Introduction

The Aesthetics of Hunger

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Print publication date: 2018
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: November 2018
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198828891.001.0001

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Abstract and Keywords

The introduction maps out the broad intellectual history of hunger, modernism, and aesthetic autonomy, sketching the prehistories that led to their convergence in the art of hunger. It sets out two competing definitions of aesthetic autonomy: a sociological definition, deriving from the writing of Pierre Bourdieu; and a philosophical one, deriving from the German philosophical tradition. It argues that the art of hunger represents a crisis in both definitions of aesthetic autonomy. At the same time, the art of hunger reflects a changing understanding of the body more broadly, as it becomes increasingly understood as a limit to human potential in the nineteenth century. The confluence of these failed modes of aesthetic autonomy and the new understanding of the body as a site of human failure and limitation, creates the conditions within which the art of hunger emerges as a modernist trope.

Keywords: hunger, aesthetic autonomy, modernism, aesthetics, the body
Hunger as a metaphor for art is a surprisingly pervasive trope in modernism. Arthur Rimbaud’s sonorous, “Ma faim, Anne, Anne” of his 1872 poem “Fêtes de la faim” and the quiet death by starvation of Herman Melville’s Bartleby inaugurate this tradition in proto-modernist writing, but the trope resonates in a peculiarly vivid way within—or more accurately, on the margins of—modernism proper. For Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, it was the key figure of his first semi-autobiographical novel, *Hunger*. For Kafka, it provided one of his most potent metaphors of artisthood in his 1922 short story “A Hunger Artist.” The trope was taken up by many of their successors, particularly the Parisian surrealists and the American Lost Generation. In post-war and contemporary literature, the metaphor of writing as a kind of starvation continues to resonate in the works of writers grappling with their relation to modernism, from Samuel Beckett, to Paul Auster; to J. M. Coetzee.

This book argues that this tradition—what I call, following Auster, “the art of hunger”—uses the figure of hunger to dramatize and work through a set of aesthetic problems. More specifically, I argue that the art of hunger emerges as a figure for aesthetic autonomy in crisis; a figure, that is, for aesthetic autonomy that has failed to secure the social consensus that would make autonomy legible. Without this social assent, the link between aesthetic autonomy and freedom—which has long been one of its most pervasive and powerful justifications—disappears. The art of hunger instead imagines the aesthetic as a realm of unfreedom and physical suffering, marked by a refusal to bow to necessity that nonetheless fails to end in liberation. This aesthetic stance negates most familiar justifications for art—it is neither free nor pleasurable, neither politically or morally edifying nor intrinsically satisfying—and in this sense it dramatizes the loss of social assent by radically assenting to be as unredeemable as art’s most vehement critics assume it to be. Nonetheless, from this position of failure and negation, the art of hunger imagines a novel aesthetics that sees the body as the point of mediation between art and society, between necessity and negation. In doing so, it offers a way of thinking art beyond the requirement of freedom, and of testing what an unfree art might be capable of.
The art of hunger is best understood as a fundamentally modernist trope, in the sense that, in its dramatization of aesthetic autonomy, it stages the crisis of one of modernism’s signature aesthetic positions. Modernism’s association with autonomy has been one of its most controversial characteristics, often fuelling attacks on the writing of this period and on its heirs. Much modernist scholarship since the field’s resurgence in the 1990s—work on gender and race, on the middlebrow, on modernism’s relationship to media and popular culture, and on its relationship to celebrity and the literary marketplace—has implicitly or explicitly sought to redeem modernism (or to undermine it) by unpicking the apparently inviolable connection between modernism and autonomy, revealing new, less autonomous modernisms and exposing the less autonomous flipside of high modernism.¹ This work has demonstrated the extent to which modernism’s association with autonomy has been the result of a narrow canon—often disproportionately European, male, and white—and of a too-hasty willingness to take authors from this canon at their word when they have espoused positions of autonomy. It has shown that modernism was a larger tent than previously assumed, and that the espousal of aesthetic autonomy constituted only a single strand within this complex literary-historical picture. Nonetheless, a more recent wave of scholarship, typified by Andrew Goldstone’s *Fictions of Autonomy* and Lisa Siraganian’s *Modernism’s Other Work*, has sought to swing the pendulum back, reaffirming the centrality of aesthetic autonomy to modernist literature, by arguing that autonomy is less formalist, less apolitical, and less asocial than we have tended to assume. The art of hunger is a modernist practice in the sense that, like the modernist writing examined by Goldstone and Siraganian, it interrogates writing’s relationship to autonomy. *The Art of Hunger* seeks to contribute to the revival of interest in modernist autonomy from the besieged and beleaguered position implied by the art of hunger.
While the art of hunger is a modernist trope, its tentacles reach not only back into the nineteenth century but forward to the very end of the twentieth. This book traces the modernist art of hunger’s contemporary legacies, focusing primarily on writing between 1945 and 1990, particularly the work of Samuel Beckett, Paul Auster, and J. M. Coetzee. In orienting myself towards the writing of the late twentieth century, I am less interested in arguing that these later writers should be classed as modernist, than in tracing modernism’s legacies in more recent writing. Aesthetic autonomy after modernism has a checkered history, retaining much of its earlier prestige in certain circles, but also experiencing a series of profound crises and shocks that challenged its ongoing viability as an aesthetic position. Throughout these travails, aesthetic autonomy was consistently understood as a modernist position, and modernism’s fate was insistently linked to that of aesthetic autonomy. Modernism as an idea in the late twentieth-century literary imagination was thus intimately bound up with the idea of aesthetic autonomy. When late modernists like Beckett, postmodernists like Auster, and postcolonial writers like Coetzee draw on the art of hunger, they do so in dialogue with its earlier modernist manifestations. This tradition therefore becomes a path by which post-war and contemporary writing negotiates its relationship to modernism, and works through the fate of aesthetic autonomy beyond the modernist era. It offers an alternate version of aesthetic autonomy—less certain of its social position, and less utopian in its claims—that remains more tenable during moments of aesthetic autonomy’s most acute crises, as modernist autonomy seems, repeatedly, to enter what feels like its death throes, losing (and then regaining) its prestige without losing its centrality to many writers’ conceptualizations of the aesthetic.

1. Aesthetic Autonomy Without Social Assent
If the art of hunger represents a failure of social assent to aesthetic autonomy, it confronts an immediate objection, in that we do not typically think of aesthetic autonomy as a social phenomenon. While its critics have worried over its apparent irresponsible refusal of the social, however, theorists of aesthetic autonomy have repeatedly emphasized that it relies upon social assent. The communicability of apparently subjective aesthetic judgements—what he calls “common sense”—is a central tenet of Kant’s definition of the aesthetic in the *Critique of Judgement*, usually taken as the inaugural document of aesthetic autonomy. In “The Crisis in Culture,” Hannah Arendt foregrounds this dimension of Kant’s writing, arguing that “the ability to see things not only from one’s point of view but from the point of view of all those who happen to be present” is central to Kantian aesthetics. Arendt’s reading of Kantian judgement shifts his aesthetics somewhat, insisting that it is not the universality of Kantian “common sense” but the more limited, more context-bound assent of “all those who happen to be present” that defines the sociality of aesthetic experience, but they share a conviction that aesthetics requires social assent for its operations.
Pierre Bourdieu, who has traced the emergence of an autonomous literary field in France in the late nineteenth century, makes the most sustained and influential case for aesthetic autonomy as an inherently social phenomenon, arguing that the “society of artists” produces a market that has “the virtue of assuring a form of social recognition for those who otherwise appear (that is, to other groups) as a challenge to common sense.” Bourdieu’s sociological analysis of this literary field is made possible by his understanding of autonomy as a social category that declares its separation from—even opposition to—the wider society, even as it generates its own social dynamics. His work offers a conceptual framework for more recent analyses of modernist autonomy, such as Andrew Goldstone’s reading of it as “a shared social-aesthetic project” in which, he argues, “fictions of autonomy change according to what they seek to be autonomous from.” Despite the sometimes fairly dramatic differences in their positions, these theorists all agree that aesthetics in general, and aesthetic autonomy in particular, are inherently social phenomena, and that art can only meaningfully be autonomous if this autonomy is grounded in the community’s assent, be that the assent of the presumptively educated bourgeoisie implied by Kant’s “common sense” or that of Bourdieu’s oppositional “society of artists.” Moreover, as both Bourdieu and Goldstone suggest, aesthetic autonomy as we know it today has achieved its most influential and stable social context in the communities and coteries of modernism.
The art of hunger presents a special case of aesthetic autonomy as a social phenomenon, however, because it dramatizes the breakdown of this assent. The authors discussed here experience the loss of the sociality of the aesthetic on two fronts. On the one hand, they confront a public that does not grant the autonomy of the aesthetic. On the other, they (p.5) experience art as an intensely isolated and isolating experience, stripped of the alternative social recognition of Bourdieu’s “society of artists.” I do not mean to confuse this collapse of sociality with earlier understandings of aesthetic autonomy that deny the importance of the social to this concept entirely. With Rita Felski, I agree that, “Art works must be sociable to survive, irrespective of their attitude to ‘society’.” This book is interested, however, in a tradition whose problematic attitude to “society,” and whose sense of society’s equally complicated relationship to its authors, pushes its artworks to the limits of their ability to survive (the art of hunger, after all, is a figure for art that approaches death). My work offers a gentle corrective, from the margins, to claims like Lisa Siraganian’s insistence that, “Autonomy from the world was never, for the modernists, a failure of relation to it.” I argue that, for the tradition of modernism that I examine here, autonomy from the world did imply a failure of relation, but that this was neither triumphant nor desired—and did not, whatever the difficulties it threw up, exempt them from seeing autonomous art as a social phenomenon. Instead, the writers I discuss in this book experience their writing’s failure of relation to society as a traumatic collapse of context and purpose. The art of hunger is the tradition, I suggest, that seeks to explore the possibilities that remain available for art when a writer’s aesthetics entail a collapse of their social context.
One way of understanding this position is to see the art of hunger as the desocialization of the more familiar trope of the starving artist. Bourdieu notes that, “the invention of the pure aesthetic is inseparable from the invention of a new social personality, that of the great professional artist who combines, in a union as fragile as it is improbable, a sense of transgression and freedom from conformity with the rigor of an extremely strict discipline of living and of work, which presupposes bourgeois ease and celibacy.” The starving artist typifies this new professional artist, his starvation signifying both prongs of this “personality”: starving is simultaneously a form of discipline, as in the practice of fasting; and the visible manifestation of the poverty that signals the artist’s refusal to conform to the strictures of the marketplace. He (these artists are always presumptively male) is a familiar figure in modernist self-representation: he is the protagonist of autobiographies from Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* to Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, and appears with enough frequency in surrealist self-mythologization that Mina Loy felt moved to *satirize* it with her novel *Insel*. But all these starving artists, however taciturn and wilfully unpleasant, are embedded within a bohemian social milieu that makes their behavior intelligible as a form of aesthetic practice. Indeed, for many of them, the social is precisely the point: *A Moveable Feast* is above all a portrait of the social world of 1920s expatriate Paris; *Insel* above all the story of a friendship. In these cases, adopting the persona of the starving artist is understood to cement a writer’s or artist’s position within bohemia, rather than to cast them out of it.
The art of hunger that I examine in this book both is and is not part of this starving artist tradition. Like the starving artist, the writers of the art of hunger combine social transgression with intense discipline; they aspire, that is, to become the kind of “social personality” capable of embodying the autonomy of art. But, in an important sense, they fail—fail in part because aesthetic autonomy requires an audience that is not available to them, a society of artists that is neither an uncomprehending mass audience nor the complete absence of an audience. The difference between a figure like Kafka’s hunger artist, who ends as a lonely and unrecognized (and dead) failure, and one like Henry Miller or Ernest Hemingway, who is able to leverage his performance of starving autonomy to cement his position within a literary field, is, in large part, one of positioning. Those writers most centrally involved in elaborating the art of hunger—Hamsun, Kafka, and Beckett, for instance—stand persistently at the margins of modernism. Socially, ethnically, geographically, or historically, they are all notably peripheral to the main game of Anglo-American “high modernism,” and to the other major modernisms flourishing in Germany and France in the early twentieth century. They sit, like Hamsun, on Europe’s underdeveloped edges; like Coetzee, in its “provincial” colonies (and at its extreme historical margins); or, like Kafka, as part of a marginal and displaced minority, writing in another culture’s language, producing what Deleuze and Guattari have called his “minor literature.”  

Or, like Beckett and Auster, they are in the right place at the wrong time, writing a second- or third-generation expatriate Parisian modernism, long after the expatriates have all left Paris. On these historical and geographical peripheries, where European modernism’s hegemony fizzles out, the autonomous literary field as Bourdieu describes it does not exist to provide the kind of well-developed social milieu that he finds in late nineteenth-century Paris. Out here, aesthetic autonomy is only an aesthetic principle, not a social dynamic. And without the social organization that validates and elucidates the principle, the starving artist is less a recognizable “social personality” than a choleric old crank, refusing to eat for no reason at all.
These writers, then, are marginal—but not too marginal. The canon of hunger artists, at least insofar as hunger functions as a reliable and readable trope for aesthetic autonomy, is an exclusively white male one, and for good reason. As a large body of scholarship has recognized, self-starvation has a long association with women and with femininity. As a result, female hunger artists—Emily Dickinson or Simone Weil would be strong candidates—are inevitably read as participating in a tradition that is deeply invested in the political, social, and religious roles of women. Similarly, poverty became increasingly racialized in many parts of the English-speaking world during the twentieth century, both domestically within countries like the US, the UK, and Australia, and globally as the concept of “world hunger” emerged, foregrounding extreme poverty in regions such as Africa and South Asia. In this context, the starving bodies of people of color developed their own inescapable set of cultural meanings, inscribing them within a narrative that linked poverty to race, as I discuss in the context of South African apartheid in Chapter 4.

Because starvation has such strong political and cultural associations for both women and people of color, it is only white men whose starvation can reliably be read as a purely aesthetic gesture, and therefore only white men for whom hunger can reliably function as a trope for autonomy. This caveat ought to remind us that the art of hunger tradition is not exempt from the older criticisms that have been mounted against aesthetic autonomy: that it tends to be a privilege, like other forms of autonomy, reserved for white men, and that its canonization has tended to disproportionately exclude women, people of color, and working-class writers from its ranks. Indeed, it is particularly important to bear in mind the racialized and gendered nature of this tradition as I move, in the pages that follow, to conceptualize its relation to freedom and embodiment.
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One of the curious side effects of these writers’ combination of white masculinity with a marginal modernism has been to make them sometimes (p.8) appear to critics as towering, isolated geniuses, even as contemporary criticism has theoretically abandoned such affectations. Despite on-going work that seeks to place them in their historical moments, scholarly communities around authors like Beckett and Coetzee continue to read the oppositionality of their aesthetic position as making them into ahistorical figures who somehow transcend their social contexts. One of the claims of this book is that the crisis of aesthetic sociality that is crystallized in the art of hunger is itself a social position, and that the historical, discursive, and social contexts out of which these authors write shape their aesthetics more profoundly than much criticism has acknowledged. This book is interested in how the crises that confront the legacies of modernism in the latter half of the twentieth century place aesthetic autonomy under siege in these new discursive environments. Locating Beckett within the debates around aesthetic autonomy in post-war France, Auster in the intellectual and political foment of post-1968 US and France, and Coetzee in the hyper-politicized literary field of late apartheid South Africa, I argue that each of these authors stakes a claim to autonomy and seeks to affiliate themselves to modernism in literary fields that no longer straightforwardly recognize such claims. They therefore adopt positions that, while oppositional, are best understood within the debates out of which they arise. Moreover, by tracing these debates, I suggest that we get an insight into the travails of aesthetic autonomy itself over the twentieth century, and a sense of the extent to which modernism set the terms for late twentieth-century thinking on art and aesthetics.

2. Taste And Tastelessness: Against Culinary Art
But why turn to hunger to describe this crisis of aesthetic autonomy? Part of the answer, which I explore in more detail in Chapter 1, lies in its capacity to dramatize the less-than-glamorous stakes of being outside the protection of society and its economic arrangements. Another part of the answer is more philosophical. The art of hunger is in key respects the bastard child of German Idealist aesthetics, which invented the concept of aesthetic autonomy through the systematic exclusion of food from the categories of art and beauty. This tradition emerges in opposition to eighteenth-century British taste philosophy, in which the concept of aesthetic taste was initially developed by analogy to literal or bodily taste. Hume, for instance, \( (p.9) \) draws upon “the great resemblance between mental and bodily taste” to derive a definition of the all-important “delicacy of imagination” from a story, taken from *Don Quixote*, about the ability of Sancho Panza’s relatives to distinguish faint overtones of metal or leather in a barrel of wine. This definition rests on the assumption that aesthetic taste is something like bodily taste applied to a different object. It takes place in the context of a broad assumption that aesthetics is principally a question of sensation—that is, that it is phenomenological and acts on the body.
Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, the foundational document of aesthetic autonomy, represents the decisive break from this tradition, the moment at which food is exiled from the realm of art and beauty. Writing out of and against the British tradition, Kant retains the concept of taste as the faculty by which aesthetic judgements are passed, but draws a bright line between its aesthetic and bodily manifestations. This distinction becomes the foundation upon which Kant builds one of the most distinctive and influential aspects of his theory of aesthetics, that of the disinterestedness of the aesthetic. For Kant, “*Taste* is the faculty of judging an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*. The object of such a delight is called *beautiful.*” Kant develops this definition of the aesthetic by arguing that the beautiful is devoid of both sensory interest in the agreeable and conceptual interest in the good. If Hume and other taste philosophers could derive properties of aesthetic taste by exploring its analogy with bodily taste, Kant instead takes eating and physical taste as paradigmatic examples of the agreeable. Thus, Kant uses “a dish that stimulates the sense of taste with spices and other condiments” as his example of that which is agreeable but not good, and illustrates the inherently particular nature of the agreeable by observing that the claim “Canary-wine is agreeable” always implies only, “It is agreeable to me.” The agreeable—with the pleasures of dining as its principal manifestation—is neither disinterested, nor universal, nor purposive without purpose, nor necessary, failing on each of Kant’s four definitions of the beautiful. It stands therefore for everything that he seeks to exclude from the category of the aesthetic, leading him to found the principle of aesthetic autonomy on an opposition between aesthetics and eating.
Kant’s repudiation of eating, however, is not an embrace of hunger. For Kant, eating is only one manifestation of the whole realm of bodily experience and desire that maintains the subject in an interested relation to the physical world. Hunger, another manifestation of bodily interest, is similarly excluded. Indeed, in a rare elision between physical and mental taste, Kant opposes hunger to all kinds of taste, arguing that it removes the faculty of discrimination on which aesthetic taste is founded. As a result, he concludes, “only when people’s needs have been satisfied can we tell who among the crowd has taste or not.” Hunger in this sense emerges as a paradigm of interest, an experience of investment so strong that it erases everything outside itself. Moreover, its inimicality to either taste or a properly disinterested aesthetic is also, crucially, the mechanism that preserves the class structure of Kant’s aesthetic theory, ensuring that the poor, those whose needs have not yet been satisfied, are by definition excluded from entry into the bourgeois realm of Kantian taste.
Kant’s formulation of aesthetic autonomy has been enormously influential for post-Kantian philosophers, artists, and audiences, standing at the foundation of discussions of aesthetic autonomy wherever it appears. This influence, however, has frequently carried within it the implicit opposition between eating and aesthetics. Writing in the wake of Kant, aesthetic philosophers have had constant recourse to this trope in their attempts to establish art’s autonomy. Where Kant is interested in the subjective processes that allow us to make aesthetic judgements, understood broadly to include not only artistic but also and primarily natural beauty, Hegel’s aesthetics shifts the focus to the nature of art itself. For Hegel, art is a particular expression of Geist and therefore “has the vocation of revealing the truth in the form of sensuous artistic shape.” Nonetheless, like Kant, Hegel opposes this truth-embodies sensuous shape to “purely sensuous apprehension,” where the latter has much in common with the Kantian category of the agreeable. For Hegel, art is opposed to desire, which he defines as an “appetitive relation to the outer world.” Echoing and extending Kant’s profession that the aesthetic must be divorced from any interest in an object’s actual existence, Hegel emphasizes that, “desire requires for itself not merely the superficial appearance of external things, but themselves in their concrete sensuous existence. Mere pictures of the wood that it wants to use, or of the animals that it wants to eat, would be of no service to desire.” Here Hegel draws an explicit distinction between real objects capable of inciting desire and art which, deferring the object’s actual existence, also defers its relation to desire. (p.11) Here, as in Kant, eating returns as one of the key examples of such desire. In fact, as Hegel’s editor, Michael Inwood, suggests in his commentary, Hegel’s arguments in this section seem “more appropriate to the desire to eat than to e.g. sexual desire,” suggesting that Hegel’s conception of the desire that he posits as antithetical to art takes the desire for food as its exemplary and informing instance. While for Hegel the determining feature of art is its sensuous embodiment of truth, this sensuousness remains opposed, as in Kant, to bodies that eat or that desire to eat.
Arthur Schopenhauer, Hegel’s rival and fellow post-Kantian Idealist, adopts an even stricter and more thoroughgoing view of the separation of art and appetite. For Schopenhauer, the true value of art lies in its suspension of the will, which he sees as the source of all suffering, the desiring property that motivates and corrupts all (phenomenal) existence. Art presents Ideas, which, like the Platonic idea or Kantian thing-in-itself, constitute the true nature of the world, divorced from the impulses of the will. As the bearer of these will-less Ideas, art therefore promises to still the will. The desire to eat, in contrast, is one of the principal manifestations of what Schopenhauer at one point calls the “hungry will,” and he makes extensive use of examples drawn from the domain of food and eating to illustrate its malevolent force. In his definition of the charming—a rough analogue to the Kantian agreeable—Schopenhauer extends this exclusion to specifically prohibit the depiction of food in art, singling out Dutch still life painting for “err[ing] by depicting edible objects.” This misstep, Schopenhauer suggests, negates their very status as art, for, “By their deceptive appearance these necessarily excite the appetite, and this is just a stimulation of the will which puts an end to any aesthetic contemplation of the object.” Schopenhauer, radicalizing the exclusion of eating from the aesthetic, insists that anything that might give rise to even the thought of eating compromises proper aesthetic detachment, stirs the will, and thus undermines art’s true function.
Despite his firm rejection of hunger that is oriented towards an object, Schopenhauer, alone among the Idealists, reserves an important place for self-starvation. In the fourth book of *The World as Will and as Representation*, Schopenhauer sets out his ethics, which are supposed to achieve what Schopenhauer’s aesthetics cannot: a permanent renunciation of the will, in place of the temporary reprieve offered by art. Here, he advocates an asceticism whose aim “is to serve as a constant mortification of the will, (p.12) so that satisfaction of desires, the sweets of life, may not again stir the will, of which self-knowledge has conceived a horror”—a practice that finds one of its highest expressions in the renunciation of the will to eat.23 Schopenhauer is, however, careful to keep his embrace of asceticism separate, both structurally and conceptually, from his aesthetic rejection of eating. The reasons for this derive from the Idealists’ shared conception of aesthetic autonomy: aesthetics, for Schopenhauer, as for Kant and Hegel, is a purely mental phenomenon. This is the source of its strength as a site for the Kantian play of faculties, Hegelian revelation of truth, and Schopenhauerian suspension of the will. It also means, however, that the price of this autonomy is its exile from the everyday life of either artist or spectator, as well as from the realms of bodily experience and sensation. Art, in such a model, can have as little to do with hunger as with eating, for both are experiences that must be lived out from within a body and both therefore necessarily violate the relegation of the aesthetic to the mental, on which its autonomy is constructed. In this context, the art of hunger might be understood as a calculated misreading or parody of German Idealism’s opposition between eating and aesthetics, an attempt to reinscribe aesthetic autonomy in the material realm from which the Idealists exclude it.
In this sense, Friedrich Nietzsche can be read as an early philosophical precursor to the art of hunger. The German Idealist tradition excludes eating from the realm of art in order to develop a theory of aesthetic autonomy that is not bound to the body. Nietzsche, whose aesthetics tend towards the heteronomous and embodied, develops a counter-metaphor, figuring modern art as a form of starvation. For Nietzsche, the playwrights of late Greek drama are “emaciated epigones,” whom he condemns to “Hades so that there you can for once eat your fill on the crumbs of the masters of a previous age.”

In their humiliating starvation, they are, he claims, the forebears of modern culture, whose “uncanny agitation” is nothing more than “the starving man’s craven grasping and snatching for food.” For Nietzsche, starvation is a sign of belatedness and derivativeness, of an excessive reliance on “history and criticism,” and of a generalized cultural enervation. He rejects aesthetic autonomy, and the literary historical and critical traditions that he associates with it, on the grounds of its deleterious effects on the body. While the writers I discuss in this book do not share Nietzsche’s skepticism of aesthetic autonomy or his repudiation of bodily weakness, they nonetheless carry forward the claim that modern art is undergoing a crisis, linked to its belatedness, and that hunger offers a way of inscribing that belatedness on the body.

Together, these philosophers from Kant to Nietzsche constitute a tradition whose influence on modernist art and aesthetics has been immense. In different ways, each of these thinkers has articulated and pioneered some of modernism’s key ideas. Kant’s model of autonomous art underpins many modernist theories of aesthetics, while Hegel’s claim that modern art had reached or passed a critical endpoint is an early expression of the sense of crisis that pervades modernism. Schopenhauer’s alternate articulation of the central importance of art, which places music at its heart, was similarly influential throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, while Nietzsche has frequently been read as one of the great aestheticians of modernism. These philosophers’ ideas, and the models of aesthetic autonomy that they embrace (or, in Nietzsche’s case, reject), pervade the modernist period and underpin much of its artistic production.
Modernist writers continue to make use of both German Idealism’s exclusion of food from the realm of the aesthetic and its coupling of this un Consuming art with the notion of aesthetic autonomy. Examples of the modernist disdain for appetitive art are numerous, and span modernism’s stylistic and ideological range. Bertolt Brecht, in one of the most influential formulations of this trope, desairs of “our existing opera” which, he argues, “is a culinary opera...To every object it adopts a hedonistic approach.” Henry James similarly dismisses those readers whose aesthetic taste too closely resembles its literal counterpart in “The Art of Fiction,” complaining that, “The ‘ending’ of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddlesome doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes.”

George Orwell reprises the metaphor in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, where Gordon Comstock expresses his disgust for the “soggy, half-baked trash” of the popular novel, imagining it as “pudding, suet pudding. Eight hundred slabs of pudding walling him in—a vault of puddingstone.”

Bloomsbury’s chief aestheticians, whose aesthetics were strongly influenced by Kantian ideals of disinterest and aesthetic autonomy, were similarly united in their insistence that art and appetite belong to irreconcilable realms. Roger Fry writes dismissively of mass-market novels, “which supply every day their pittance of imagined romantic love to hungry girl clerks and housemaids,” while Clive Bell ridicules psychoanalysts by professing that, “if Cézanne was forever painting apples, that had nothing to do with an insatiable appetite for those handsome, but to me unpalatable, fruit.”

Even Katherine Mansfield, who is on the whole more receptive to food imagery than her male counterparts, complains of “these little predigested books written by authors who have nothing to say.”
The modernist scorn for culinary art, like that of the German Idealists, reflects a commitment to aesthetic autonomy. It suggests that art that is too readily consumed is unserious and unaesthetic, and seeks to demarcate a zone of high art, uncontaminated by the temptation of easy pleasures or the desires of the flesh. For these modernists, digestible or “predigested” art, with its “agreeable aftertastes,” occupies a position similar to Kant’s category of the agreeable and Schopenhauer’s of the charming, in that they are all forms of cultural production whose excessive ability to satisfy removes them from the sphere of the aesthetic. The modernists, however, turn this philosophical heritage towards their own concerns, inscribing it within the opposition between modernism and mass culture. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, “Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture.”

Modernists used their disdain for edible, consumable art as one of the key tropes through which they figured this exclusion. Moreover, as Fry’s reference to “hungry girl clerks and housemaids” suggests, the modernist scorn for culinary art preserves the gender politics of the modernism/mass culture distinction. As Huyssen has shown, “political, psychological and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities.” Within this gendered framework, the girlish treats, superficial pleasures, and domestic labor suggested by the culinary arts perpetuate the modernist contempt for feminized mass culture and preserve an austere and ascetic masculinity as the site of high culture.
The modernist rewriting of culinary art as mass art has had a pervasive influence on twentieth-century theory and criticism. Theorists as different as Hans Robert Jauss and Q. D. Leavis have written against the corrupting influence of “culinary’ or entertainment art” and the “detrimental diet” of bestsellers.35 No doubt the most influential theoretical formulation of this anti-culinary trope, however, comes from Adorno, in his staunchly anti-populist defense of aesthetic autonomy. For Adorno, mass culture is characterized by its “pre-digested quality...It is baby-food: permanent self-reflection upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which it creates in the first place.”36 Because it offers no roughage, no resistance, mass culture has an infantalizing effect on its audiences. It limits their ability to “digest” things for themselves, their ability to analyze and confront new texts. In this context, Adorno argues, art is the antidote to the passive consumption promoted by capitalism and symbolized by the too-easily digested. Following Kant, who, he argues, “snatched art away from that avaricious philistinism that always wants to touch it and taste it,” Adorno elaborates an anti-capitalist aesthetic autonomy.37 For Adorno, art’s difficulty is key to its ability to hold off the voracious hordes: “the absorption of resistant material and themes opposes the culinary consumption of art even if, given the general ideological tendency to integrate everything that resists integration, consumption undertakes to swallow everything up whole, however repulsive it might seem.”38 Adorno combines elements of Kantian autonomy with the new modernist privileging of art’s unfamiliarity or difficulty, in order to revise both traditions from a Marxist perspective. Eliding the difference between the consumption of food and capitalist consumption, he uses the trope of anti-culinary art to figure art’s critical stance towards capitalist commodity culture at large.
The conceptual link between hunger and aesthetic autonomy that is the subject of this book comes out of this philosophical tradition. Pitting autonomous art against culinary art, and aesthetic autonomy against the pleasures of a good meal, the philosophers and critics traced above pave the way to imagine hunger as the natural mode of aesthetic autonomy. When Adorno declares that, “the bourgeoisie want art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better,” or when Nietzsche imagines the modern artist as “eternally hungry,” they suggest that hunger and asceticism lie at the heart of the modern and modernist understanding of art. The art of hunger might be understood as an attempt to take this conceptualization of aesthetic autonomy both seriously and literally. Like the philosophers traced above, the writers in this tradition are committed to aesthetic autonomy. This attachment leads them to pit high art against the pleasures of mass culture, and to imagine art as, in its essence, an unsatisfying and difficult undertaking. They do so, however, by translating aesthetic autonomy back into the realm of the body, thus seeking to dramatize an art that, contra Kant and his post-Kantian friends, suffers through its own embodiment.
The aesthetic autonomy that emerges from the tradition outlined above is in many respects a different beast to the Bourdieusian notion of autonomy with which I began. While Bourdieu conceives of autonomy as a social phenomenon, in which a literary field establishes its social position by opposing itself to the commercial demands of popular and mass art, the tradition I trace here is a philosophical one. It is committed to an ideal of autonomy that is an intrinsic property, not of a literary field, but of art or aesthetic appreciation as such. The art of hunger, as an art that stages the loss of aesthetic autonomy’s social context, relies upon this less contextually bound understanding of autonomy for its viability. In various ways, all the authors I discuss in these pages write themselves into the tradition above, using it, and the tradition of the art of hunger itself, as an ersatz literary field, an alternate context in which aesthetic autonomy can find its guarantor. Autonomy for these writers, therefore, is both a social condition, as Bourdieu claims, and a particular philosophical idea about the nature of literature. Indeed, the crisis of autonomy that I am associating with the art of hunger is the direct result of the disjuncture between the idea of autonomy traced above and its social milieu. The art of hunger, that is, is a position that dramatizes the painful failure of these different modes of autonomy to coincide, through the isolated, victimized, and spectacular body of the autonomous artist.

(p.17) 3. The Art of Hunger Is An Unfree Art
The attempt to persevere with an autonomous art in a social environment where aesthetic autonomy is disputed or disparaged throws into question its capacity to produce freedom. To strip aesthetic autonomy of its association with freedom, however, is a strange and difficult move, cutting against almost every extant defense of the concept. As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have observed, “many of our most powerful critical models see criticism as a practice of freedom by locating autonomy, self-reflexiveness, detachment and liberatory potential either in the artwork itself or in the valiant labor of the critic.” Aesthetic autonomy is a particularly influential instance of this association between criticism and liberation, and has been theorized from its inception as a practice of freedom. Kant’s characterization of aesthetic judgement as the “free play” of the faculties opens the way for this association, and it is brought into an early political formulation in Friedrich Schiller’s 1794 treatise On the Aesthetic Education of Man, which argues that “To bestow freedom by means of freedom is the fundamental law” of what he calls the “aesthetic State.”
This association between aesthetic autonomy and freedom persists into more recent accounts, and across remarkably different political ideologies. It is foundational to Jacques Rancière’s work on aesthetics, which maintains that, “The scenario depicted by aesthetic revolution is one that proposes to transform aesthetics’ suspension of the relations of domination into the generative principle for world without domination.” In her book, Lisa Siraganian makes a liberal version of this claim, arguing that, “The freedom of the art object not from the world generally but from the reader’s meaning specifically presents a way to imagine an individual’s complicated liberty within yet enduring connection to the state.” Nicholas Brown, in Marxist terms, argues that in the contemporary not only is “the assertion of aesthetic autonomy...in itself, a political position,” but that “a plausible claim to autonomy is in fact the precondition for any politics at all.” Even Adorno, whose aesthetics, grounded in writers like Kafka and Beckett, steers closest to the art of hunger, and who insists on “the unfreedom in all art,” nonetheless ultimately sees art as pointing, however darkly, to a kind of freedom beyond—“By their negativity, even as total negation, artworks make a promise”—in which their autonomy allows them a limited critical distance from the relentless unfreedom of contemporary society.
The writers I discuss in this book forcefully undercut this connection between aesthetic autonomy and freedom, portraying their art as unfree and unchosen. For some of the writers of the art of hunger, this lack of freedom takes the form of a literal loss of liberty: Bartleby starves to death in jail; Kafka’s hunger artist spends the story living in a succession of cages. For others, it is signaled by an ending that purports to introduce real freedom, in contrast to the unfreedom of the art of hunger: Hamsun’s narrator finishes *Hunger* by signing on as crew on a ship, liberating himself from starvation and writing in one fell swoop; Rimbaud provides the real counterpart to Hamsun’s fictionalized account, famously giving up poetry for life as a French colonialist. In her book *The Hunger Artists*, Maud Ellmann posits a connection between starving, writing, and imprisonment, arguing that, “Writing and fasting both attempt to rise above the flesh in order to escape its mortal bounds.” While the writers of my study are deeply invested in this connection between writing and fasting, however, they imagine it to be of a piece with the loss of freedom, not the path out of it.

Despite the prevalence of prisons and cages in these texts, the art of hunger’s unfreedom is not the denial of freedom by the state or by society at large. It does not participate in the tradition of critique that has driven symptomatic readings of literature as a record of oppression. The art of hunger, while not an art of freedom, is also not an art of oppression. Instead, it is troubled by the negotiations aesthetics makes with necessity, and by the constant failure to achieve what political philosophers call “positive liberty”—that is, the freedom of self-actualization. The ambivalence around the artist’s will, typified in Bartleby’s famous slogan “I would prefer not to,” is characteristic of the art of hunger. Neither involuntarily imposed on the artist by external forces, nor freely chosen by the artist himself, it forces us to think about art beyond the binary of freedom and oppression.
(p.19) The chief—and, to many readers, no doubt the most disturbing—consequence of this claim is that these writers deny themselves not only the occasion to read art as free, but also the possibility that that allows to turn aesthetic autonomy into a political act. The art of hunger, that is, stages the unthinkability of politics outside of society. This claim would not come as a surprise to most of the theorists who seek to link aesthetic autonomy to freedom. For writers as different as Rancière, Siraganian, and Brown, the politics of aesthetic autonomy is grounded in the ways in which it models an ideal social world, or in which autonomy itself can be understood as a (sometimes minimally or oppositionally) social act. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon to read many of the writers discussed in the pages that follow—perhaps most commonly, to read Kafka, Coetzee, and Melville’s Bartleby—as figures for or writers of a utopian (or at least a progressive) politics. At least in the texts I discuss, such a reading would require the construction of an asocial, anti-social, or extra-social politics, something that, as I argue in Chapters 1 and 4, is neither supported by the texts nor a sound political strategy. As Bruno Latour has argued, “emancipation...does not mean ‘freed from bonds,’ but well-attached.” The art of hunger provides a negative demonstration of this claim, showing the unfreedom that arises in the absence of social bonds.
To claim that the art of hunger does not provide a political model or depict a sound political goal is not, however, to suggest that it is devoid of political implications, although the nature of these implications shifts over the period under consideration in this monograph. For the hunger artists writing in the modernist period (and, in a different register, for people like Brown in the twenty-first century), the unfreedom of art manifests primarily in the tension between autonomy and the market. If refusing the market is what makes art art, the art of hunger nonetheless suggests that it does not make art or the artist free. On the contrary, if turning away from the market ends in starvation (as well it might for the writer who is not independently wealthy), this refusal simply reveals the artist’s subjugation to the more basic and banal necessities of life: food, and an income to buy it with. The art of hunger, and the associated figure of the starving artist, therefore represent not autonomy as freedom, but the double bind produced by aesthetic autonomy’s disavowal of the necessities of life. As the twentieth century wore on, doubts about the viability of aesthetic autonomy as a position from which to write were joined by waves of criticism that argued that aesthetic autonomy was not only financially unviable, but also irresponsible, neglecting the political responsibilities of the writer to produce engaged, socially relevant art. In these new contexts, the art of hunger’s ambivalence over the question of freedom starts to look like an advantage to defenders of autonomy, allowing authors to resist the linking of art to the cause of freedom, without becoming complicit in oppression.
Instead of imagining art as a practice of freedom, the art of hunger offers up the spectacle of the starving, suffering body. Indeed, if these writers offer an affirmative definition of what their aesthetics might look like, it lies in the primacy of the body itself. Put this way, the art of hunger is an attempt to think through the tension between embodiment and aesthetic autonomy—which has been imagined, since Kant, as a largely disembodied practice. The writers of the art of hunger put this distinction into question, by imagining the struggle to achieve aesthetic autonomy as one that plays out on the body of the artist, his body suffering and finally dying in the approach towards autonomy. Its impossibility and its failure lies in the attempt to reconcile these irreconcilable terms, in the recognition that the only fully autonomous body—autonomous even from food itself—is a dead body. In a sense, then, the art of hunger represents the violent return of the old eighteenth-century connection between aesthetics and the sensuous, translated in modernism into a radically new affective register that sees art not as pleasure but as suffering. Where Lisa Siraganian’s study of autonomy could take the breath as its animating trope, implying that art is life, the writers studied here take a much grimmer view of autonomy: for these writers, the art of hunger is the figure for aesthetic autonomy in its death throes.
In their emphasis on the materiality of the starving body, the authors I discuss in this book imagine hunger in quite unusual terms. Theorists of self-starvation such as Maud Elllmann and Leslie Heywood are united in seeing hunger as a form of disembodiment, a process whereby the body is subjugated to mind, spirit, language, or will. There is a reciprocity in this exchange that has something of the ascetic about it, in Geoffrey Harpham’s “loose sense” of the term: “any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification.” Indeed, acts of self-starvation are necessarily read against a cultural background in which asceticism, as Harpham’s book shows, has a pervasive, structuring influence. Nonetheless, the authors in my study cast doubt both on the viability of the term “self-denial,” in a context where characters are curiously deprived of will; and on the feasibility of transcendence, be it religious, linguistic, or rational. The art of hunger instead offers a model of asceticism stripped of its emancipatory power and of any possibility of disembodiment, a process that Sloterdijk identifies with the modern “de-spiritualization of asceticisms.” Where an aesthetic asceticism would hold starvation and art in a reciprocal relationship, such that the more one starves, the more capable one is of achieving the higher states necessary for art, these writers strive instead to collapse that distance, to produce an art that is identical with the act of starvation. Substituting embodiment for disembodiment and immanence for transcendence, these writers retain the forms of practice associated with asceticism but strip it of asceticism’s emancipatory power, imagining the body instead as the final frontier of necessity and human finiteness.
By replacing the disembodiment of asceticism and post-Kantian aesthetics with a more embodied, materialist art, the art of hunger reflects a historical shift in the conceptualization of the body. As Vanita Seth has shown, the “Classical age” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries believed that “human corporeality was detached from Man’s more exalted status as a knowing, reasoning, free-willed subject.” In this context, “the significance of the body was essentially disavowed,” in favour of a focus on the self-determining human subject. Kantian and post-Kantian thought, emerging at the tail end of this period, reflects the disavowal of the body in its attempt to produce a disembodied aesthetics that belongs exclusively to the mental realm. Its rejection of food and eating therefore takes place as part of a larger devaluation of the body, and an attempt to develop a dualistic subjectivity in which imagination, not the body, served as the telos of the subject.

The nineteenth century saw a significant shift in the way the body was imagined. Like the Classical Age, the nineteenth century saw the body as an object, devoid of agency, but in this later period it was now “accorded an immutability and intransigence that is resistant to the inconstancy and variability of time.” The body, that is, ceases to be pliable and malleable, subject to the whims of the free Enlightenment subject, and instead becomes understood as one of the chief limits to human potential. While this historical shift is clearly discontinuous, with both asceticism and a disembodied post-Kantian aesthetics retaining much of their purchase (p.22) today, the nineteenth century nonetheless makes available a counter-discourse. This new worldview imagines the body as a fixed and immovable limit, just at the moment when the art of hunger is first beginning to emerge as a way of dramatizing a new aesthetic position.
A new attention to hunger stands at the center of this re-evaluation of the body. T. R. Malthus’s wildly influential Essay on the Principle of Human Population (1798), for instance, locates human misery in “the constant tendency in all animated life to increase beyond the nourishment prepared for it”—that is, in the incommensurability between human reproduction and our need to eat. Such an account produces a vision of the human body as what Seth calls an “untranscendable, immutable object,” by imagining hunger as one of its chief limitations. This way of understanding hunger as a limiting factor runs counter to the ascetic imaginary, in which self-starvation and other practices of bodily mortification are thought to allow us to transcend the limitations of our bodies. In the Malthusian framework, bodily suffering does not do away with the body, so much as it foregrounds the body’s inescapability, its insistent materiality, and its untranscendability. As Catherine Gallagher has shown, Malthusian ideas, via the intermediary text of James Frazer’s The Golden Bough, shaped important aspects of modernism in general. This book argues that the theory of the body that such ideas produced is particularly important in the modernist writing associated with the art of hunger, with its skepticism about transcendence and its tendency to use starvation to magnify rather than reduce the role of the body.

This newly limited and limiting conceptualization of the body shapes the aesthetic possibilities of the art of hunger in crucial ways. On the one hand, the nineteenth-century body is a perversely appropriate site on which to inscribe aesthetic autonomy. This theory of the body sees it as providing “constancy and temporal immutability,” a welcome counter, in the Victorian mind, to the inescapable historicity of most other aspects of human experience. The body is no longer subject to history, but is now imagined as the limit that history butts up against. In this sense, it shares aesthetic autonomy’s resistance to the vagaries of historical, social, and political experience. If the body is a transhistorical phenomenon, marked by its intransigent immutability, then the art of hunger—an aesthetic (p.23) position grounded in this recalcitrant body—can be understood as the translation of aesthetic autonomy’s resistance to historical change into the sphere of material, embodied existence. Instead of locating art’s autonomy in the free play of the mind, the art of hunger finds it instead in the historical intransigence of the body.
On the other hand, though, this preservation of aesthetic autonomy carries with it the aesthetic problems that I have already associated with the art of hunger. Imagining aesthetic autonomy as manifesting through an intransigent body creates problems for art’s relationship to society. As Catherine Gallagher has argued, “Malthus’s theory destroyed the homological relationship between individual and social organisms by tracing social problems to human vitality itself.”

The art of hunger—despite being entirely uninterested in human vitality—develops in a moment in which the body’s status as a synecdoche for society is under pressure. In this context, the starving body becomes available as a spectacle of individual and idiosyncratic failures, and of failures that are marked primarily through the exclusion of the body’s bearer from the realm of the social. For this reason, as I have argued, the art of hunger is able to make use of the spectacle of starving bodies to dramatize the experience of espousing an aesthetic position—the position of aesthetic autonomy—which fails to achieve social assent.

Dramatizing the collapse of social autonomy through this newly intransigent body, the art of hunger also makes the body into one of the causes of its unfreedom. If the Classical Age saw the body as mutable, pliable and subject to human agency, it did so in order to guarantee the freedom and free will of the subject. The revision of the body that made it immutable and intransigent therefore also posited it as one of the most important limits to human freedom. By figuring aesthetic autonomy through the untranscendable and unfree body, the writers of the art of hunger strip this post-Kantian position of all possibility of freedom. They equate the aesthetic—long imagined to be a site of freedom—with the body that poses a limit to freedom, and in doing so, they produce a theory of art that sees it as autonomous but not free.
The disavowal of art’s capacity to produce freedom, and of its political efficacy more broadly, makes the art of hunger into a singularly unheroic aesthetic position. Walter Benjamin’s claim that “To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure” holds true for all the writers of this study. The art of hunger is an art of failure, as we often say of Beckett, and an art of the impossible, as Yves Bonnefoy has said of Rimbaud. It reflects the failure both of collectivist models of liberty, such as most Marxist accounts, as well as of individualist models, such as those commonly found in liberalism. If the writers of the art of hunger do not find freedom in social bonds, they also cannot find it in themselves, as art is experienced as a state that is unchosen and unwilled. In this sense, the art of hunger fails, it lacks the possibility of freedom, because it imagines art as a solitary activity in which the artist exercises only the most limited agency, and an agency that is almost always negative.

4. Histories of Autonomy: Modernism And Method

The lineages I have traced here see the art of hunger as emerging from a specific intellectual history, the confluence of shifting understandings of the body in the nineteenth century with a long tradition of aesthetics that defines art’s autonomy through its exclusion of food. Both of these historical trajectories culminate in the modernist period, which is marked by a fascination with the materiality of the body and a commitment to practices of aesthetic autonomy. In this sense, I have been suggesting, the art of hunger is a modernist tradition. In the light of the long time span of this concept, however—both its pre-history in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought, and its afterlife in post-1945 literature—it is worth paying a little more attention to what I mean here by the term modernist, and how I see it relating to the conglomerate of ideas I call the art of hunger.
This book is interested above all in modernism as a retrospective construct. In tracing this formation, it offers a partial intellectual history of the intertwined fates of aesthetic autonomy and modernism in the second half of the twentieth century. More specifically, it is a history of how modernism came to be understood as the literary mode of aesthetic autonomy. I focus particularly on three moments—France in the aftermath of World War II; the US and France in the wake of the 1968 student protests; and South Africa in the dying days of apartheid—when this version of modernist autonomy was least secure in its position in the literary field. This is not to suggest a straightforward or linear trajectory for the fates of either modernism or aesthetic autonomy. On the contrary, there are as many times and places since modernism that have resoundingly endorsed a theory of aesthetic autonomy as there are those that have denigrated or attacked it. My claim is not that aesthetic autonomy or even modernism entered a uniform decline in the years after World War II, but that, in specific moments and at specific places, both came to seem illegitimate, precarious, or simply unpopular. The history of modernism as a retrospective construct and as a specter haunting contemporary writing has its roots at least as much in the moments of its delegitimization as it does in the moments of its canonization. In tracing some of the most momentous blows to modernism’s hegemony in the post-World War II period, I therefore seek to provide a history of what has become today the commonplace association between aesthetic autonomy and modernism.
The art of hunger is part of this historical arc in that, like modernism itself, it is a retrospective construction. Unlike the post-World War II writers who form the focus of the better part of this book, the modernist hunger artists that I discuss in Chapter 1 did not know each other and can only peripherally be said to have influenced each other’s work. They come from significantly different historical times and geographic places. Several of them—Melville and Rimbaud, most importantly—are not even usually considered modernist, although they share something that we are tempted to call a modernist sensibility and, like the tradition of aesthetic autonomy, are widely acknowledged to have left major and lasting impacts on modernism. In this unlikely context, what makes these writers modernist—and what makes them a tradition—is their reception from the 1930s through to the present. Scholars and writers, centrally among them writers like Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, have tended to read them together, and to read them, in this context, as modernist. Through these readings, later writers have produced the art of hunger as a kind of modernism of the last resort—a marginal, precarious tradition, which can both dramatize the sense of crisis that attends modernism and aesthetic autonomy in the historical moments I consider, and provide a way of imagining the persistence of both traditions. In this sense, the way in which the earlier writers come into focus as a modernist tradition—as the art of hunger—is a product of the way in which modernism and its canons have been constructed from late modernism onwards.
In understanding modernism as a retrospective construct that circulates as both a product of and participant in contemporary literary discourse, we might learn something from the way scholars of the Middle Ages have theorized the concept of medievalism. As recent work on the topic has shown, the Middle Ages persist into the modern period as a syncretic concept that is as much a construction of the present as an excavation of the past. As Louise D’Arcens argues, “the ‘found’ and the ‘made’ Middle Ages...cohabit” in many medievalist texts, producing a notion of the medieval that arises from the interplay between presentist preconceptions and historical texts and artefacts. A similar claim could be made for the role of modernism in the contemporary academy and within the contemporary high art and literary worlds. In these contexts, modernism persists both as a set of actually existing texts and artefacts, and as a concept that conditions our readings as much as it is conditioned by them. I am suggesting, therefore, that modernism as it appears in this monograph has more in common with medievalism than with the study of the medieval period per se. This constructed modernism is the subject of this book and the referent of the “modernism” of my title.
This way of thinking about modernism’s contemporary legacies takes its impetus from recent attempts to rethink historicism’s role in literary criticism more broadly. In her recent polemic on the state of literary studies, Rita Felski calls for us to abandon models of historicism that “serve as the equivalent of cultural relativism, quarantining difference, denying relatedness, and suspending—or less kindly, evading—the question of why past texts matter and how they speak to us now.” Instead, she advocates for attention to “cross-temporal networks” that “mess up the tidiness of our periodizing schemes,” asking “us to acknowledge affinity and proximity as well as difference, to grapple with the coevalness and connectedness of past and present.” This book takes up this challenge, seeking to understand what modernism has meant to writers in the second half of the twentieth century by tracing the circulation of an idea that, in many contexts, comes to define modernism—the idea of aesthetic autonomy. In this sense, I am less interested in what aesthetic autonomy “really” meant in the modernist period, or what the art of hunger “really” looked like from the vantage point of 1922 or 1890, than I am in how these ideas have been constructed and produced in the latter half of the twentieth century. I argue that the art of hunger offers post-war and contemporary writers a way of thinking with and through modernism and its texts, in order to approach pressing questions about the status and function of the aesthetic in their own historical moments.
The attempt to trace modernism’s circulation beyond its period of origin has required a rather historicist approach to the moments of its reception. As a result, there is a methodological bifurcation at the center of (p.27) this book. Chapter 1, which focuses on the art of hunger as it emerged in modernism, operates according to a logic of retrospectivity. In this chapter, I seek to derive a theory of the modernist art of hunger from its key texts, focusing not only on the moments of production but also on their circulation and reception, and asking what reading these disparate but thematically linked texts together tells us about the intellectual coherence and aesthetic stakes of the art of hunger, understood as a tradition and an aesthetic position. Chapters 2–4 each follow a single exemplary practitioner of the art of hunger—Beckett, Auster, and Coetzee respectively—and seek to locate his deployment of the art of hunger as a response to larger debates about modernism and aesthetic autonomy in his respective literary field. The goal in these chapters is to understand the ways in which modernism in general and the art of hunger in particular persist as sites and occasions for the contestation of ideas about aesthetic autonomy, by developing a richly textured sense of the historical debates that condition the re-emergence of the art of hunger at specific historical junctures.
Taken together, the book as a whole seeks to trace how modernism’s relationship to aesthetic autonomy, and with it the minor modernism of the art of hunger, have emerged as transhistorical and transnational phenomena. I am interested in how these ideas, texts, and tropes circulate across different historical moments: how they become new in new times and accumulate meaning through their different iterations, as well as how they are retrospectively gathered together, written and rewritten to constitute a tradition. Here, my dual definition of aesthetic autonomy as both a social condition and a philosophical idea becomes important. By emphasizing its double-edged nature, I’m able to understand autonomy’s persistence diachronically. I see earlier social milieux as producing particular forms and definitions of aesthetic autonomy, which are then reprised not as history but as theory, to be contested or debated anew in new times. As such, I read autonomy as both an idea that circulates transnationally with the spread of modernism and a condition of a social milieu, and understand its specific manifestations to arise in part from the disjunctions and the departures between these different understandings of autonomy. In this transhistorical frame, aesthetic autonomy’s pre-existing value as an aesthetic ideal serves to reinforce and bolster writers in later periods where autonomy is newly contested or delegitimized, even as the forms that aesthetic autonomy adopts to survive these perilous moments condition future understandings of the term.
This retrospective model of modernism’s relationship to contemporary literature breaks with some of the more influential frameworks for understanding modernism’s dissemination and transmission beyond early twentieth-century Europe and the US. While these frameworks have (p. 28) often partaken of the expansive movement that Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz identify with the “new modernist studies,” this book is not primarily concerned with expanding modernism’s definitional scope, or with reconceiving contemporary literature as modernist. My model should, therefore, be distinguished from most theories of global modernism, including Susan Stanford Friedman’s attempt to develop a theory of planetary modernisms by conceiving of modernism as “the expressive dimension of modernity.” This definition has allowed Friedman to expand modernism’s scope temporally as well as spatially and thus in theory allows us to redefine much contemporary literature as modernist. But Friedman’s approach—in common with other more modest theories of global modernism—understands the new modernisms that she uncovers as existing in a primary relation to modernity. Indeed, such a claim is often taken as necessary to avoid the specter of derivativeness that haunts the global modernism project. The post-war and contemporary writers and milieus that I consider in this book, however, are primarily concerned with their relationship to earlier iterations of modernism. They therefore constitute precisely the kind of second-order, derivative modernism that theorists of global modernism mostly repudiate. In this book, I investigate how a primarily European modernism has been constructed and deployed by scholars and writers who understood themselves to be writing after modernism, in all senses of the word.
For this reason, this book’s understanding of modernism’s role in post-war and contemporary writing has more in common with David James and Urmila Seshagiri’s concept of metamodernism than with existing theories of global modernism. Like James and Seshagiri’s twenty-first-century metamodernists, the late twentieth-century writers that I examine in Chapters 2–4 relate to modernism as “an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Modernism returns in this model not as a straightforward continuity of the past into the present, but as an imagined construction, a “mythos” that allows contemporary writers to work through new issues. These writers make use of modernism, that is, as a kind of resource. As James has it in his book Modernist Futures, their “modes of working resonate with priorities that they don’t (p. 29) passively inherit from modernism, like period-souvenirs, but that revitalize modernist aesthetics for tackling a new spectrum of artistic, cultural, ethical and political demands.”

The focus in this model is on the revitalization of modernist resources—what James calls “modernist aesthetics”—in new contexts. It foregrounds the ways in which modernism, returning beyond its historical moment, is recontextualized and redeployed, coming to reflect the concerns of the new moments in which it is taken up again.
With its focus on literature written between 1945 and 1990, *The Art of Hunger* is concerned with modernism’s return in a slightly earlier period than many studies of modernism’s contemporary revival. James and Seshagiri apply the term “metamodernist” to a primarily twenty-first-century body of work, which they see as reacting against an earlier postmodernism. Similarly, writers including Nicholas Brown, and Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges have claimed that contemporary literature represents a break with postmodernism and a return to modernism, including what D’Arcy and Nilges call “the modernist question of aesthetic autonomy.” The *Art of Hunger* is concerned, in contrast, with what intervenes in the period between modernism proper and this current juncture, and with how modernism and aesthetic autonomy survived the moments in the intervening period in which neither was securely in the cultural ascendant. In this sense, this book might be understood as an attempt to map the space between modernism and its contemporary returns, tracing out a more embattled history in the in-between periods, in which modernism and modernist ideas of aesthetic autonomy persisted in hostile environments. Understanding these lulls in modernism’s popularity is important for a full sense of its influence on, and construction by, later writing, and, I suggest, it offers a new way of understanding its relationship to the literary developments of the latter half of the twentieth century. This book traces modernism’s role in periods that we ordinarily think of as late modernist (Chapter 2), postmodern (Chapter 3), and postcolonial (Chapter 4). In each, it shows that these designations do not so much name a period or approach to the world that succeeds, surpasses, or displaces modernism, but rather one that engaged with and constructed its own particular modernist mythos, often in order to reject or problematize it. As I argue in relation to Paul Auster’s postmodern writing in Chapter 3, this focus on the intervening periods and their returns to a now déclassé modernism allows us to add nuance to the periodization on which recent studies of modernism’s return are implicitly or explicitly based.
Modernism’s importance to the literary and intellectual history of these intervening periods lies to a significant extent in the way in which it came to be identified with the concept of aesthetic autonomy. For much of the period under discussion in this study, a writer’s or thinker’s relationship to modernism was a way of signaling his or her relationship to aesthetic autonomy. Conversely, debates about aesthetic autonomy inevitably found themselves grappling with modernism’s legacies and influences. What is important about modernism for the late twentieth-century literary fields I examine, in other words, is its association with a specific aesthetics. By “aesthetics,” I mean a set of theories and ideas about art, sometimes deriving from a philosophical tradition like the one outlined in Section 2 of this introduction, which seek to explain how we understand and experience art and art objects. This use of the term should be distinguished from the way in which it is sometimes used by literary scholars to refer more broadly to a text’s formal qualities, or its “literariness.” Aesthetics as I use it here is neither form nor style. The modernist legacies that I am interested in have less to do with the reprisal of formal techniques like stream-of-consciousness or collage, than with a theory about art’s relationship to society that became widely associated with modernism in the late twentieth century. Similarly, the art of hunger describes not so much a shared set of formal resources—although the texts I consider tend, on the whole, to be rather on the slim and direct side—but the use of hunger as a way of dramatizing an unfree and embodied mode of aesthetic autonomy. The aesthetics of the art of hunger certainly has consequences for form, and I seek to draw these out in each chapter, considering how Beckett’s fascination with permutation and rhythm, Auster’s use of abstraction and metafiction, and Coetzee’s negotiations with realism all derive from each writer’s understanding of the aesthetics of the art of hunger. But these formal consequences are not necessarily shared among writers, and do not in the end lie at the heart of these writers’ relationships to one another or to modernism. Instead, what binds them together is a shared figure—the figure of hunger—through which they dramatize a shared aesthetics.

5. A Hundred And Fifty Years of The Art of Hunger
This book follows the dissemination of the art of hunger over a period of 150 years and across three continents, showing how it was repeatedly (p.31) taken up in new contexts in order to dramatize aesthetic autonomy’s impossibility and art’s unfreedom. Chapter 1 begins with modernism itself, mapping out the complex of ideas and aesthetic positions that are brought together under the banner of the art of hunger. In this chapter, I reconstruct the canon that forms the basis of later writers’ deployment of the art of hunger, bringing together texts such as Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Rimbaud’s poetry, Hamsun’s *Hunger*, and Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist.” Reading these texts and authors both in their own moments and as they have been read by later writers and scholars, it seeks to derive the theory of art that later writers engage with when they redeploy the art of hunger in new contexts.

Chapter 2 takes up this story in post-World War II France, where the aftermath of war produced fierce debates about the status of aesthetic autonomy, presided over by the field-shaping influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and his theory of intellectual *engagement*. In this context, Samuel Beckett emerges as a transitional figure in the art of hunger tradition: both its last modernist and its first standard-bearer in the post-war period beyond modernism. Situating Beckett’s writing from the 1940s onwards within the post-war French debates about the status of aesthetic autonomy, this chapter follows Beckett’s resistance to both *littérature engagée*, and defenses of autonomy that linked art to freedom. Hunger, tied in his writing of this period with obligation, unfreedom, and the collapse of collective and political communities, becomes the vehicle through which he develops this minority aesthetic position.
The debates about aesthetic autonomy and writerly responsibility that emerged in post-war France cast a long shadow over the later twentieth century. Chapters 3 and 4 follow the reverberations of these debates as they are taken up globally. Chapter 3 examines the questions raised about the role of art in the aftermath of the 1968 student protests in France and the US, as aesthetic autonomy was being absorbed into the university and the university itself was changing in response to the emergence of what in the US became known as “French theory.” Paul Auster, who was a student at Columbia in 1968 and spent the early 1970s in Paris, moves between these two milieus, using his commitment to an art of hunger position to locate himself outside both. In the process, Auster reinvents the art of hunger in line with the preoccupations of his own historical moment, locating the besieged author at the center of the tradition, and linking the art of hunger’s old preoccupation with aesthetic autonomy to the new 1960s and 1970s quest for personal authenticity.

Finally in Chapter 4, Auster’s near-contemporary, J. M. Coetzee, takes us to South Africa in the dying days of apartheid, where the call to political responsibility returns with a new urgency. Coetzee, however, breaks with this consensus, maintaining a commitment to aesthetic autonomy through his investment in a European modernist tradition that incorporates the art of hunger. In a context where hunger itself was highly politicized, Coetzee’s 1983 novel *Life & Times of Michael K* produces an anti-politics of hunger, whose autonomy rests in the disjuncture between its white author and its Coloured protagonist. Updating the art of hunger’s anxieties about art’s unfreedom, Coetzee’s novel responds to its social context by holding itself apart from it, constantly calling into question the potential of the novel to imagine Michael K’s freedom.
Unlike much work in this field in recent years, this book is not intended as an argument either for or against aesthetic autonomy. Instead, I seek to show that debates about the role of aesthetic autonomy—and the parallel debates about the value of modernism—have been structural to how we thought about art and literature in the twentieth century. The art of hunger tradition occupies an important position within these debates, precisely because it dismantles so many of aesthetic autonomy’s most convincing justifications, while nonetheless remaining committed to the concept. To imagine an art that does not have a secure social context and that cannot lead its writers or its readers to freedom requires that we develop new ways of understanding what the point of such art might be. This book suggests that art might be valuable for the way in which it investigates constraints, limitations, and forms of necessity, as much as for the way it opens onto new and better worlds or strives to liberate its readers or its writers from their bonds. It stages the sense that art is in crisis, and by making this aesthetic crisis something visceral and embodied, it makes it into a site for thinking through questions that exist at the cusp of politics and philosophy, where the unfree, suffering body collapses questions about the nature of being and questions about the nature of power. By not imagining that aesthetic autonomy provides a model for freedom, the art of hunger provides an occasion to think through the unpleasantness of different kinds of necessity and obligation. It ends by suggesting that an art that is in crisis, an aesthetic autonomy on the brink of collapse, is one that might teach us something important about the prospects for embodied autonomy beyond the realm of art.

Notes:


(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid.

(17) Ibid.


(19) Ibid.

(20) Ibid.


(22) Ibid.

(23) Ibid.


(25) Ibid.


(34) Ibid.,


(38) Ibid.,

(39) Ibid., *The Birth of Tragedy*


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(53) Ibid.,

(54) Ibid.,


(56) Seth, *Europe’s Indians*, 211.


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(63) Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 156.

(64) Ibid.,


(68) Ibid.,


(70) James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism,” 93.
