres share even their negative countercultural elements. One such example lies in the preponderance of some extremely influential artists on fascism and Nazism. This is an element particularly amongst black metal musicians and listeners, complete with a niche sub-genre that is dedicated to the ideology. Similarly, the countercultural positioning of high modernist poetry informs some of the ideology of figures such as Ezra Pound. Known on one hand for his multi-layered and allusion-laden style of writing, Pound was also known for being a zealous sympathizer with World War II Germany and the Nazi way of thinking. Robert Casillo categorizes Pound's fascism as being partially wedded to his fascination with mythology, an aspect of it that is similar to black metal's own fantastic themes. On this subject, Casillo writes, "Inseparable from Pound's appeal to permanent nature is his nostalgia for the timeless world of myth as opposed to history. This longing follows from Pound's view of mythology as the expression of natural truth, the product of minds 'close on the vital universe'" (296). Here, Casillo equates the nature of authoritarian with an unbending rigidity, deducing that Pound's obsession with permanence was not so dissimilar to the authoritarian focus on security, power, and longevity. Most importantly, he ties this fascination with the concept of permanence to mythology, a genre that can be viewed as symbolic of history itself as well as traditionalism and its values. As it does for the musicians who allude to it, for Pound, mythology represents a kind of cyclical security, tales of a permanent and undeniable greatness that transcends chaos and progress. The unthinking and unchanging values of such a cultural touchstone make it appealing to those sympathetic to authoritarianism, and in Pound's case, might activate what an artist finds compelling about the ideology.

Kahn-Harris, on the heels of his own research into Norwegian black metal and the socio-political events that formed the genre discusses the bent of such musicians of that area towards hyper-masculine, authoritarian thought. By considering the genre through the lens of countercultural “scene” politics, he makes a salient point as to the religious and ethnic roots that helped to breed some of the genre’s more oppressive elements.

The term ‘black metal’ has been used since the early 1980s to refer to satanic and occultist forms of extreme metal. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a distinct self-conscious black metal scene began to coalesce, affirming a spectacular, serious and uncompromisingly satanic vision of metal that attempted to merge music and practice as an expression of an ‘essential’ identity. Under the slogan ‘No fun, no mosh, no trends, no core’, a tightknit scene developed in Norway that attempted to be ‘genuinely’ satanic and evil. The scene developed a mythology in which Satanism was constructed as part of a pagan history of resistance to the conquest of Christianity. Scandinavian black metallers drew on Norse and Wotanic mythologies as exemplar of a heroic past free from the ‘weakening’ influence of Christianization. In some cases, this resulted in the affirmation of a racist, exclusivist national identity. (99)

Kahn-Harris begins to drill down on some of the aesthetics that informed black metal’s infatuation with ethnocentric fascism. Not unlike Pound himself, many of the genre’s codifying musicians have had the same fascination with mythology as salve for their anxiety about a changing world around them. In Pound’s case, this manifested as a hyper-masculine obsession with unity and authority, while in the case of musicians such as Varg Vikernes or Bard Eithun, it manifested as a violent and ethnically centered devotion to the aesthetics of authority, both inside the form of their music and in the events of their embroiled personal lives (Kahn-Harris 97). In

each case, by devoting themselves to these ideologies, Pound and these musicians granted themselves a sense of security in a world they feared would ultimately reject them, strip of their power, and render them culturally irrelevant. On both counts, however, these artists' work offers important insight to the social and cultural paradigms that contribute to authoritarian sympathies and widespread cultural breakdown. In each case, the criticisms that figures like Pound and Vikernes offer is ignored at our cultural peril, as both of them offer both an important window into the systemic elements that promote negative counter-cultural elements. By activating mythological modes from other cultures in an attempt to engage and reinforce his own heritage (in the case of Pound), and by frequently channeling and elaborating upon his particular attachment to Nordic history (in the case of Vikernes), these artists are reinforcing an ethnic paradigm with an authoritarian aesthetic. As we can see from these two, as well as the artists discussed by Spracklen et al, certain figures in high modernism as well as extreme metal seek to uphold a distinctly white cultural paradigm. Whether the affect they adopt is authoritarian or not, this is often expressed in the content of their work, all while appropriating and activating a dense web of allusion and historical touchstones.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Beyond all other threads of discussion and similarity between high modernist poetry and metal, it has been observed that music and literature share an important link throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. On the subject of this commonality, T. Austin Graham writes the following:

It would be difficult indeed to overstate the extent to which nineteenth-century artists and thinkers across the Western world named music as a model for their works, aspiring toward the otherworldly abstraction that they considered unique to it. Whether evoked for its unitary Pythagorean properties, for its Platonic powers of direct emotional effect, or for both of these at once, an art that had once been regarded as a lower, less rational form than poetry came to achieve supremacy in philosophic circles and inspire interdisciplinary imitation well into the twentieth century. (9-10)

Graham notes the deep link between music and literature that forged itself through an earned connection. Most notably, music's ability to directly influence emotion and its "Pythagorean" structural and poetic elements give it an enviable artistic quality. This effect renders music a logical sister genre to poetry, especially in their sharing of common fixtures and elements. In the case of modernist American poetry and heavy metal specifically, Graham's assertion serves as a reminder of the persistent importance of music as an artform, which even throughout modern genre convention should be given similar consideration to literature.

Though the categorization of these different arts and texts is a necessary function of the academic dynamics in liberal arts (stewarding and critiquing culture is, after all, a key

component of the discipline), the separation of these artists from one another is predicated on a lack of engagement with the content of their work. The heavy focus on a work's canonicity in education is the source of certain misunderstandings of popular culture and its potential as a critically enriching artistic force. Though the contributions of scholars like Kahn-Harris, Lusty, and Kennet prove that metal is an academically recognized artform, there is a paradigm at work that has failed to adequately culturally categorize it. Foregoing evidence regarding heavy metal specifically illustrates the role of critically relevant and enriching content in extra-canonical texts, especially regarding its pre-existing relationship to "higher" culture. In much of literary academia, these relations are not completely explored, and heavy metal seems rarely to be considered through the lens of various intellectual artistic movements such as modernism. As academic canon and heavy metal, as we've seen through analysis, are rife with intertextual, cultural references and allusions, considering them together grants the latter a new kind of analytical power to the critic. Considering the relationship, both direct and indirect, between extreme metal and high modernist poetry illuminates the deeper cultural influences in popular culture, and how it may draw on the same forces as more canonical content.

This notion that poetry, which sits squarely within the canon of English literature, shares lineage with art so esoteric and often unfriendly as extreme metal is contentious with literary paradigm, to some extent. However, in truth, the two are closely related, with high modernist poets and musicians operating with similar thought and thematic patterns to their work. The structural elements of poetry and music being so obviously linked aside, these poets and metal musicians regularly channel a rebellious spirit in their work, which expresses itself throughout the format and often the sound of their writing and playing. The tension of modernity expressed and continues to express itself through unorthodox art, especially across sonic mediums.

Knowing this, turning an eye to intertextual, multi-modal ways of considering literature and art should be considered with renewed importance. The discomfort and coarseness of extreme metal is as much a part of its central power as it is with the high modernists' rejection of tradition and intentionally anxious subject matter. As the tensions of war and change continue to grow, and generations across civilization face new challenges, the arduous verse of the modern poets has given way to a thunderous beat, and ideas that take new, electric shapes. Learning to appreciate this link between the two can help us continue to understand the tension that underlies modernity: change is inevitable, and its violence is better confronted than ignored.

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