

“The finger points backwards”:

Satirical Endism and the 1990s Fictions of Will Self

“The 1990s will come to be seen as the Gotterdammerung of periodicity itself [...] never again will the brute fact of what year it is matter so much in cultural terms”

(Self 2002, 26)

This chapter argues that contemporary British author and cultural commentator Will Self uses satire in his writings from the 1990s to interrogate the “endism” of the period. Challenging perceived conclusions to evolution, gender and time at the close of the twentieth century and interrogating interrelationships between love, anger, longing, power, isolation, dependence, hopelessness, depression, trauma, transition and crisis, his 1990s fictions present a controversial perspective on pre-millennial anxiety and search for a mode in which to speak of resulting anomie and doubt.

As a genre of literature, satire can be traced back to Ancient Egypt and Greece, to the Romans and Medieval Europe. The role of satire as a mode of social commentary came into focus during the Enlightenment period, with seminal literary satires including Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) and the writings of Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe. During the nineteenth century, this tradition was developed by the novels of Charles Dickens, the social satires of Bernard Shaw and the rise of the political satirical cartoon by artists including as James Gillray and publications such as *Punch* magazine. A trend for caricature and parody developed in the twentieth century with prophetic warnings about the future of the human race in Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949).

Satire is generally public-spirited, concerned with ridicule and denigration to restore truth and justice. In his dictionary, Dr Johnson defined satire as a text “in which wickedness or folly is censured”, while in *The Battle of the Books* Swift argues that, “satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own, which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it” (1704, 137). As “truth’s defence” (1738, 1.212), satire therefore presents “a chameleon-like surface by using all the tones of the satiric spectrum, wit, ridicule, irony, sarcasm, cynicism the sardonic and invective” (Melville Clark 1946, 32).

The fictions of Will Self, a quintessential bad boy of 1990s literature, adopt satirical approaches to narrative, form, language and characterisation to offer disconcerting truths about the pre-millennial human condition. Marked by a self-conscious style, his writings manipulate generic conventions to disrupt expectations, using parody, pastiche and intertextuality as tools to represent tensions inherent to the turn of the century. Employing fragmentation, discontinuity and generic instability, Will Self’s fictions from the 1990s reveal new perspectives on the late twentieth century world. Exploring representational possibilities in an anxious society, his writings are generated by a period that foregrounded the very concept of endings as the new millennium brought with it new challenges and threats both to society and the future of literature itself.

The 1990s writings of Will Self distinguish the satirical from the comic, focussing on individuals and systems that fall short of his exacting standards. Departing from conventions ascribed to the contemporary and driven to protest as a writer, Self exposes to derision and holds up as hideous elements of the real world including gender, power, time and notions of humanity. Identifying tangible gaps between what is and what might be, Self writes satire as an attempt to restore the balance and correct the errors of humanity before the turn of the century.

As a cultural critic and commentator on social and political events, Self is interested in the breakdown of societies and individuals. In his madhouse fictions of the absurd and grotesque, Self offers contemporary satires on pre-2000 Britain. Using fiction to test “the limits of narrative propriety” (Hayes 1997, 4), his works offer a sense of purpose through satire. Self describes his novellas *Cock and Bull* as “an elaborate joke about the failure of narrative” and openly confesses to not being “interested in character at all. Indeed, I don’t even really believe in the whole idea of psychological realism. I see it as dying with the nineteenth-century novel” (Self 1995a, 408). He finds freedom through transgression and excess, mobilising language to open doors to suggest alternatives. According to Self, there are “two ways of getting someone to suspend disbelief. One is to present a fantastic conceit—like Kafka—and the other is to very gradually try and convince somebody of something wildly preposterous” (Self 1997b, 52). As a writer who regularly opts for the later approach, he claims that “my heart lies in a particular kind of fiction, fiction of the alternative world. The great liberty of the fictional writer is to let the imagination out of the traces and see it gallop off over the horizon” (Self 2008).

Over the course of the 1990s, Self generated an impressive oeuvre including short stories, novels, journalism and a comic strip. His first publication, a collection of short stories *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991) was praised by the UK literary establishment, shortlisted for the 1992 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. Self followed this with two novellas *Cock and Bull* (1992), a novel *My Idea of Fun* (1993), *Grey Area* (1994), another collection of short stories, *Junk Mail* (1995), a collection of journalism, interviews and articles, and *Great Apes* (1997), a second novel. Despite this prolific output during the decade, Self garnered fame for his work away from the page as much as on it. As a contemporary author and media personality, Self quickly became aware that alongside the critical acclaim and literary prizes “there’s the fame shit too, and

swaggering around in a silk suit and having your catamite buff your toenails—I went for all that” (Self in Kinson 2007). As Lesley White wrote in *The Times*, “Most of us have never met Will Self, nor read his novella about a woman who sprouts a penis; but we are all aware of his pose, his junkie past, the naughtiness that once declared it was as easy to get crack as a rail ticket at Kings Cross station” (White in Pattern 1997). Over the course of the decade, Self quickly achieved “a certain literary reputation” and a pronounced degree of “personal notoriety” (Pattern 1997).

The problem with any satire lies in the inherent tension between a position of assumed moral authority and one of hypocrisy if the author falls short of the charges or ideals propounded by their work. Self’s literary representations evidence a sharp consciousness of the vices and flaws inherent to his fellow humans, yet as a literary satirist, he assumes a position of “Janus-like ambivalence”, at once both anti-establishment and prone to drug-fuelled rages, with an undeniable heritage as a middle class graduate from a well-to-do family. As Self explains, “I am very anti-establishment [...] But I am also very obviously a middle-aged bourgeois man, so it is difficult to quite maintain the edge” (Self in Guignery 2013, 137). In contrast to his notorious reputation, Will Self was raised “as much at the heart of the establishment as you can get” (Rennison 2005, 150). The product of Jewish-American and Anglican parents—a union that produced a sense of a split identity that Self draws on throughout his work—his upbringing was remarkably stable, progressing from Christ’s College Grammar School to Oxford to read PPE at Exeter College. However, he quickly became more interested in the drug culture of Oxford than its teaching. He left university with a third class degree and discovered a personal capacity for self-destruction. During the 1990s, Self plundered what he has called the “toxic landscape of carcinogena—the yards of liquor, the sooty furlongs left behind by chased heroin, the miles driven and limped for over a decade to score crack which then scoured its way into my lungs. The prosaically giant

haystacks of Virginia tobacco hardly bear mentioning—being, in contrast, merely bucolic” (Self 2011a, 2). He has since described his addiction to drugs as a horror that “cast a long shadow over my life and the lives of my family, and infiltrated my fictive inscape, poisoning its field margins, salting its earth” (Self 2011a, 3). Away from the page, Self remained a Soho regular, with a propensity for long nights and controversial situations. This continued well into the 1990s, culminating in Self being exposed by the press for snorting cocaine on soon-to-be Prime Minister Tony Blair’s private jet during the 1997 UK General Election campaign. Championing “the social and spiritual value of intoxicification” (Self 1995, 19), Self spent time in rehab for addiction to drink and drugs, an experience which formed the basis of his short story “Ward 9” and his recurring character Dr Zack Busner, positions which can be seen as explicit evidence of his later change of opinion and approach to narcotics and creativity. Despite a liberal approach to drug culture in his private life, Self’s fictions focus on the trauma, rather than the glamour, of addiction, featuring characters whose lives are damaged or ruined by experiences with mind or mood altering substances. Self uses fiction to undertake a comprehensive examination of the relationship between illness and psychology, repeatedly turning over addiction, illness and morality to consider the place of the individual in the contemporary society.

As an author who divides critics and readers alike, Self has been the focus of critical attention since his first collection of short stories was published in 1991. Self enjoys a love/hate relationship with both his peers and literary critics and claims to have “always relished the idea of my work being not simply misunderstood by ordinary readers, but also comprehensively misinterpreted by the professionals” (Self 2001, 7). Despite being a recognised an “enfant terrible” (Self 1997, 52) of the 1990s, Self was also praised as one of the most gifted young writers of the period. As an author whose fictions document “a sort of extension of absurdum” (Leith 1997) Self was lauded as “the most original new fiction writer

to appear in Britain during the 1990s” (Finney 2006). Featured on *Granta*’s 1993 list of best young novelists before his first novel had even been published, Self quickly became “a cult figure” (Rushdie 1993, 24) and heavyweights of the literary world joined in a chorus of approval. Salman Rushdie claimed that Self was “someone who stands as a one-off” (Rushdie in Shone 1993, 39), Doris Lessing deemed him “a genuine comic writer”, while Beryl Bainbridge applauded his black, macabre and relentless vision of the world (Lessing in Shone, 1993, 39). These dark, distorted visions garnered most critical praise, culminating in Zoe Heller’s assessment of Self as “a very cruel writer—thrillingly heartless, terrifyingly brainy [...] Self has probably won more praise — and praise of a more uninhibited kind— than any writer to emerge in the last decade” (Heller 1993, 126).

Successful satire demands detachment from the world under examination and, using the self-consciousness of postmodern fiction, Self delights in inventing worlds with which to negotiate the relationship between fantasy and reality. Mobilising satire to achieve a distancing perspective on the spirit of his age, Self’s fictions offer both a reflection on, and engagement with, the moral, social and cultural zeitgeist of the 1990s. Making a play for the vitality of fiction at the dawn of the twenty-first century, his texts define themselves against the social, political and historical values, systems and characters which they seek to subvert or undermine, using fantastic scenarios to communicate alternative perspectives on humanity. Across *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991), *Cock and Bull* (1992) and *Great Apes* (1997), Self reveals the true horror of his characters as the logical manifestations of humanity’s own sense of loss and fragmentation at the end of the twentieth century.

Beginning with Thatcher, high unemployment and riots, and ending in Blair, promises of economic prosperity and “Cool Britannia”, the social, political and economic contexts of the UK in the 1990s constitute an informing presence in Self’s fictions. While the 1990s are widely regarded as an information age of new media, networking and the rise of

the internet, Self's work questions this progress to suggest that humanity is on the brink of degeneration at the turn of the century. Self's fictions of the 1990s mobilise satire to point towards residing discourses of doubt and discomfort and to reveal spectacles of difference and tension within this wider pre-millennial anxiety.

Self's views on the 1990s are well documented. He describes the decade as having "the merest trace of *maquillage*, daubed across the awful, ravaged face of decadence" (Self 2002, 26). For Self, "a culture lost in a hopeless fugue" is the "defining characteristic of the 1990s". As "a 24.7 celebration of sexuality and death", he argues that the 1990s "existed in dyadic relationships with two other decades, the 1980s—for which they were a rerun with knobs on, sort of: 1980s ®—and the 1890s" (Self 2002, 26). Highlighting a *fin de siècle* sentiment mixing the decadence of the age with a pronounced awareness of an unavoidably approaching end, his work marks a turn to the imaginative worlds of fictive creation as a means of comprehending the looming unknown, offering a social role for fiction in the face of "endism". The 1990s writing of Will Self focus on psychology, regression and degeneration through a hybrid of dreams, nightmares and alternative realities to explore the heightened anxiety of his age and offer a mediation on the darkness of civilisation at the dawn of the new millennium.

The 1990s fictions of Will Self are grounded in this sense of "endism", of conclusion, uncertainty and apprehension. The year 2000 appeared to mark a crucial turning point for society and for contemporary literature. The approaching end of the millennium produced in 1990s fiction a concern with the end of the century and what, if anything, the new millennium would bring. As the millennium approached, it seemed to be carrying a host of disturbing social indicators which culminated in a broader cultural millennial anxiety. In Britain, this anxiety was expressed through declining voter turnout, decaying levels of trust in government, institutions and other people, a widening gap between rich and poor at national

and individual levels and a rise in the number of the clinically depressed. This much-hyped swelling of millennial anxiety, as a myriad related fears about “Y2K” also referred to as the “millennium bug”, a problem for both digital (computer-related) and non-digital documentation and data storage situations which resulted from the practice of abbreviating a four-digit year to two digits post-2000—apocalyptic biblical prophecies, proliferating cults and militia groups, metastasizing religious and ethnic conflicts— increased meant that the year 2000 became a source of fear as well as a time for hope and optimism about the future. As Bradbury argues:

Industrial pollution surges, environmental terrors reign, and plagues and earthquakes spread. Our pleasures have become our pains: our food and drink, our sex and smoking, all threaten to injure us. We have new visions of choking, collapsed, crime and drug ridden cities, wasted landscapes, fundamentalist conflicts and genocidal wars, shrinking ice-caps, the widening of the ozone hole [...] seen from this turning point, our century is most likely to seem uniquely terrible, less the age of visionary hopes and fantastic utopian prospects [...] more a time of terrors, crimes, political disasters and technological horrors’ (Bradbury 1993, 87).

Self’s writing of the 1990s focuses on the experiences and thoughts of individuals in a seemingly chaotic world about to end. Reshaping recognisable reality, Self’s narratives distort matters of scale, offering uncanny images of the formerly recognisable, using literature as a diffracting lens through which to project new satirical perspectives on science, art and the nature of narrative itself.

Claiming that “England has the world’s top satirical culture” (Self 1995c, 87), Self “unquestionably” situates himself as part of that heritage (Self 1995a, 408). Drawing upon

exaggeration and the absurd, his 1990s fictions do not reject tradition but rewrite it, using satires of the past as an energising force. Rather than converting readers to his own world view, Self operates as a linguistic agent provocateur, mobilising an eighteen-century Swiftian tradition with fantastical elements of the contemporary to create self-estranging and challenging fictions. Much maligned for his “lumpy” (Hayes 1997, 4) and “abstruse vocabulary” (Leith 1997), Self’s prose style has been likened to “[Martin] Amis going cold turkey with a thesaurus” (Finney 2006). As Julian Evans reflects in his *Guardian* feature on the author, “Self leaves no adjective unsaid, no metaphor unturned” (Evans 1992, 12). The author’s famously verbose style even won his first novel *My Idea of Fun* the “Sunday Times Purple Prose Award” for outstandingly pompous or pretentious verbosity in 1993. His narratives are grounded in experience, but extended in such a way that they are not entrapped by autobiography. This satirical prose and vast “lexical palette” (Self 1995c 401) have been heavily criticised, but Self defends this style as key to his literary approach. In interview, Self argues that his reliance on a thesaurus is not unusual, since “a writer saying he doesn’t use one is like a mechanic saying he doesn’t use a socket set” (Barber 2000, 17). Although it can be argued that Self’s hybrid of journalese, high metaphors and metatextual references seems designed to “obscure rather than to illuminate” (Walsh 1993, 28), it effectively captures the emotional and physical states of flux that characterise his satirical writings.

Self’s fictions are fuelled by the conviction that “writing is about expressing something new and exploring the form in new ways” (Self in Murray 2011). Like many contemporary authors, Self’s short stories function to establish ideas later reproduced, and in some cases developed, by his longer works. This technique enables Self to author sustained satires employing recognised characters who react and respond to changing contexts which mirror the contemporary world. The arrangement of his short stories collections in particular often constitute a narrative in themselves, offering fractured, disjointed novel-like structures

when considered as a whole. The role of form in Self's repetition, revisiting and construction of a fictional parallel reality was recognised by fellow Nineties novelist Nick Hornby who described *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* "as not so much stories as a series of feature articles on an alternative world" (Hornby in Self 2008). Self's oeuvre to date can be considered a kind of 1990s *roman-fleuve*, a set of independent yet interrelated fictional works with reappearing characters that work around a set of distinct themes and concerns. As Self reflects, "writing can be kind of an addiction" (Self in Heller 1993, 149) and throughout his writing he returns to the same locations, protagonists and concerns to enhance and enrich his satirical representations.

Raised in East Finchley, Self is repeatedly drawn back to London as a recurring backdrop to his alternative fictional worlds. If part of the capital can be classified as "Amiscountry" (Self 1995c, 2) there is almost certainly a case for the suburbs of North London being classified as "Selfcountry" (Self 1995, 321). The suburbs are of particular significance to Self's vision of London and are often related to a particular satire on city life and the potentially repetitive lives of those dwelling in suburbia. Interrogating this relationship between humans and space, Self uses London as his muse, mediating physical and imaginative topographies of the city. In conversation with J.G. Ballard, Self confesses to being "a writer who is very attached to the idea of place", one who views the idea of writing about locations away from the capital as akin to "pulling a tablecloth from under your imagination" (Self 1995, 353-4). Loosely aligning himself with a field of "psychogeographers", Self's fictive topographies "are wholly mutated out of the ones that we really occupy" (Self in McCarthy 2001). Offering a tight focus on events specifically produced by, and situated in, London, his work begins at this psychological and geographical "centre" to decentralise and explore alternative perceptions of the city. Across Self's work, characters traverse the city to explore its topography as a metaphor of their own inner

traumas. Defamiliarising the most familiar space in order to satirise our relationship with it and our practices and routines within it, his fictions explore the relationship between landscape and the people that occupy it to focus on contemporary disconnections from urban living and alienation in the modern city.

Self's first collection, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*, uses the capital city as a site for six short stories interconnected by repeated characters, events and locations. Exploring anxieties about revulsion, attraction, psychiatry, civilisation, death and mortality, the dominance of the first person establishes a sense of personal confession and reflection which augments the topics under discussion. The collection opens with a story that has come to define Self's approach to fiction. "The North London Book of the Dead" is narrated by a middle aged man whose mother's death involves her relocation to an afterlife in the London suburbs as part of an extended community of the suburban undead. The story proposes immortality as a concept more frightening than death, one which, in the fictional world of Will Self, simply involves relocation to the leafier parts of London. Across Self's oeuvre, death overshadows everything and its imminence can be felt across each story in this collection. Exploring bereavement and a fascination with the darker side of stasis, "The North London Book of the Dead" creates an alarming juxtaposition from which Self satires the concept of an afterlife by allowing it to intrude upon and likening it to present day reality. Proposing the afterlife as a form of "deathocracy [...] a kind of self-help group run by the dead themselves" (Self in McCarthy 2001), the tedium of the ultimate establishes an interest in nihilism which is developed in his subsequent work.

Read in the context of Self's wider oeuvre, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* plays a vital role in establishing locations (including London's suburbs, hospital wards and riverside spaces), characters and concepts (such as Dr Busner and the Urbororo) and approaches to narrative that underpin his later work. Like the patients in the collection's Chekhovian "Ward

9”, readers quickly become aware that Self’s characters are not active agents and merely respond to events around or beyond them. Etched with a lightness of authorial touch, they do not evidence free will and even though the presence of choice is regularly highlighted—his characters can be dead or alive, sober or high, patient or doctor—they often choose to remain in limbo, trapped by an inability to commit to a single role or state. As the collection immediately establishes, even the boundaries between the living and the dead are not immune from transgression or satirical derision in the hands of Will Self.

Identifying in death an “inconsistent iconisation of violence and sensuality” (Self in Gloer 1997, 15) Self adopts a heterogeneous approach to death in his writings. He argues that, “What excites me [...] is to disturb the reader’s fundamental assumptions. I want to make them feel that certain categories within which they are used to perceiving the world are unstable” (Self in Gloer 1997, 15). Satire depends on the solidity of certain assumptions, against which things are contrasted negatively. Depending upon shared notions of humanity, assumed approaches to life and death and a commonality of experience, Self disrupts comfortable visions of reality to offer critique, alternative perspectives and judgement. Concerned with the breakdown of the human form, Self’s fiction explores mutations—of people, psyches, sensibilities, attitudes, gender, ideas and landscapes—to energise narrative with a new, satirical power. Self claims that “metamorphosis is the key condition; we are always in a state of change and flux, and it’s really only received constraints in our language that try to block that from us and straight-jacket us into definable states” (Self in McCarthy 2001). Confessing that “transmogrification, particularly horrible metamorphosis, tends to lie at the core of most of what I write” (Self in McCarthy 2001), Self explores distortions of scale and elements of the fantastic to present a seemingly irreconcilable, intelligent and visceral re-visioning of society. Representing change and alternatives via the grotesque,

parody and metamorphosis, Self's invention lies in his use of satire to illuminate the fragile and fluid boundaries between reality and fiction, the word and the world.

Mobilising the under-used form of the novella as a convenient mid-ground between the formal discipline of the short story and the lengthier novel and exercising its satirical potential to satirically comment on the novel form, Self followed the success of *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* with twin shorter fictions in his 1992 texts *Cock and Bull*. Progressing from changes between life and death, the most basic and familiar forms of mutation in *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*, to gender and sexuality in *Cock and Bull*, Self uses the form of the novella to offer a satire on gender and power relations at the turn of the century. *Cock's* protagonist Carol is initially established as a passive female in an unfulfilling relationship. She is submissive, without agency and at the mercy of events around her in her job, family and relationship. Indeed, it is Carol's propensity "always to take the line of least resistance in all that she ever said, or did, or even thought, that gives this story its peculiar combination of cock and bull" (Self 1992, 4). The growth of a small pubic mound begins to change this behaviour and leads to her engaging in more masculine behaviour. Significantly, Carol becomes aware of this change in the domestic setting of her dining room when "she sawed too vigorously at her M&S chicken kiev" and "a spurt of butter marinade shot from the ruptured fowl and fell, appropriately enough, like jism on Dan's crotch" (10). This comical and symbolic ejaculation foreshadows Carol's ultimate transformation from domestic cook into sexualised killer.

Satirising the restricted gender role and repetitive, limited existence Carol occupies as a woman the beginning of the novella, Self exposes his protagonist to a total metamorphosis. Rejecting her "cramped and pedestrian sex life" (10-11), Carol begins to collect caged birds, has sex with a woman, buys a dildo and "masturbated for the first time" (24). Embracing a liberated and performative sexuality, Carol's cock mutates from "a tree growing in a gully"

(28) to a “miniature volcanic column” (29), culminating in Chapter Five’s titular descriptor “It” (51). Carol does DIY, takes up driving lessons (55) and notices that she is “getting more aggressive” (57) but also “empowered [...] she felt her status as a potentially effective agent” (69). This power reaches a pinnacle when she crumbles cantharides into the drinks of her partner Dan and his friend “Dave 2” and anally rapes them. By this point, a man is simply “an empty thing, a vessel, a field upon which the majestic battle may rage” (112). The reader is asked to accept that the growth of a cock “somehow *made* Carol aggressive, made her a rapist” (113). The transformation of Carol into a rapist was, claims Self, “a very facile or simple-minded enjoiner or endorsement of the early seventies feminist argument that anybody with a penis is a potential rapist; I was just taking that to its logical conclusion” (Self in McCarthy 2001). Self claims to have the “ability to actually feel disgusted with sex” (Self 1995, 418) and recalls that he originally “wrote *Cock* out of rage at the involuntary character of my own sexual arousal” (Self 1995, 422). Where it does occur in his work, sex is a form of exploitation, an act of theft or manipulation inextricably bound up with power. As bodies mutate both physically and metaphorically, so too does Self’s fiction, using literary form and genre to satirise gender roles and role performance in contemporary society.

In interview, Self has stated that he “wrote most of the first draft [of *Cock* and *Bull*] in about ten days” (Self 1995, 410). Bearing a clear debt to Kafka and to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (chapter one of *Bull* even borrows from Ovid’s title), the novellas offer transformation as a problematic experience. Opening with quotations from Byron’s *Don Juan*, the first novella establishes an early expectation of the labyrinthine narrative to come. In *Cock*, Self’s narrative takes the form of two competing voices which vie for dominance. Only at the end of the novella is it revealed that the “don” who relates Carol’s tale is actually an elderly version of Carol, who goes on to viciously rape his fellow male passenger while holding a knife to his throat. The interplay of this female (in possession of a cock) and male voice

forms a dialogue that centres on conflict and makes the reader question the reliability of the narration provided.

In *Cock*, the voice of the don and the passenger break the narrative into fragmented sections. The don furthers this fragmentation, “*addressing*” the passenger “*personally, directly and not simply as a unitary audience*” (68) to detach from the voyeurism of his/her mutation. Staging the tale as a “*performance*” (39), the uncomfortable intimacy of the don and passenger encourages reflection upon the role of the author and the nature of narrative itself. The don is used to wryly reflect on “the value of good narrative [...] the positive values of storytelling” (90). Guiding interpretation through aggressive warnings (“I hope you aren’t deriving any signifiers or symbols from Carol’s penis. I hope you aren’t undertaking some convoluted analysis of this story in your sick [...] mind [...] Only a faggot would do such a thing’, 93) and a self-aware satire on genre (“If you don’t watch it some purely local story, some commuting tale, will mow you down, cleave you in two, finally separate your dialogue from your characterisation”, 90), the don offers a jaded warning to the literary critic. Under strict instruction that we must not “go looking for the hidden meaning” or “try to pick away at the surface of things, pretending to find some ‘psychological’ sub-structure” (90-1), the role of the reader is undermined to offer a scathing perspective on the relationship between writers and literary critics. Refusing reduction to an “amusing character, an oddity, a type!” (49), the standard font and direct speech of the don are fragmented by the italicised reflections of the passenger. As their literal and metaphorical journeys progress, the passenger reports that the don was “*metamorphosising into someone else altogether*” (64). Noting that the “*don was playing with himself*” (113), the passenger predicts the climax of the story and the don’s frantic excitement as Carol is revealed to be his “*fictional alter-ego*” (124). The don attacks the passenger and flees, leaving his victim in fear of contacting the police in case they assume “you were asking for it [...] you wanted to be an audience [...]

That is what you get if you sit there like a prat, listening to a load of cock [...] and bull” (127). Echoing concerns usually reserved for female rape victims, Self satirises gender roles and expectations as well as the desire for narrative closure, surprising his captive readership before allowing the narrator to disappear into the night without explanation.

While *Cock* claims that a woman’s body is “totally unlike a man’s body, which never changes, which is static and lifeless” (32), its sister novella *Bull* counters this claim. *Bull* opens with a reference to Tennyson’s poem “Maud” (1855), with its connotations of sexual maturity, secrets and death, functions as a chilling warning of events to come. At the beginning of the novella, male protagonist Bull is athletic, well-built and defensive of his gender identity. In contrast to the narrative complexities of *Cock*, *Bull*’s story is told in the third person through a broadly linear plot, broken occasionally through rhetorical questions. Beginning without preamble, the novella’s opening line immediately informs us that “Bull, a large and heavysset young man, awoke one morning to find that while he had slept he had acquired another primary sexual characteristic: to wit, a vagina” (131). Bull is pursued by Alan, a doctor whose medical care of Bull extends beyond the treatment room. Lust makes Alan view “Bull-as-a-woman; Bull as inside, rather than outside” (203) and together they have “contorted sex” (268). Although his own physical state remains intact, Alan is not immune to mutation and transformation. His awareness of the London landscape evolves across the novella until he experiences a Ballardian vision when he “saw for the first time that the line of the flyover formed the sick shape of an enormous woman [...] Alan’s car was charging like a runaway vibrator, towards the very crotch of the flyover. Alan appreciated that he was about to penetrate the woman-figure with 170 brake horsepower. He felt just fine [...] He revelled in it!” (214-5). Faced with the ultimate revelation that London is entirely comprised of “cunts” (221), Bull is left to reflect that it is “patently absurd to describe the city’s architecture [...] as ‘phallic’. The church spires, the war memorials, the clock towers,

the skyscrapers...they were all terminally irrelevant, ultimately spare pricks. The real lifeblood of the city, Bull now saw, was transported in and out of quintillions of vaginas” (221).

Trapped in this “ugly knot of revelation” (196), Bull struggles “to make sense of his own identity” (201) and “a new loss of self, a new *petit mort*” (202). In this horrific orgasm, Bull adopts the role of a passive, emotional dependent. Dismissed from his job as a reviewer of cabaret for a barely fictionalised version of London listings magazine *Time Out* and replaced by his aggressive female friend Juniper, Bull is repeatedly left asking “Who am I?” (231). Rejecting his male friends (feeling “oppressed by their self-assurance, their seemingly unquestioning masculinity”, 250), he finds solace in Ramona, a trans-sexual prostitute. This “He/She” (242), an ex-welder from Wearside, possesses an intense Northern masculinity that constitutes the ultimate reversal of gender roles. The novella concludes with a claim to unoriginality. Declaring the tale an “everyday story [...] There’s nothing new under this red dwarf emotional sun of ours” (265), it ends in conventional narrative closure—Bull establishing a home in the quiet domestic setting of San Francisco with a son Kenneth (the result of his affair with Alan) who is, ironically, “very much one of the boys” (275).

The twin novellas *Cock* and *Bull* represent gender and sexuality as forms of power which Carol and Bull master as a result of their respective mutations. While Carol finds herself empowered and inclined to consume without morality, Bull finds himself crippled by a new emotional awareness and responsibility. Where the *petit mort* of organism signals an escape from frustration for Carol, it marks a loss of identity for Bull. Indeed, for all these narratives appear to promote liberation from strict gender roles via metamorphosis, they are actually rather inhibited, excessively absurd and, like the pained stand-up comic who berates Bull, they try a little bit too hard. Self claims that he has not re-read this “dicktych” (Self in McCarthy 2001) since he wrote it and at times the novellas do feel dated, especially in

respect to their polemic representations of gender and power. Marked by tales of impotent individuals, forced to stand by and watch or be subjected to aggressive acts, the two novellas, like much of Self's work, concern themselves with the grotesque, exaggerated to the point of the absurd, to reveal profound tensions in contemporary culture. Significantly, the novellas do not offer solutions to the debates with which they engage. Instead, these extended cock and bull stories, tales of nonsense—or in an alternative expression of the phrase, plain “bullshit”—actualise transformation and mutation to enact change. As satires, they point to the contemporary social norms behind such inversions to suggest the need for change.

A wildly preposterous world fuelled by the physical alteration of states reaches a climax in Self's 1997 novel *Great Apes*. During the 1990s, several major news stories concerning animals captured the British imagination. In 1992 Damian Hirst—a key member of the YBAs (Young British Artists)—exhibited his now infamous work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a tiger shark suspended in a formaldehyde filled vitrine, at the Saatchi Gallery, London. In 1996, attention turned again to matters of humanity and evolution in the ground-breaking genetic cloning of “Dolly the Sheep”. Echoes of these events can be detected in Self's approach to the relationship between humans and animals in his 1997 novel. *Great Apes* explores an ethological crisis centred around the intrinsic connection between humans and animals. Ethology, an offshoot of zoology, became popular in the 1990s as a means of understanding human behaviour. Claiming that humans are remarkably like animals in respect to reproduction, workplace behaviour and recreational habits, ethologists propose that through appreciating this revelation, humans can understand their ancestors and the mechanisms of evolution that led to the final, superior position of humanity. Ethology therefore not only seeks to illuminate political and social interactions but re-frame them, to throw new light on the human condition.

The central conceit of *Great Apes* is that time has been reversed and apes have won the evolutionary game. Transgressing and mutating boundaries, Self works with the length of the novel form to reanimate and develop characters and settings from his previous fiction into an absurd new parallel universe. With humans decentred in favour of the evolutionary dominance of apes, Self takes a satirical swipe at anthropocentrism. Opening with an epigraph from Kafka's "Report on the Academy", Self situates his own narrative within a long established tradition of literary interventions on the subject. Elsewhere, references to the *Planet of the Apes*—a television series from the 1970s—foreground a cultural heritage of questioning the assumed superiority of the human race. Setting humanism against animal rights, Self takes this metaphor as far as it will go to draw attention to the assumptive nature of anthropocentrism. In his novel of hierarchy, the most shocking and satirical revelation is how far down the dominant order humanity has fallen.

Self's ape-run vision of contemporary London presents a world in which humans have swapped roles with apes and become "domesticated" beasts "employed for scientific purposes". "Held in large compounds, isolated, diseased, in pain, malnourished" (Self 1997, x), humans are cast as wild creatures whose primeval cry "Fuuuuuuckoooooffff-Fuuuuuuckoooooffff" (484) is indicative of their declining evolutionary potential. Mocked for their "primitive forms of ideology" including mating for life (xi)—a practice derided on the grounds that it offers "no genetic advantage" (xii)—humans are presented as "worthy of some small measure of our sympathy" (x). Kept in zoos, circuses or PG Tips adverts (227), perhaps the ultimate cultural inversion of the novel, humans are relegated to the role of animal while apes drive cars, staff hospitals and run a country unsettlingly similar to the UK during the 1990s. Self's regular cast of fictional characters including Simon Dykes and Dr Zack Busner are not immune from this satirical transformation, translated here into their chimp-counter-selves. Although this trope of inversion begins to drag when extended across

several hundred pages, it is generally successful in attempting to create an imaginative space that, despite its absurd and frightening scenario, retains enough elements of reality to anchor Self's criticisms to the real world.

The opening chapters of *Great Apes* offer a subtle and suggestively satirical focus on animalistic aspects of the human world. For artist Simon Dykes, even in his pre-ape state, "intimacy was defined by sexual interaction" (13), by "Bodies dragged by thin shanks through thick mud, bodies smashed and pulverised, throats slashed red, given free tracheotomies so that the afflicted could breathe their last" (16) before intercourse. Vanessa, an art critic Simon encounters at a gallery, is a classic Selfian female, an idiot whose ignorance of ethnologist Levi-Strauss is flaunted for the benefit of knowing male nods. Simon regards Vanessa as an alien, sending "one psychic probe into her anus, the other into her left nostril. He turned her anatomy inside out, sockwise, and in the process quite forgot who the fuck she was, what the fuck she has said up until now, and so told her" (6).

Criticised for blatant sexism and reproducing older, sexist views of men and women, Self's approach to gender and sexuality has been the subject of much critical distain. Across his fiction, Self traverses the divide between naughty schoolboy and blatant misogynistic, tempering his limited and problematic characterisations with "groaningly cheap jokes" (Leith 1997, 28) about the differences between men and women. In *Great Apes*, Selfian gender relations reach a new low as female apes are immediately subordinated to their males counterparts, who do not even "discard the morning paper before effecting penetration" (40). Drugs fuel a similar primal promiscuity for Simon in human-form, making him "feel like penetrating everybody in sight [...] a conga-line of copulation, where a cock-thrust here would produce a cunt-throb way over there" (11). Simon calls his girlfriend Sarah "my little monkey" (51), noting "her imperfections [...] the too thin lips [...] pointed canine teeth" (83) and her "covering of coarse blonde fur" (89), descriptions actualised in the subsequent

transformation to her ape-self. Propositioned by suitors at a bar in the human-world, Sarah reflects that the “men were like apes [...] attempting to impress her by waving and kicking about in a display of mock potency” (18). Culminating in Simon’s vision of King Kong attacking a busy Oxford Circus (31), this early focus on “the darkness at the edge of the sun, and these bulletins of disembodiment, disincorporation updates” (16) sows the seeds of transitions to come. Simon’s “series of modern apocalyptic paintings” (29) foreshadow his own descent into chaos, the end of the human world and the birth of the planet of the (great) apes.

After the interjection of a chapter introducing an alternative ape society, Self’s narrative returns to the human, culminating in a drug-induced dream in which Sarah transforms into an ape who swings through the trees surrounded by phallic imagery. Simon awakes to a world in which reverse Darwinism has taken effect to produce a mirror image of evolutionary progress. After this point, the novel is situated solely in an alternative reality where Simon’s “human delusion” (231) is blamed on his drug induced psychosis and he is sectioned in an ape-run hospital. Ape society liberates the boundaries of the human, presenting Simon with a culture in which racism and misogyny underpin social interactions and where incest, paedophilia and (literal) arse licking are accepted models of behaviour. Thrown into this “ghastly planet of the apes world” (473), Simon reflects that he “had gone to sleep with his human lover and when he awoke the following morning she was a chimpanzee and so was everyone else in the world” (94). Identified by the media-savvy Selfian regular Dr Busner as a “great ape” (131), Simon proves an ideal “case to manipulate” (99). Long forgotten for the “doctoral excesses of *The Quantity Theory of Insantiy*, with which he had been associated” (34), Self’s recurring character Dr Busner might look like an ape but is otherwise unchanged. He is interested in Dyke’s case solely because other “case

histories” of patients like Simon have “made great copy and highly entertaining television” (36).

The novel finally reveals that Simon’s psychosis of humanity is not caused by his apocalyptic paintings, feelings towards women, or his children, but simply by “a satirical trope” (493) imposed by its author. Focussing on the “numinous dividing line between man and chimp” (xiii), *Great Apes* suggests that humanity itself is a form of psychosis, that all anthropocentrism is madness, and that it is only when Simon accepts his true nature that he is cured. This satire is based on a normative position that implies that humans should be more than apes, yet the similarities across the novel are too frequent to be dismissed. Simon is left to reflect, “What, after all, were the apes, if not distorted versions of the body?” (223). An omniscient narrator guides a narrative that attempts to underpin this unhinged reality with misanthropic humour and parody to offer a satire on mankind’s distorted relationship with the human body and evolutionary superiority. The function of this satire is to convince the reader to identify the behaviour highlighted and with the satirist in condemning it and considering alternatives to perceived humanity at the turn of the century.

Exploring the divided self through the transformation of living to dead, female to male, male to female and man to ape, the 1990s fiction of Will Self delights in dismantling fundamental binary oppositions. Literally working out the internal beast, his texts reverse humanity’s place in evolutionary time and, in doing so, invert the dominant narratives of the age. Complicating the concept of accurate representation, these devolutionary scenarios suggest that the true horror of his 1990s fictions lies in their revelation of the terrifying familiarity at the heart of “otherness”. In *Great Apes*, Dr Busner describes Simon Dykes’s condition as “the *Zeitgeist* [...] fused with psychosis” (325). In many ways this diagnosis can be extended as an effective description of Self’s oeuvre. His 1990s fictions combine irony and satire to engage with the decadence of 1990s Britain as it marched towards the new

millennium. Trialling new forms of imaginative narration to reflect the “endism” inherent to this era, his fiction evidences a millennial anxiety in which entertainment is interwoven with truth to create alternative perspectives. Describing this approach as a “kind of miscegenation, a kind of rubbing up against the traditional categories of English literary concern” (Self 2008), Self reveals the capacity of his fictions to draw upon satirical traditions of the past to fuel new critiques of *fin de millennial* society. Filled with statements and profiles rather than subtle characterisation and plot development, his writings from this period can be viewed as a kind of “‘movement’ fiction [...] a book where you work consciously to unite your individual voice—in some way—with the *Zeitgeist*” (Self 1995a, 405).

The writings of Will Self not only to look under the surface of reality but also expose familiar aspects of our world to an uncomfortable and newly illuminating light to—as Coleridge commented of Wordsworth—‘awaken the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom’ (Coleridge in Jackson 1985, 122). Exploding the familiar world around us, the 1990s satires of Will Self leave readers to pick up the pieces and reassemble a more logical and fairer world vision. Making people laugh, whilst at the same time making them think, these texts employ character, language, imagery and mode to reveal structures of power and flaws in humanity and, in doing so, position Self as a hopeful satirist for the contemporary world. Turning critical focus within rather than without, Self explores the “Gottterdammerung of periodicity”—or disastrous conclusion to events—that was the 1990s, to suggest potential trajectories for humanity at the turn of the century: transformation, regression or death. As Bull reminds us, in “this world where all are mad and none are bad, we all know that the finger points backwards” (Self 1992, 266), while sister novella reflects that “as the cock of progress thrusts through social form and change, it is at once and the same time taking itself from behind” (74). Alternative worlds in which change occurs through mutation rather than progress mark the fictions of Will Self. His characters change physically and

psychologically, from life to death, madness to sanity, active to passive, male to female and human to animal. Through these transformations, identity and notions of the self are altered, boundaries brought down and set in motion. His work satirises to interrogate ideas central to the development of post-war British literature including identity, gender, class, social change, drugs, morality, the media and threats to the nuclear family. Marked by the social, economic and political conditions of the 1990s, they explore responses to a series of conclusions — of lives, ideas, relationships, sanity and identity— to offer new satirical psychogeographies of mutation and transgression as potential paths forward from the perceived “endism” of the twentieth century.

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