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Popular modernism: representations of modernist literature in popular culture

Loontjens, J.

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Epilogue

Approximately nine years ago, I found myself in a bookshop in Malaga. Among the English books that were on display for tourists, I noticed Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. I was delighted to see her novel next to *Harry Potter* and Dan Brown and Don DeLillo. When I picked up the book, a label caught my eye, bearing the text: "As featured in the film *The Hours*. Starring Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf." Through this sticker, Woolf's novel was suddenly connected with American celebrity culture. Thinking back, I conclude that that moment formed one of the points of beginning for my study of the representation of modernist icons in popular culture.

In a recent essay on the survival of the novel, the Dutch critic Bas Heijne argues that academics who study modernist literature may intend to inspire potential readers, but that the result of that scholarship is practically the opposite: modernist literature has become isolated in a specialized field of research and academic discourse, which, according to Heijne, actually discourages readers to attempt reading Proust or Joyce (2011: 30). However, as I have tried to demonstrate in this study, modernist novels easily reach an audience outside of the academic world because of their re-embedding in popular culture.

Though a film like *The Hours*, or Oprah's selection of Faulkner's work for her Book Club, may inspire readers who had never heard of Woolf or Faulkner to read their work, one can also observe that the authors' exceptional feeling for language tends to disappear behind stereotypes. On the one hand, then, academics are blamed for creating a reserve for modernist literature, which is only accessible to specialists. On the other hand, the popular media are blamed for paying little attention to style and idiom, reducing literature to human interest. Oprah, for instance, is not so much concerned with stylistic questions as she is with using literature to discuss the general problems of life. Yet, while many consider her approach to literature to be "not done," one could also argue that she highlights the most valuable gift literature can give: helping one to better understand this world.

Hence, my problem with representations of literature in popular culture is not so much a problem of approach, but rather of time and concentration. Popular culture does not appear to allow for the long-term concentration reading requires. Reading, of dense books especially, demands a concentration that seems to have become obsolete in popular culture. Not only because of the increasing speed of images in different kinds of media, but also because reading asks for what I would like to call a particularly active focus. The self-reflexive, exploratory aspect of modernist literature asks for specific attention, which may have more affinity with philosophical and analytical thought than with reading for the purpose of entertainment.

Getting acquainted with Kafka through an image on a mug or a picture in a tourist guidebook; getting to know *Mrs Dalloway* through a feature film—those are passive ways of getting to know the works of those authors. They are served up along the way, part of watching a movie or going on a city trip. In effect, they become stopping points along the route, much like the sites that one observes while surfing the Internet. Our attention span is brief and superficial. While the reappearance in popular culture consolidates those writers' fame as canonical authors, and while the sale of their books increases, the impression lingers that only few readers actually read their work. Heijne argues that it used to be a sign of prestige when one had read Proust, Joyce, or Musil. Nowadays one only needs to know the names so as to be able to joke about how unreadable their works are (2011: 20-22).

However, even if it is true that fewer and fewer people read the modernistic icons, nearly every reader is familiar with their writing techniques, because those techniques have been incorporated into contemporary literature. Moreover, one cannot deny that readers do exist who escape the bombardment of images and choose to descend in the particular concentration that modernist novels require. Just like a clear division between high and low culture is ultimately untenable, as it dissolves in multifaceted distinctions, reading also knows many forms.

I follow Barthes in his argument that the reader decides the value and signification of the book. This is yet another reason for the impossibility of dividing books into the domains of high and low culture. A reader may find an

interesting angle to elevate a seemingly uninteresting book and, the other way around, a reader can also read a dense book at a very superficial level, merely extracting the storyline. While I concur with Barthes's point that the author can never control or limit the understanding or explanation of his work, I disagree with the tenacious heritage of the New Critics: the idea that the author's biography is of no importance to his or her work (which is so often mistaken for Barthes's point).

The biographical way of reading may illuminate the role of writing in someone's life, as well as reveal hidden patterns of thought relating to the author's background or particular milieu. It does not make sense to consider this way of reading low-brow, as has been done for such a long time. Sometimes, one starts reading a novel to learn something about a particular historical period, a certain culture, subculture, youth, or Japanese culture; sometimes, because one enjoys the rhythm of a particular author; or because one is interested in writing oneself and one wants to learn from other's writing; or because a book is popular and recommended by a celebrity on television; or because it teaches us about Apartheid in the Nineteen-Sixties in South Africa; or because one saw a film adaptation of a book that raised one's curiosity; or because one is interested in the unique style of a specific writer; or because a book is about a mother-daughter relation that may help one understand one's own mother better; and so forth. I am convinced that we all move between these ways of reading, depending on the period in life, the book itself, and sometimes one combines various ways of reading and interests within a single reading experience.

In the Faulkner-archive on Oprah.com, Faulkner is not described as a modernist author. The words "modernist" and "modernism" are simply not used. In the context of Oprah's Book Club, it is not necessary to characterize Faulkner as a modernist, because his books are not discussed in the context of the history of literature or in relation to a literary canon or genre. Instead, his work is presented as fiction dealing with American history, particularly with segregation and the South. The way in which the label "modernist" is left out shows how irrelevant the term can be for readers. One can observe the same with regard to Woolf as represented in the movie edition of *The Hours*, or with regard to Kafka in tourist guidebooks. Woolf is presented as an image of women's literature,

Kafka as an icon of the literature of Prague Jews. Popular culture phenomena do not seem to care for the category “modernist.” It belongs to a different discourse. Woolf, Kafka, Faulkner or Proust do not necessarily just belong to a literary period from a century ago. They have become part and parcel of contemporary popular culture.

In the first chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that Charlie’s ideas about writing actually display more modernist characteristics than the ideas expressed by Marcel in *La Recherche*. This shows not only that modernism is part of the present day, but also that it is partly, necessarily, a contemporary construct. Conversely, Marcel’s conclusion about writing as interpretation, especially the idea that through interpreting a reminiscence is re-created—differently yet authentically—makes of him more of a postmodernist than a classical modernist, who on occasion even agrees with certain aspects of contemporary self-help culture. While I have argued that modernist paradigms have become the paradigms of contemporary literary writing in general, it has also become clear that these paradigms are partly the products of recent history and offer an image of modernism that has been developed after the fact.

McKee’s comparison of Kaufman’s scenarios with modernism also confirms that modernist techniques and perspectives on writing have permeated various genres of writing. As I have shown, the problems that fictional writers deal with correspond to ideals of writing that were once formulated by modernists; for example, the wish to represent someone’s inner world, or the wish to write something original. Originality in writing often conforms to literary techniques instigated by modernists, as, for instance, shedding chronology or a single and clear narrator or storyline. Thus, originality and experimental writing often conform to the breaking of rules that the modernists already broke.

Modernist writing, defined as such or not, is part and parcel of all contemporary literary writing. As writers, we are all modernists. High modernism is not dead, or past, or disappearing; it runs through our veins, having become mother’s milk for every western writer. I dare to say that even those who have not read the modernists follow in their footsteps. The rules that the modernists broke and transformed, the freedom that they created for narrating and writing, is deployed by every writer today.

As I was working on this study, I was repeatedly asked if my preoccupation as an academic did not hinder me in my literary writing. The opposite is true. I was surprised to discover how separate the two remained. Analyzing literature and writing literature apparently ask for entirely different kinds of reflectivity. In addition, working as a literary author did inspire me to pursue certain questions concerning writing. It was revealing to receive reviews of my poetry and novels, and to observe my own part as an author today. I also experienced intimately that the biography and gender of an author is of great influence on how a book is reviewed. In the very first review I received, a respected critic (Adriaan Jeaggi) in a respected Dutch newspaper (*Het Parool*) described me as a 'hot thing' [*lekker ding*]. I did not use experiences such as those in my analysis of the role of the author; yet, the gender question did gain in importance while working on the chapter about the author.

The fact that self-reflexive thought is often described as the main trait of modernist literature could create the expectation that literary texts contain a theoretical element. In a certain sense this might be true. In many modernist works, the act of observing the observing mind is part of the writing. With regard to Proust, Malcolm Bowie describes this as "the pains and pleasures of the theorising mind" (1990: 2). Yet, as a literary writer, I would like to comment that there is also an important difference between the self-reflexive or theoretical element of prose and a merely theoretical text. A work of fiction can respond to a genre, a story pattern, or a literary tradition, but all this would not be argued as such. The famous principle of literary writing decrees: show, don't tell. In addition, a literary text allows the reader to feel, guess, or sense, but a literary text is hardly ever structured in such a way as to argue or build up a case or line of reasoning. That is what theorists do. Now, of course, a literary writer can describe a theorist, or someone with a philosophical approach to life; yet, there remains an important difference: when describing the thoughts or a speech of a fictional character, one does not just think about valid arguments. The theory that the protagonist advances should also reveal something about his deeper motives, inclinations, habits, anxieties and desires. As a literary writer one is also aware of what distracts the character's thoughts while talking and whether there is a tiny piece of parsley sticking between his front teeth.

These are different ways of thinking, and yet they are connected. The way in which they are connected has been one of the topics of this study. The self-reflexive writing of the modernists knows endless branches, which have led me to various sectors of contemporary popular culture: film, websites, tourism, self-help books. What I have done is trying to map some of those branches and to analyze what they tell us about our contemporary concepts of truth, fiction, the author and the role of literature in society. However, this concerns a way of thinking that poses questions without necessarily reaching definite answers. Culture is always in transformation, endlessly engendering more questions.

To conclude, I wish to say something about finishing, about bringing this study to a close. While writing the last chapter on Kafka's unfinished stories, I realized that I found finishing even harder than starting to write. Beginning can be frustrating, and I must say that I have found many things to distract a good and clear start, but, as my first chapter repeatedly shows, one has often already begun while one still feels that one cannot find a right beginning. Finishing, in contrast, is a process that never ends. One can start finishing, but ending the finishing process is almost impossible. Even after one has finished, there will always remain sentences or entire paragraphs to correct, to add or to delete. Thus, I have procrastinated finishing this study and especially writing this epilogue. In fact, it has been finished for months, but I could not decide that it was really finished. Hence, I decide that I will stop here and end by submitting the present study in this ever unfinished state.