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## Configurations of Self

### Modernism and Distraction

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According to present dominant visions in literary studies, high modernist fiction is characterized by formal innovation, the destruction of tradition, and above all, the radical subjectivization of literature. Modernism is said to be focused on the problem of mastering a chaotic modernity by means of formal techniques. The most characteristic formal techniques are ironic detachment, highly mediated and multi-perspectival narration, self-referentiality, stylistic ostentation, use of large-scale symbolic forms, and the dramatization of states of consciousness, including the author's own (Miller [1999], 17).

According to current academic doxa, modernism is an aesthetics of formal mastery. At first, this seems to contradict the other common wisdom about modernism, that modernism consists of a radical subjectivization of literature. However, this subjectivization should not be understood as expressive, as in the case of romanticism. For the modernist, personal vision is not proclaimed but rather *embodied in formal mastery*. Fredric Jameson formulates this as follows: "The great modernisms were [...] predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body" (Jameson [1983], 114). Modernist authors try to convey their personal vision by developing an individual form of language. This unique style, is supposed to embody, to *be*, the subjectivity of the author. The modernist author metaphorically identifies herself or himself with her or his text.

This is, however, only part of the story. In 1930, in the introduction of his review of Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Walter Benjamin pointed out that there are two extreme tendencies in modernist fiction. These two tendencies form antithetical but equally authoritative manifestations of the modernist novel. The first tendency is the one that can be recognized in present constructions of modernism. It is marked by formal mastery and purity, and orientation toward unique interiorized experience. André Gide's novel *Journal des faux-monnayeurs* (The Counterfeiters) is for Benjamin emblematic for this tendency:

[...] Gide develops the doctrine of the roman pur. With the greatest subtlety imaginable, he has set out to eliminate every straightforward, linear, paratactic narrative (every mainline epic characteristic) in favour of ingenious, purely novelistic (and in this context this also means Romantic) devices. The attitude of the characters to what is being narrated, the attitude of the author toward them and to his technique—all this must become a component of the novel itself. In short, this roman pur is actually pure interiority; it acknowledges no exterior [...] (Benjamin [1999], 300)

Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* represents the second tendency, this one marked by heterogeneity of materials with extra-literary contents, montage techniques, and orientation towards everyday life and speech. According to Benjamin, this writing technique radically challenges the pursuit of interiority and subjectivization: "The texture of this montage is so dense that we have difficulty hearing the author's voice" (Benjamin [1999], 301).

Tyrus Miller contrasts the two modernisms as follows: "If Gide's subtle hand is discernible over all his materials, all the more so as he retreats from direct authorial address, then Döblin's authorial presence is nearly eclipsed by the heterogeneous materials he assembles." (Miller [1999] 15). Miller contrasts James Joyce and Beckett in a similar way, although the issue is now not so much unification of authorial voice by constructing a solid subjectivity and interiority, but rather unification by means of rigorous form resulting from Joyce's "mythical method". Samuel Beckett, in contrast, has challenged Joyce's modernism with the following words:

I am not interested in a 'unification' of the historical chaos anymore than I am in the 'clarification' of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphization of the human necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births, and deaths, because that is all I can know. (Beckett cited in Miller [1999] 17–8)

The lack of emphasis on the second tendency in modernist fiction in later scholarly constructions of modernism, is, as I will argue, the side effect of formalist approaches, which, after having been introduced in the forties and fifties, became authoritative in literary studies in the sixties and seventies. This formalist approach was superficially very effective in analyzing the brand of modernism that distinguishes itself by formal mastery, purity and interiorised experience, because it was able to distinguish and analyze the devices by means of which modernists exercised their formal mastery. But against the other brand of modernism, the formalist approach is quite powerless, because this other modernism seems to distinguish itself by a lack of formal mastery in its random gathering of materials mounted into a text, that is, by heterogeneity of materials, montage techniques and orientation towards everyday life and speech.

In the Dutch context, Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch's construction of modernism in their *Modernisme in de Europese Letterkunde* (Modernism in European Literature) is emblematic for the strengths and limitation of the formalist approach to modernism. It is significant that those authors who, for Benjamin and Miller, are part of the first tendency of Modernism — Gide, Joyce, Proust, Woolf, Thomas Mann, Svevo — make up modernism as such for Fokkema and Ibsch. Those authors who belong to the second tendency in modernism, like Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Alfred Döblin, Samuel Beckett, Wyndham Lewis, remain undiscussed or are just mentioned as marginal figures within modernism.

Second, this formalist approach lacks the power to explain how modernism responds to its historical context. In the section titled "The historical context of modernism," Fokkema and Ibsch restrict the historical context to literary history: modernism is presented as a reaction to realism and symbolism. This is legitimated by the statement that "the influence of important developments in world history on literature goes via the cultural system, in which — besides many others — writers and readers participate" (Fokkema and Ibsch [1984], 30).<sup>1</sup> History, then, is only important in so far it has been included, let's say documented, into literary texts in a very literal way. Ultimately, liter-

ary history is seen as an internal development, with only an indirect, filtered relation to the world outside literature, which can, as a result, remain undiscussed.

Since the nineties, however, New Historicism has presented a major challenge to the limitations of formalist literary history. New Historicism views Modernism as part of the broader socio-cultural phenomenon of modernity. Modernism in literature is, then, a specific embodiment of modernity, related to other such developments such as realism or symbolism, which are all dialectically connected to modernity. This transition from formalism to New Historicism has not only led to interest in the second kind of modernism, but, more importantly, this interest has been developed in terms of the relation between literary history and its historical context.

In his brilliant study of literature and modernity, entitled *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan*, Ulrich Baer defines the essence of modernity as the experience of shock, of experiences that register as unresolved, of traumatic experiences that elude memory and cognition (Baer [2000], 1). Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan are for him major figures who mark the beginning and ending of modernity. Baudelaire first recognized the dissolution of experience that characterizes modern existence. Although his confrontation with the “small shocks of urban existence” (Baer [2000], 7) pale in comparison with Celan’s efforts to testify to the Holocaust, both Baudelaire and Celan inscribe the historical events they were part of as “shocking and traumatic because they occurred in complete isolation and as absolute breaks with the belief systems that grounded their worlds” (Baer [2000], 8). This diagnosis of modernity perhaps sounds far-fetched, but it can be illustrated with a description of modern man by a writer who is associated neither with the revolutionary changes in Parisian urban life nor with the catastrophe of the Holocaust, namely John Ruskin. In 1856, a year before Baudelaire published *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Flowers of Evil), he expressed the decreasing graspability of the world as follows:

Out of perfect light and motionless air, we find ourselves on a sudden brought under sombre skies... and we find that whereas all the pleasure of [earlier days] was in stability, definiteness, and luminousness, we are expected to rejoice in darkness, and triumph in mutability; to lay the foundation of happiness in things which momentarily change or fade, and to expect the utmost satisfaction and instruction from what it is impossible to arrest, and difficult to comprehend. (Ruskin cited in Baer [2000], 36)

It is in Modernism, however, that this vanishing of the “experienceability” of the world begins to have serious repercussions for the experiencing subject. This becomes very clear, for instance, in Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge) of 1910. In the years covered by the notebooks, the narrator attempts to gain some control over the sensory impressions that initially threaten to overwhelm him. He experiences this invasion of sensory stimuli mostly in the city. In Paris he is literally bombarded by acoustic stimuli:

Electric trams go clanging through my room. Cars run over me. A door slams. Somewhere a window-pane crashes down and I hear the larger shards laugh and the smaller splinters giggle. Then suddenly, a dull muffled sound from the other side, inside the house. Someone is climbing the stairs. Comes, keeps on coming. Arrives, stays there a long time, then goes on up. And then the street again. A girl screams: Ah tais toi, je ne veux plus. The tram races in, rattling with excitement, and then rattles on, over everything. Someone shouts. People walk hard, catch up with one another. A dog barks. (Rilke [1982], 8)<sup>2</sup>

Rilke uses personification to describe Malte's acoustic experiences: shards that laugh and splinters that giggle. This personification transforms the sounds into active agents threatening to overwhelm the protagonist. It is as though the car is riding over him and the excess of acoustic stimuli makes it impossible for him to assume any distance or reflect on anything. He literally registers everything and, deprived of the capacity for reflection, loses any secure sense of himself.

The main character in this novel threatens to drown due to the sensory impressions that assault him in the modern city. Stimuli penetrate his body by way of his senses, and threaten his self with disintegration. The border between him and his external reality disappears. The subject (or the disintegration of it) presented here is no longer defined by reason, but by his senses. In Rilke's novel this situation is experienced as negative. The thrust of the novel, then, consists of the search for remedies against this feeling of being completely overwhelmed by sensory impressions.

Rilke's narrator can be seen as exemplary for a new view of subjectivity and bodily experience that became increasingly important in the course of the nineteenth century. According to this view, rationalism and cognition are no longer the foundation of subjectivity and the senses are no longer the instruments by which the rational subject can dominate its environment; on the contrary, subjecthood is formed in reaction to stimuli that penetrate the body by way of the senses. The "battle" that is thus waged through the senses is of a fundamentally different nature than it was before. While remaining the point of contact between the subject and its surroundings, the senses no longer function as an interface separating the subject from the outside world, thus enabling it to survey and control reality. Instead, the senses are now conceived of as a "channel," or door that is continually ajar, through which the outside world penetrates the body in the form of stimuli. The balance in the power struggle between the subject and the outside world would now seem to tip decisively towards the latter.

Some critics associate this nineteenth and early twentieth century concern for the role of sensory impressions in the creation of subjectivity with the social and technological developments of modernity. As a result of the industrial revolution, rapid urban expansion, the advance of capitalism and the invention of new technologies, the field of the senses changed—particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century—at breakneck speed. The subject was increasingly exposed to new sensations that could no longer be fitted into the familiar world order. Therefore, in the words of Jonathan Crary, an essential aspect of modernity consists of:

a continual crisis of attentiveness [...] the changing configurations of capitalism pushing attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an unending introduction of new products, new sources of stimulation, and streams of information. (Crary [1994], 68: 22)

According to Crary, this "crisis of the senses" is the reason why the concept of "attention" became one of the most important categories in the empirical psychology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The American philosopher and psychologist William James (brother of modernist novelist Henry James), for instance, defined the subject in terms of attention, concentration or focalisation. Precisely at the point when the *distraction* of the subject starts to emerge as a new phenomenon in the course of the nineteenth century, he took the concentration and attention of the subject to be decisive for human subjectivity.

But not everyone sees distraction as a polar opposite of attention or concentration, or as threatening to the subject. German thinkers such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin consider it rather

as a liberation or emancipation of the subject than as its downfall. In his essay “The Cult of Distraction” from 1924, Kracauer tells us how the new media of his time such as radio and film bring about an intense form of distraction in the viewer or listener. Someone listening to the radio, for instance, will switch from one station to another. The idea of the uninterrupted unity of the traditional work of art is radically disrupted by the “fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions” (Kracauer cited in Armstrong [1998], 216) that comprises the reception of film. On the one hand these ways of looking and listening are symptomatic for the fragmented character of modern life, “deprived of substance, empty as a tin can, a life which instead of internal connections knows nothing but isolated events forming ever new series of images in the manner of a kaleidoscope” (Kracauer cited in Armstrong [1998], 216). On the other, Kracauer argued that watching films would help to demolish the bourgeois worldview, “making the ‘soul’ flow out of itself to become a part of the material world, [...] constantly encountering material reality” (Kracauer cited in Armstrong [1998], 216).

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin presents the distraction of the viewer-listener less and less as the opposite of attention. Rather, being distracted is a special form of attention by which entirely different objects penetrate the subject. He compares the effect of cinema with Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, which made it possible to isolate matters that hitherto “floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception,” (Benjamin [1969], 237) subjecting them to analysis. The fragmented structure of film carries the viewer’s attention with it, and distracts it in the sense that at such moments conscious reflection is impossible. In order to illustrate this distracted manner of seeing, Benjamin quotes Georges Duhamel, who, incidentally, and unlike Benjamin, regarded film as a great danger: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images” (Benjamin [1969], 238). But the discontinuity in the sequence of film images and the “shock” that this brings about in the viewer ends up facilitating a “heightened presence of mind” (Benjamin [1969], 238).

The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. [...] Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasingly noticeable in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true mode of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background, not only by putting the public in the position of critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (Benjamin [1969], 237)

At first sight, the “reception in a state of distraction” that Benjamin regarded as having been triggered by the new media takes on paradoxical forms. Because subjects are no longer capable of organizing and anticipating their own perceptions, and because they are distracted by discontinuous sensory impressions, they become capable of attaining new or higher insights. According to this notion of things, distraction is an element of attention, seen as dialectic process. The subject who gets these new insights is, however, not the same subject as the one proposed by the Enlightenment who acquired insight by means of controlled observation and rationality. The subject of modernity acquires insight while being subjected to a mechanical process, unintendedly and accidentally.

The notion of subjectivity in modernity described so far differs radically from conventional notions of the subject in modernism, for instance in the construction of modernism of Fokkema and

Ibsch. According to their view, the modernist subject is not characterized by distraction, disintegration, loss of self, and inability to experience the world, but by distanced observation, reserved intellectualism, scepticism and irony and a pursuit of an authentic self (Fokkema and Ibsch [1984], 24). These qualities seem to embody a notion of strong individualistic subjectivity, rather than the loss of it. I will, however, rearticulate these two opposed notions of subjectivity as the world-sensitive subjectivity versus the defensive subject. But how can a strong, individualistic subjectivity be seen as “defensive”?

In order to solve the apparent contradiction between modernity and literary modernism, in order to historicize, *and* in order to argue that the individualistic subject is a defensive one, I will invoke one of the most important and canonical essays written about modernity and written in the middle of it, in 1903: “The Metropolis and Mental Life” by the German sociologist Georg Simmel. Like Baudelaire before him and Benjamin after him, Simmel describes the psychological foundation of metropolitan subjectivity as determined by the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. “Lasting impressions, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them, consume, so to speak, less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli” (Simmel [1971], 325). This metropolitan life stands in sharp contrast to the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence.

But the metropolitan subject does not just let itself be annihilated by these violent stimuli. It has its defense mechanisms:

Thus the metropolitan type—which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications—creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it. Thus the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity, which is least sensitive, and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality. (Simmel [1971], 326)

Simmel sees the intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolitan subject as a protection of the inner life against the sovereign powers of the metropolis. But it is not only its intellectualism but also its reserve which protects the subject from being overwhelmed by modern urban life:

If the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city should be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom one has a positive relationship, one would be completely atomised internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition. (Simmel [1971], 331)

According to Simmel, it is because of lack of space, and due to bodily closeness in the dense crowds of the metropolis, that mutual reserve, indifference, and the intellectual distance of life become perceivable and significant for the first time. Simmel’s diagnosis of mental life in the metropolis does resolve the contradiction between notions of modernity as, on the one hand, being defined by a crisis of the senses (Crary) or by traumatic shock and the dissolution of experience

(Baer), and, on the other hand, literary modernism as it is seen by mainstream criticism. Both distanced observation, reserved intellectualism, scepticism, irony and the pursuit of authenticity that characterizes literary modernism in Fokkema and Ibsch's construction of it, as well as the world-sensitive modernism as distinguished by Benjamin, are a protection against the loss of self which threatens the subject living under the conditions of modernity. This implies a total reversal of the kind of relation between the features of literary modernism and history as postulated by Fokkema and Ibsch. For them, the independent intellectualism and reserve of the modernist subject is not a defense strategy, but the foundation of individual subjectivity as such. They explain, for instance, the allegedly marginal role of the events of the First World War in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain) and in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as follows:

In the modernist world of experience, everything, even the events of war, is filtered by consciousness; historical events are made subordinate to the vision of the pondering, evaluating subject, which will never give up its independence. (Fokkema and Ibsch [1984], 34)<sup>3</sup>

However, when we try to understand modernism contextually, instead of formalistically, it becomes necessary to conclude that it is not a matter of holding on to independence, as if wilfully, but of armouring the self by means of intellectualism and reserve against overwhelming threats to it. It will be clear by now that this armouring of the self does not safeguard the self. The Austrian modernist writer Hermann Broch articulates clearly why modernist intellectualism is compulsive instead of controlled: "The highly developed rationality of modern metropolitan culture does not at all mitigate the human twilight, rather it intensifies it. The accepted *ratio* becomes a mere means for the satisfaction of drives and thus is robbed of its content as knowledge of the whole" (Broch cited in Miller [1999], 40). According to Tyrus Miller, rationality had embarked on a journey to the end of the night, reducing the individual subject to (in Beckett's words) "a peristalsis of light, worming its way into the dark" (Miller [1999], 40).

This is a far cry from the triumphant rational subject to which critics tend to cling. But it is also an overcoming of the split alleged by critics more sensitive to other kinds of modernist literature, the kinds that can now be considered more daring, looking the condition of modernity more directly in the face. What I propose, instead, is that we now reread Gide, Joyce, Woolf, Mann, Svevo and Proust from the vantage point of Döblin, Beckett, Lewis, Stein and Barnes. We will discover them to be altogether different writers from the ones we may have constructed.

## Notes

1. "de invloed van belangrijke ontwikkelingen in de wereldgeschiedenis op de literatuur (loopt) via het culturele systeem, waaraan naast vele anderen, de schrijvers en de lezers tot wie zij zich richten deelnemen" (Fokkema and Ibsch (1984), 30).
2. "Elektrische Bahnen rasen läutend durch meine Stube. Automobile gehen über mich hin. Eine Tür fällt zu. Irgendwo klirrt eine Scheibe herunter, ich höre ihre grossen Scherben lachen, die kleinen Splitter kichern. Dann plötzlich dumpfer, eingeschlossener Lärm von der anderen Seite, innen im Hause. Jemand steigt die Treppe. Kommt, kommt unaufhörlich. Ist da, ist lange da, geht vorbei. Und wieder die Strasse. Ein Mädchen kreischt: Ah tais-toi, je ne veux plus. Die Elektrische rennt ganz erregt heran, darüber fort, fort über alles. Jemand ruft. Leute laufen, überholen sich. Ein Hund bellt" (Rilke (1982), 8).

3. “In de modernistische ervaringswereld wordt alles, ook het oorlogsgebeuren, door het bewustzijn gefiltreerd; historische gebeurtenissen worden ondergeschikt gemaakt aan de visie van het afwegende, oordelende subject, dat zijn onafhankelijkheid nooit prijsgeeft” (Fokkema and Ibsch (1984), 34).

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