

"and the disintegration was already taking place": Ruptured Perception in
the Late Modernist Aesthetics of Alexander Trocchi's *Young Adam* and
Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar*

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Abstract:

Countering more conventional understandings of the post-1945 British novel as resistant to innovation, this essay provides a means for understanding a seam of more conspicuously avant-garde British writing. Relative to modernism's pre-war stress on the new, these are fictions which utilise the consequences of their own lateness to the modernist vanguard as a literary mode. Through recent critical reevaluations of late modernism's significance and continued relevancies, the Scottish fictions of Alexander Trocchi's *Young Adam* and Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar* are taken to demonstrate a subversive trajectory of late 20th century British fiction. Crucially, this essay argues that the respective central traumas of both novels function as sites of rupture, allowing outside influences, pathological urges and excluded details to flood in. What is further argued is, that in their shared hyper-attentiveness to these elements, narrative perception becomes disrupted and complicated. How these novels are composed of psychic tatters, therefore, illustrates how they are innovative in form as well as content. Moreover, by blurring the boundaries of what is, and is not, worthy of inclusion in the novel, these are fictions which are shown to breach the divide between low and high culture. In its reworking of pulp fiction's more lurid tropes through modernism's resonances and debris, the characteristic outsidership and distain of Trocchi's novel principally provides a means of understanding the mid-century British novel's more mildewy and seedy corners. How *Morvern Callar* inherits and—ultimately—discards Trocchi's residual presence will then lead to an assessment of how the novel moves away from the legacies of modernist tradition. This concludes the essay with a model of narrative perception that is appropriately errant, unwilling to be burdened or stifled.

"After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—"

—T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

Late-modernism's *lateness*, Julia Jordan posits, "implies being past the main event; irrelevant; at an angle; it implies a difference, but, perhaps, *not yet*" ('Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde Renaissance' 146). Through this definition we gain a sense of late modernist fictions as ones caught in suspended animation; simultaneously looking back to modernism, yet propelled irrevocably beyond it. Extending this propulsion, Jordan's recent *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies* identifies a vein of mid-century British experimental writing which utilises lateness as a literary mode. In a specifically Scottish context, the late aesthetic of perhaps the nation's most controversial writer, Alexander Trocchi, provides a rich comparison to fictions closer to the new millennium in assessing how far this lateness extends.

Morvern Callar (1995), the debut of fellow Scottish author Alan Warner, shares many overt similarities with Trocchi's novel *Young Adam* (1954): mourning; existential detachment; recurrent memory; repetitive labour; bleak visions of Scotland's waterways and coastlines; a sense of the overripe festering into the rotten¹. Through their respective narrators—Trocchi's Joe, a barge-hand on a vessel traversing the canals between Glasgow and Edinburgh; Warner's Morvern, a supermarket assistant escaping the limits of her Highland coastal town—both novels share a perspective attuned to the minutiae and verifiable details of modern human life. Indeed, if T. S. Eliot's Prufrock was unable to reconcile his body—and further Western subjectivity—to the paraphernalia of rapidly developing modernity, then Joe and Morvern demonstrate an alienated *reliance* upon it. The echoing narrative rupture of both protagonists' (late) discovery of their respective lover's dead bodies explicitly foreground this dependence. Elucidating the particular relationship between the late modernist body (both corporeal and textual), and the deteriorating materiality of the world surrounding it, gains an insight into how the traces of modernism mark these texts. Late modernism, is, therefore, a useful bridge in assessing the trajectory of the post-war British novel—from its mid-century exhausted spaces, towards the conditions of

¹ Moreover, coincidentally, both *Young Adam* and *Morvern Callar* were adapted into films within a year of each other. For an account of this filmic relationship between the two novels, and its contribution toward New Scottish Cinema, see Simon Brown's "'Anywhere but Scotland?'" Transnationalism and New Scottish Cinema'.

postmodernity which increasingly characterised its latter half—illustrating its self-conscious innovations and experimentalism.

Arriving *after*—rather than at the *end* of—death crucially underpins both novels' late modernist narrative strategies. Chiefly, the ambiguous relation between both novels' protagonists and the corpses they discover illustrate how both texts complicate expectations of an act's depiction, and its sense of narrative place. In *Young Adam*, this uncertain relationship rests on eschewing clear culpability. The intrigue and status of the apparent murder, which drives the narrative thrust of Trocchi's novel, in reality is more of an accident: Joe's former lover, Cathie, having fallen into the Clyde chasing after him, with Joe too late to save her. As an accident, the narrative status of the discovery of Cathie's body conforms to Jordan's sense of accidents functioning in late modernist narratives as "portal[s] through which we can see the more gaping disjunction between all events and their narrative manifestations" (*Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel* 5). As if to deny any narrative manifestation, the first image of *Young Adam* is of Joe attempting to resubmerge Cathie's body with a boathook—he is only foiled by his canalboat captain, Leslie. *Morvern Callar*'s opening displays a similar disassociation. Warner's opening line, "He'd cut His throat with the knife" (1), evokes the psychic shock of Morvern's discovery of her boyfriend; having killed himself in a messy and protected manner with a kitchen knife and a meat cleaver. This simple yet horrific image is disrupted and complicated by syntactic discrepancies. Warner strangely prefixes "knife" with a definite article, instead of a more typical indefinite determiner. The "the" implies an anticipated narrative finality, as if this specific knife was fated to cut "His throat". Demonstrating the futility of reviving the past, this opening act's anticipation of Morvern's lateness—her arrival after, not *in medias res*—cements her boyfriend's death as terminal. Yet while her boyfriend's body is kept distanced and dehumanised through the anonymous pronouns², these pronouns are oddly capitalised. Oxymoronically, for such a distanced subject, such capitalisation recalls the devotional implications of reverential capitalisation (e.g. God as "He"/"His"). This emotional incongruity in Warner's opening line recalls the famous opening of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know" (3). Implying childlike deference, "Maman" raises expectations of intimacy or association, yet—much like Warner's "His"—really serves to illuminate emotional distance. There is a mechanistic impersonality to

² In fact we never learn his name in the novel.

Warner's short, disjointed syntax which further mirrors Camus' mimicry of telegraphic laconicism. Pushing *Morvern Callar*'s literary borders beyond strictly Scottish or British literature, Morvern appears to inherit the existential numbness of Camus' Meursault³. Therefore, the narrative rupture of death, manifesting in oddly indifferent responses, leaves the reader unsure as to whether both texts' first-person narrations are focalised through empathetic human responses.

Similar to Warner's refiguring of conventional responses surrounding death, Trocchi's narrative placement of the revelation of Cathie's drowning equally disrupts narrative expectations. Ambiguity is inherent to drowning: agency becomes subsumed into the water, all physiological signs and signals being cloaked by its variable and inconsistent translucency. Trocchi textually figures his murky autopsy through disjunctions in conventional time: for instance, in how Cathie's "scream choked in her throat before it was uttered" (78) her death becomes almost paradoxical. Akin to *Morvern Callar*'s opening, this line's proleptic action cements the drowning's inevitability and finality; the water having already fatally filled her lungs in the past tense, even in the present moment of her drowning. Trocchi's textual mechanics here seem engineered to deny the reader the narrative "relief" of crime fiction, and its familiar, pulpy tropes: the blood-curdling scream, and the culpable suspect. This inertia—the water clogging the route of the phrase, preventing it from proceeding—is compounded by Joe's inability to act as "she was gone suddenly" (Ibid.). As Lecia Rosenthal illuminates, it is such narrative ruptures' aftereffect, their "trauma", which "articulates the event of pain and its failure to register" (Rosenthal 2). Thus, we begin to question where the *now* of the syntax lies. This inability to properly "register" a narrative event self-reflexively calls attention to its problematic narrative status. Indeed, clarification of the circumstances of Cathie's death comes late in *Young Adam*; as if the novel—like Joe—is hesitant to reveal its involvement. By calling into question an event's temporality, Trocchi's late aesthetic thus illustrates how trauma can only be properly registered in delay of its "proper" narrative place.

³ Criticism surrounding both novels often cite Camus as a haunting influence. Upon *Young Adam*'s first British publication in 1961, the *New Statesman* commented that "one half expects to see 'Camus was here' scrawled on peeling plaster" (qtd. in Pringle v). Similarly, Roderick Watson positions *Morvern Callar* as an expatriated text, its spirit closer to Camus' "sunny Algiers than to [Iain] Banks' Gothic glee or Irvine Welsh's violent nihilism" (Watson 272).

For Warner, the trauma of his novel seems to figure in the language and voice of Morvern herself. Throughout the novel, narrative suggestions indicate that her emotionally blunted responses are informed by a wider world suffused with, and desensitised to, violence—especially against women. For instance, a moment of narrative rupture occurs when a television begins to display images from the Yugoslav Wars: Morvern notices "a picture of a girl human with the head missing" (50). The unexpected lexical sequencing of "girl human" incongruously disrupts the sentence's flow. Similar to her discovery of her boyfriend, this horrific image's rupture reconfigures syntax to create an ambiguity; as if Morvern cannot immediately comprehend what she is seeing is human. Beyond the purely horrific, Warner's rendering of Morvern's voice, and its accurate observation of colloquial speech patterns, further contributes to her dissociated perception. Although not written in Scots, Warner's novel uses standard orthography to gesture towards non-RP lexicography: for example, "soaken"/soaking, "nut"/no (69, 124). Such lexical items themselves function as ruptures in the novel's general text. Likely aware that these non-RP forms disassociate the non-Scottish reader, Warner's rendering of Morvern's voice further makes objects non-specific and indeterminate. The compound phrase "far-away-like" (7), for example, figures detachment literally through its dashes.

Such as the previous phrase's "like", Warner's addition of more general colloquial suffixes—unrelated to Scottish dialect—most commonly, and effectively, figure this distance. There is almost a juvenility to the suffixes which Warner affixes to Morvern's gaze: a lighter is merely "goldish" (3); the Highland hills surrounding her are unremarkably "greenish" (120). In capturing Morvern's Gen. X slackerish mentality—not being bothered to arrive at definitive specificity—there is a concurrent gesture back, recalling late modernism's deferral of resolution. Approaching language "sideways" (29) can, therefore, more keenly evoke the cheap tackiness of a spray gold lighter, or neuter trite, general representations of the Highland's sublime power. At the edges of "conventional" English language use—in both dialect and generational apathy—Morvern's voice demonstrates a reterritorialisation⁴ of language. Such openness of language, in its specificity of colloquial phraseology, paradoxically, becomes a means of evoking diffuseness. Rather than a mere "authentic" veneer, the incursion of these textual ruptures upon conventional prose integrally figure

⁴ How language can be "torn from sense, conquering sense, bringing about an active neutralisation of sense" (Deleuze and Guattari 21).

Morvern Callar's allusive tone, demonstrating an alienated and alienating loss of material definition.

Echoes of modernist iconoclasm—namely, Ezra Pound's invocation to "Make it New!" (qtd. in Gay 4)—resonate in how these novels' *new* material objects have arrived, become familiar, exhausted and then discarded to form daily life's debris. Trocchi's own iconoclasm came most starkly in his provocations outside of his fictions. Infamously, at Edinburgh's 1962 International Writers Conference, he denounced Scottish literature as "turgid, petty, provincial, stale, cold-porridge, Bible-clasping nonsense" (qtd. in McGonigal 129). However, it is precisely imagery recalling "cold-porridge"—domestic paraphernalia left forgotten and wasted—which litters *Young Adam*, defining Trocchi's materiality. Joe's narration displays a heightened awareness of such grim, unnoticed details: the quilt "washed too often" (91), "sleep-sweat" (70), "the cigarette butts and the soiled underclothing" (107). Placing Trocchi outside of the confines of Scottish literature he sought to shed, this hyper-attentiveness runs parallel to that of 60s English experimental novelist, Ann Quin. Trocchi and Quin occupy a position—aesthetic not geographic—in British writing attentive to excluded details, that is self-consciously high strung, and receptive to the European avant-garde—particularly the influence of the *nouveau roman*⁵. Quin's novel *Berg*—which memorably begins: "A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father" (7)—illustrates this shared attention to the minutia of daily routine and the façades of human appearance. While being awkwardly seduced by his father's mistress, Quin's titular protagonist fails to cohere her presence into a unified whole; instead, he narratively anatomises her, concentrating on details like how "the powder on her cheeks had dried into small particles round her nostrils" (79). Mirroring *Berg*'s setting in Brighton's crumbling seafront hotels—with their empty, cheap promises of pleasure—such microscopic attention to particulates of powder is indicative—especially given this attempted seduction's Oedipal undertones—of Berg's abjection. The account is, therefore, so detailed as to deny intimacy. Conversely, Joe's sexual pleasure is heightened by such façades. What attracts Joe to Ella (Leslie's wife) is how her body appears "about to tear through [her] fragile too-much-washed cotton dress" (49). Even Ella's armpits excite narrative interest: Joe notices "a damp patch under her arm", comparing the green cotton's "gradually paling yellow" discolouration, in poetic simile, to "like a leaf in autumn" (18). Therefore, the toil of Ella's existence on the

⁵ Such correspondences in estranging, and then innovating, the quotidian further align with the writings of Georges Perec—a key figure of this French literary avant-garde.

canal boat is not only laid bare on her clothes, but further reveals—through over-treatment and shrinkage—how the points of Joe's arousal are entwined with the quotidian. In this regard, Quin's Berg and Trocchi's Joe seem to be different sides of the same coin: their dislocation and marginality figuring in fragmentary perception and embodiment. For Quin, this has its ends in Berg's nausea and inability to unify the selfhood of others—or even himself. Yet for Trocchi, this ruptured perception and textual detail, such as a sweat stain's hue and texture, is not wholly abject. These fragments form Joe's narrative obsession and sexual gratification. Joe's perception thus appears just as idiosyncratic as Morvern's, yet it is burdened with misogynist undercurrents. Not only invoking processes of rapid and inevitable decline, the description of an autumn leaf insidiously implies something to be stamped into the dirt.

More broadly, this attention to material objects, and their centrality to *Young Adam's* plotting, is reinforced by how characters cling to them for epistemological clarity. For Samuel Beckett, the project of his fictions was to grasp onto "the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know" (qtd. in Nixon 178)—the details of domestic life. Cathie's petticoat, the only clothing found on her body, is something secondary characters equally grasp onto. The petticoat becomes the novel's MacGuffin⁶. Violence against women in *Young Adam* is presented with unsurprised indifference, as equally unremarkable as it is in *Morvern Callar*. Unsuccessfully searching in a newspaper for reports about their retrieval of Cathie's body, Leslie grumbles that "an old woman's had her head bashed in in Paisley, but there's nothing about our one" (57). While the repeated preposition "in" coincidentally reinforces the grim physical impact of the murder, Leslie's cold reportage deadens its emotional impact. Instead, there is a heavy implication of wishing to possess Cathie's death. The final clause's possessive determine "our" is almost metatextual: signalling to the reader that the old woman's death is not *our* narrative focus. When reports of Cathie's death do begin to circulate, emphasis is placed on how "she was wearing only a thin petticoat" (44). Upon retelling the story of her body's retrieval in a pub, Leslie is challenged by patrons over whether Cathie was naked if she was found wearing a petticoat, to which he replies: "Same thing. These petticoats is transparent" (Ibid.). Whilst Leslie has seemingly put this issue to rest, the other patrons' interest proliferates through gossiping and inferences into wider society, escalating the apparent crime's magnitude. As

⁶ Necessary to the novel's specific plotting, yet insignificant in of itself.

the only piece of evidence, the implications of the petticoat compels the patron of another pub to speculate that "it was obviously the work of a homicidal maniac, a Jack the Ripper who didn't use razors", going so far as to see in it evidence of "Necrophilia" (120). Moreover, Connie—one of the many women Joe begins an affair with—coldly states that "a woman doesn't get undressed for nothing" (131). Therefore, the petticoat turns the narrative act from what the reader knows to be an accident into a sensationalist sex crime. Indeed, in a bitter irony, this piece of transparent lingerie—emblematic of modernity's flimsy and disposable waste—is what cements Goon (the man falsely accused of Cathie's death) as a sex criminal in the public eye, consequently, sending him to the gallows. The public reaction Trocchi presents seems to anticipate Georges Perec's sense of the "infra-ordinary" (Perec 205). Rather than extraordinary events, what captures modern imagination is merely "the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary" (Ibid.). The petticoat fulfils this attentiveness to everydayness, Trocchi's public seemingly grasping onto whatever clarification through materiality they can glean. What is late or delayed here then is a complication in our expected reaction to events, how we are unable to arrive at a concrete differentiation between significant and insignificant.

However, where Joe's cloying attention to materiality structures *Young Adam's* patterns of confinement, Morvern's relationship to the material world is imbued with a greater sense of agency. Principally, this process occurs through the (literal and textual) device of her Walkman. Warner's novel is saturated in references to music culture. Its mixtape lists and citations are even bolstered by the novel's paratext: in the front matter, Warner dedicates the novel to Holger Czukay⁷. These pop cultural references have led Matthew Wickman to categorise *Morvern Callar* as "hipster postmodernism" (195). Yet Wickman's prefix, "hipster", feels somewhat patronising: potentially being a coded jab at these references merely giving the novel a "cool" veneer. However, Warner's music references are not superficial, instead they feel integrally receptive to postmodernism's breaching of "the Great Divide".

The centrality of Morvern's Walkman to this postmodern aesthetic is in its narrative function as an audible, material and textual reminder of her deceased boyfriend's presence. In literary depictions of memorial reconstruction, if Beckett's Krapp had his spools, the postmodern updating of this key modernist analogue-attachment occurs in Morvern's

⁷ Co-founder and bassist of the German band, Can.

relationship to her mixtapes. Interestingly, outside of the novel, Warner has stated that Morvern's listening preferences are actually "not her music but [...] the favourite music of her dead boyfriend" (qtd. in *Redhead* 132). Thus, the novel's orthographic reproductions of curated compilation cassettes, while ostensibly playful incursions upon the text, in this light, seem to uphold patriarchal connoisseurship—as if Morvern's subjectivity forms part of her boyfriend's record collection. Characters even comment upon the generational disparity between Morvern, her older boyfriend and his outmoded taste: her best friend sarcastically asks to "put some of his queer records on" (70). Even the word choice here foregrounds this distance, "queer" meant—like "gay"—as a disparaging teenage idiom for stupid or unimpressive. Much of the music in the novel is un-contemporaneously obscure, defined by an avant-garde eclecticism of free jazz, Krautrock and post-punk. Such references' very obscurity—for an uninitiated readership—thus confound easy intertextual deductions. Therefore, seemingly reversing Huyssen's "Great Divide"⁸, "low" mass cultural forms (i.e. the mixtape) become exclusionary.

Warner's foregrounding of the gendered politics of music consumption, moreover, impinges upon notions of authorship. His insistence in interviews upon the importance of the music being her boyfriend's taste reveals the novel's broader metatextual anxieties about the legitimacy and credibility of female-focalised, male-authored fiction. Yet Warner's acclaimed, rounded characterisation of Morvern is in stark contrast to Trocchi's construction of female characters. Female characters in Trocchi are so monothematically rendered that they become almost vegetive. An odd—even clumsy—pattern of vegetable similes throughout *Young Adam* reinforces this: Cathie's drowned body is compared to "potatoes, peeled, white and shining" (10) dropped into a bucket of water; her exposed leg is "like a parsnip" (7); the breasts of another woman are awkwardly phrased as resembling "long slender parts of pears" (105). In a more constructive account of females in fiction, Morvern's mixtapes, with their connotations of sampling and reproduction, actually coalesce into the novel's progression to form a neat symbol of dialogues between authorship and appropriation. By the novel's end, there is an insistence upon Morvern making her own mixtapes from her boyfriend's collection—"especially for the sunbathing sessions" (189). Defiantly displaying her freed female sexuality, this re-appropriation becomes emancipatory.

⁸ Modernism's cultural policing whereby it reinforced a "categorical distinction between high art and mass culture" (Huyssen viii).

Indeed, *Morvern Callar*'s most crucial (displayed) narrative act is one of appropriation: her renaming her boyfriend's unpublished manuscript to her own. It is critically common for the authorial figure of Morvern's boyfriend to be understood as an analogue for Warner himself: to Jordana Brown, it is "the key" to understand the text that "Warner has written himself into his novel as Morvern's boyfriend" (105). Therefore, if in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, a key text of Scottish postmodern fiction's hijinks, the reader is treated to an encounter with the author himself; *Morvern Callar*'s postmodern joke is that the 'death of the author' has occurred even before the novel's beginning. Though it would be naïve to suggest that Morvern is wholly freed from Warner's authorial control, this narrative progression illustrates a metatextual, productive awareness of character construction. Demonstrably less regressively patriarchal than Trocchi, Morvern's fragmentary sense of self—embodied and focalised through postmodern devices (both figurative and material)—therefore, coalesces toward a sense of achieving female autonomy, and a perspective beyond late modernism's limits.

Attainability, however, remains suspended by the end of both novels, aptly reflective of the uncertainties of human existence's own "narrative" trajectory. In the wake of the 1945 Trinity nuclear test, humanity has entered, and unwittingly engineered, a new epoch: the Anthropocene—defined by the dispersal of radioactive elements across Earth. As, for Virginia Woolf, "human character changed" (Woolf 396) under the pressures of modernity, mankind's newfound ability to *change* an atom (ordinary matter's smallest constituent unit) into an explosive force, with the potential to annihilate reality, necessarily demanded a re-characterisation of humanity's position. Under the burden of these concerns, Thomas S. Davis suggests that post-war British literature operates "under the dual anxieties of loss and anticipation" (Davis 24). By the end of *Young Adam*, it appears as if Trocchi's narrative impulse succumbs to this neutralisation of the future. With another man sentenced for Cathie's death and Joe's culpability undiscovered, the narration falters as Joe admits he "cannot remember how the court broke up" (146). With no narrative arch, redemption or justice, the novel ends in a faltering mid-sentence: "the disintegration was already taking place" (Ibid.). Jordan's late modernist aesthetic as being "at its limit point [...] constituted by the realisation that rupture supervenes its own representation" (*Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel* 194) thus finds its textual form and terminus here—the syntax seemingly having itself disintegrated. Equally, we find Morvern at the end of her novel at something of a limit point: returning to a mid-winter Scotland, penniless and pregnant. Despite this apparent bleakness, the final sentence maintains a sense of propulsion: "I started

the walking forwards into that night" (Warner 229). Once again utilising the idiosyncrasies of Morvern's voice, the definite article and the demonstrative adjective exude a sense of agency and momentum. Therefore, neatly embodying Davis' dual anxieties, whereas Trocchi's novel is itself at a loss at where to continue, the narrative of *Morvern Callar* anticipates something beyond the confines of its own text. Consequently, if late modernism came after its main event, the postmodernity of *Morvern Callar* implies a sense of moving towards a new one.

Through their shared sense of physical and narrative dislocation, these two novels therefore—somewhat paradoxically—helpfully map and ground elements of 20th century literature, and late-modernism's own afterlives. The abiding presence of such past ruptures upon their present characters' perception is keenly felt in both texts. The narrative weight of these ruptures impinges upon on their resultant nonlinearity, elliptical and errant narratives. Consequently, both *Young Adam* and *Morvern Callar* are illustrated as literature at the margins; simultaneously geographically, contextually and subjectively. Their shared late modernist characteristics of weakness and dilution are, however, not in their ends weak. Instead they characterise a stubborn dissension within post-war British literature. This is rendered not only through their characters' physical and emotional trauma, but further stylistically in their semantic ambiguities and presentation of psychic tatters. As such, they are texts which frustrate conventional accounts of British fictions after modernism as resistant to stylistic innovation. Indeed, they question how *late* these modernist aesthetics run, tracing ruptures along a timeline from the mid-century to the beginning of a new one. Yet Trocchi's novel, in being so overwhelmed by prolepsis and retrospection, succumbs to an exhaustion of narrative. However, Warner's novel ends with a sense of what is outside of modernism's limits. Morvern's ruptured perception, while often painful, is not one she suffers under; instead, it is utilised to create a narrative which ultimately looks forward rather than backwards.

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