

Profane Illumination through Essayistic Writing and Thinking. Benjamin and Bakhtin on the Value of Everyday Experience

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This article points at the contrast between the empty concept of experience that was introduced by Enlightenment thinkers and the "essayistic" way of redeeming experience that can be traced back from Erasmus to Perec. The argument links the theory of everydayness of Lefebvre with Benjamin's concept of "illumination" and with Bakhtin's ideal of a "prosaics".

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One of the striking paradigm shifts that occur in the Renaissance era is that intellectuals set out to redefine the notion of the irrational, putting it in an altogether different place within the discourse on experience and subjectivity. Although the modern may very well be identified with the search for a rational foundation of human knowledge, it is certainly also true that in the 15th and 16th century a parallel quest was undertaken in search of a non-metaphysical conception of the notion of experience. This sudden ascension of the irrational constitutes clear evidence of the fact that the view of subjectivity did not, or not entirely, coincide with Descartes' cogito. A case in point is the figure of Erasmus, the world-renowned humanist. In his *Laus Stultitiae* or *The Praise of Folly*, he perplexed the intellectual establishment by singing the praise of the irrational, its power to put things in perspective, to counterweigh the unilateral emphasis on logical and mathematical reason. Erasmus' body of work is exemplary for the paradoxical notion of subjectivity that continued to elude many a humanist scholar. He is truly a double-faced literary figure. Already author of a book on etiquette that makes a case for individual self-control in personal hygiene and social exchange, Erasmus gained universal fame with a work

published in Latin in 1530: *De Civilitate*. It concerned itself with good manners and civilized behaviour, and, in the view of the great Norbert Elias, was nothing less than a key moment in the civilization process. Over a period of six years it had more than 30 reprints and a total of 130 editions (13 of which were still being put out well into the 18th century; see Elias 80). In the book, Erasmus exemplifies the ways in which technical thought infiltrated everyday life. It is a plea for a way of life that celebrates control over impulses and rational submission of everything related to the body and our animal nature. At the same time, however, Erasmus' most famous bestseller, *The Praise of Folly*, shows him as a satirist who looks upon man's irrational traits with a considerably forgiving eye. The essay, dating from 1509, reveals that humanism not only adopted the ideas of harmony and logos from Antiquity, but also the relativist practical wisdom that was central to the thought of Aristotle, Lucretius en Epicurus. The irrational, Erasmus stresses, needs to be treated with respect. It needs to be kept on the right track by carrying out targeted rational interventions. In some ways, Erasmus' plea boils down to an attempt to reconcile what, in Antiquity, was considered to be the male and female principle. The Folly is represented as a goddess that personifies the irrational aspects of man. In her "declamatio," she makes a plea in favour of her own (female) attributes – naturalness, corporality and seductiveness – and indeed depicts these qualities as a compensation for reasonableness, self-control and wisdom – in short, for (what in patriarchal Western culture is identified with) male properties.

For first, what is more sweet or more precious than life? And yet from whom can it more properly be said to come than from me? (...) And the Stoics too, that conceive themselves next to the gods, yet show me one of them, nay the veriest bigot of the sect, and if he do not put off his beard, the badge of wisdom, though yet it be no more than what is common with him and goats; yet at least he must lay by his supercilious gravity, smooth his forehead, shake off his rigid principles, and for some time commit an act of folly and dotage. In fine, that wise man whoever he be, if he intends to have children, must have recourse to me. (Erasmus, online)

With the essay, Erasmus becomes one of the very first Moderns to opt for a more holistic approach to human existence. His intention was to discuss the fullness of human experience, one that comprises cognitive and affective skills, implies bodily and spiritual inclinations, and combines technical logic with aesthetic contemplation. Through the next centuries, and with clock-like regularity, intellectuals will rise to continue the work of Erasmus. At the same time, however, the dominance of logic and systemic thinking will grow with proportionate force. In philosophical thought, the

quest for equilibrium between the sensory and the noumenal will be given less and increasingly fewer chance, as the challenge to be met now is the development and expansion of a scientifically justified body of knowledge. According to Giorgio Agamben the distinction between Psyche and Nous, between the sensitive and the intelligible, has grown ever more vague (Agamben 19–27). The cogito's abstract form of subjectivity eventually, and effectively, replaced the other two by setting itself up as a neutral body. Since then, it functions as the epistemological foundation in the discourse on the foundations of human subjectivity.

The most notable exception to this general tendency of modern thought is indeed found among the Renaissance humanists, who, through their essayistic work, are at the basis of an alternative conceptualization of experience and of subjectivity. The humanists show how Psyche and Nous may be touched on – negotiated – *simultaneously*, thus paving the way for later attempts at formulating a wider notion of experience and a broader concept of the subject. Following in their footsteps, a select company, among whom we find Anglo-Saxon pragmatists, vitalists, Freudians and Nietzscheans, will raise even more radical questions concerning the Cartesian cogito. Similarly, literary men and women of the 19th and the 20th century will propose in an ever more frequent manner aesthetic programs that provide an alternative to the empty notion of experience found in science and among the rationalist thinkers of the Enlightenment. Every exponent of this new current in modern thought may be qualified as more or less essayistic. All of them choose a notion of experience that brings together multiplicity or diversity and unity, sensitivity and intelligibility. They preclude every possibility of arriving at an absolute truth, would sooner choose a precise and cautious examination of empirical situations. In other words, the investigative and tentative quality of their mode of thought thus justifies the label 'essay'.

Everydayness as a philosophical concept

Essayism, however, is not merely a mode of thought. If the term may be interpreted in a more narrow sense, it can also be said to have a proper object of its own. For essayists, the domain of inquiry is everyday life. Not the everyday life of boredom, entertainment and distraction, because in the latter situations a subject hardly ever acquired knowledge. It is the contingent events of everyday experience that prompt the subject to thinking, to contemplation. It is crucial to understand that contingent events can never be reduced to a system. To put it differently: the everyday raised in the

essay meets two kinds of enemies, to wit, the trivial and the rigid. In this respect, the essayistic object largely corresponds to the object of inquiry that occupies center stage in the work of Henri Lefèbvre: an alternative space of experience that supersedes the systematics and the compulsive control of technical rationality and an ever-expanding bureaucracy; yet also a space that manages to offer resistance against the tendency toward alienating routine and banalization that go along with the hyperindividualism so prominently present in modern economies and consumer societies. Lefèbvre ascribes a different attitude or mode of thought to these competitive, 'hostile' forms of the everyday. Modern systemic thought imposes "strategies" on everyday life and thus emphasizes the linear and teleological forms of social action; the trivial occurs when everyday action becomes repetitive and cyclical. Between both oppressive forms of everyday action lies the domain that shows us the fullness of experience. It is a domain that Lefèbvre calls "productive" everydayness and that he situates "on the level of tactics, of forces and their relations, and of stratagems and suspicions" (135). "Its transformation," he continues, "takes place on the level of events, strategies and historical moments" (135). In Lefèbvre's view, this form of everydayness is capable of rising above the trivial. At the same time, it is a free zone against the modern systemic thought of the bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy tends to operate for and by itself. By establishing itself as a 'system', it becomes its own goal and its own end; at the same time, in a given society, it has real functions, which it executes more or less effectively. Thus it modifies the everyday, and this too is its goal and its aim. However, it never succeeds in 'organizing' the everyday completely; something always escapes it, as bureaucrats themselves ruefully admit. The everyday protests; it rebels in the name of innumerable particular cases and unforeseen situations. Beyond the zone bureaucracy can reach, or, rather, in its margins, the unformed and the spontaneous live on. (Lefèbvre 64).

Lefèbvre's philosophical ideal immediately reminds us of the alternative – 'humanist' – tradition in modern thought, but also of the ideas of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau. Studying the latter two thinkers could prove to be very useful within the context of essayism, but the path followed in this paper takes us further in time, and deeper into the theories of Benjamin, Bakhtin and (to a lesser extent) Bergson. Their theories focus on aspects of essayism that are given insufficient chance in the work of the French thinkers I mentioned earlier.

In order to gain better insight into the secrets of the essayistic mode of thought, it is interesting to map out the constellations of power that govern a society, and to examine more closely the relationships of tension in modern culture. This was what Lefèbvre, Foucault and De Certeau

set out to do. It is, however, equally useful to go deeper into the type of experience that would serve as an alternative. Benjamin, Bergson and Bakhtin formulated a positive concept of experience and put their theories at the service of expanding or extending the concept. They did not merely content themselves with observing how the Enlightenment, in many ways, lead to an empty scientific and systematizing concept of experience, but tried to put the fullness of experience on the agenda. In this respect, they find themselves close to the humanist ideal that flourished in the Renaissance. Following Walter Benjamin, this ideal could be denominated as the “secular Enlightenment” or “profane illumination”. In the latter concept, the intelligible and the sensitive, *Nous* and *Psyche* are joined “by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (Benjamin, *Surrealismus* online). In this “profane illumination”, a junction between extremes occurs, as the enlightened and the banal light up together. Thus, the two enemies are simultaneously defused: on the one hand, the profane illumination consolidates the “true creative overcoming of religious illumination” (ibid.) – and, by doing so, over the premodern forms of experience; on the other hand, the scores are settled with the empty rasters or frameworks of modern Enlightenment. If these inadequate forms of experience can be avoided, the world may show itself in its contingency and the subject is given the chance to adapt to a new world, in which the unpredictability and multiformity or multiplicity can be at once a blessing and an ordeal. The goal of the essayistic thought Benjamin, Bakhtin and Bergson propagate, is at once simple and difficult: they arm the modern subject with weapons that can finally render life in the fragmented modern world genuinely liveable.

Benjamin’s auratic experience

Already in *The Origin of German Tragedy*, Walter Benjamin stands up for an essayistic way of thinking. He positions the essay in a continuum with two poles: one is constituted by the essay’s tentative mode of thought; the other by the philosophical system.

The art of the interruption, in contrast to the chain of deduction; the tenacity of the essay in contrast to the single gesture of the fragment; the repetition of themes in contrast to shallow universalism; the fullness of concentrated positivity in contrast to the negation of the polemic. (Benjamin, *Origin* 32)

In his later writings, Benjamin will apply the epistemological insights from his dissertation to the *Passagenwerk* (or *Arcades Project*) and to his studies

of Baudelaire. Especially these prove to be interesting in order to get a better view of the object of essayistic thought, that is, of everyday life. In Benjamin's view, the essayistic mode of thought is a way of working that creates a special object. In a remarkable essay on Benjamin, J.M. Coetzee recapitulates this mode of thought and its specific construction of object by way of the concept of "physiognomic method". Coetzee's term is particularly well-chosen, since Benjamin, in his Parisian period, became fascinated with physiologies, the journalistic and essayistic writings by *flâneur*-reporters and -columnists that zoomed in on everyday urban life. In these writings, Benjamin saw the physiognomy of everyday modern life indeed *manifest* itself. Whether he was influenced in this by Ernst Cassirer's interpretation of the term remains unclear to me, but there is no doubt that, here, the same primitive, mythological exchange with reality is concerned as was in the case of Cassirer. Nature –physis – is read in an emphatic manner, and this results into a specific knowledge of the laws (*nomoi*) that govern the world. Coetzee states that the physiognomic perception or *gaze* leads to a special form of theory. The physiognomic observer manages to "read the city from the outside [...] by leaving behind every form of abstraction or judgment and by representing in such a manner that all factualness already constitutes theory" (Coetzee 41). The physiognomic gaze does not touch on the rights of everyday reality. It mainly seeks out the constellations of objects, persons and actions that, in specific situations, lead to poetic or other intense experiences. In order to get a grasp of how this works, Benjamin falls back on Charles Baudelaire's essayistic work, as the poet himself was a great admirer of the physiologists and of the physiognomic gaze. In the physiognomic perception he perceived an opportunity to lift modern experience to the level of the "idéal", of aesthetic contemplation. A famous passage from *Le Spleen de Paris* describes everyday experience in mass society as follows:

The solitary, pensive stroller [...] adopts as his own every profession, every joy and every misery that circumstance presents [to him]. What men call love is very small, very limited and very weak, compared to the ineffable orgy, the holy prostitution of the soul that gives itself entirely, poetry and charity, to the unexpected that presents itself, to the unknown passer-by. (Baudelaire 21; my own translation)

These words could lead us to infer that Baudelaire intended to design a *mythologie moderne*, that he runs down aesthetic experience and degrades it to the level of the trivial and alienating. This, however, is not in the least the case. Benjamin points out that Baudelaire *reinvents* the concept of the *flâneur*, a concept that was indeed very fashionable in his days. The nucleus of this reinvention is that the ideal of the *flâneur* is no longer

constituted by the intoxication, the rush or high, but by the contemplation itself. Paraphrasing Agamben: the experience Baudelaire has in mind is no longer simply Psyche, it is also Nous. What is at stake for Baudelaire, as Benjamin states in his later studies, is the construction of an everydayness that balances on the tight-rope, the relationship of tension between the consumer, on the one hand, and the aesthetically contemplating flâneur, on the other hand. To elucidate this relationship of tension, Benjamin quotes – in a footnote to “The Paris of the Second Empire” – a chronicler who makes a distinction between the ordinary stroller and the genuine, cultivated and aesthetically gifted flâneur. Victor Fournel observes in *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* (a ‘physiologie’ dating from 1858) that “the flâneur must not be confused with the Badaud (onlooker, rubberneck)” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 83). The observer with the genuine physiognomic gaze “is always in full possession of his individuality, whereas the individuality of the badaud disappears. It is absorbed by the outside world, [...] which intoxicates him to the point where he forgets himself. [...] He is no longer a human being, he is part of the public, of the crowd” (83). The quote allows Benjamin to explain what he seeks to arrive at with this expanded or extended notion of experience. His aim is to bring those modes of perception in the limelight that establish a joint appearance of the intelligible and the sensitive. In his own terminology: he wants to reconcile contemplation with the aura of things. It would lead me too far to explain the exact shifts in meaning this notion of aura went through in Benjamin’s thought. That being said, of great importance to the problem at hand is that Benjamin, by way of the flâneur and his physiognomic perception, came on to a rich and dually founded experience. The modern phantasmagoric pseudoworld threatens to condemn the subject to the passiveness of the sensitive exchange with things. Yet, the flâneur manages to fruitfully engage this passiveness, in order to arrive at an “illuminated”, active mode of perception. The flâneur, so one could claim, *reclaims* or develops the aura in the stony stratum of passive, consuming exchange or interaction with the modern world. In doing so, he needs to strip things of their triviality, that is, to do away with their capacity for recurrence, reiteration, repetition, reproduction. Either they repeat or mimic an experience that others demonstrated (much like in fashion: “this is found interesting by people, hence I allow myself to get carried away by the aesthetic enjoyment of the object”); or they reduce the experience to the repetitive: the unforgettable experience that the media are so keen on constructing.¹ The physiognomic gaze, in contrast, emphasizes the singularity of the perception. It places the event on a pedestal, creates a singular experience of illumination or enlightenment, and contemplates the object of experience

from a distance. In the physiognomic gaze – or, which amounts to the same, in the profane illumination – time and space are transformed and modified in such a way, that they produce an intense experience: “What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 104–105). In this respect, Benjamin’s findings – that, which he comes on to by reconstructing Baudelaire’s invention – anticipate today’s highly fashionable thought on singularity. More particularly, the definition given by Badiou of “the experience of singularity” bears strong resemblance to Benjamin’s definition of the flâneur’s auratic experience. In “Philosophie du faune”, Badiou states that the unrepeatable is the source of truth. As Benjamin, he detects the enemy of this experience in repetition. The repetition of an event betrays the truth and dissolves the singular.

Bakhtin and the Bergsonian experience of duration

A similar view of singularity is present in the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin. Here, however, the framework of reference is no longer the modern consumer goods society and its fetishist interaction with things, but the psychological complexity of the modern individual. Despite the differences, Bakhtin’s phrasing of adequate and alienating modes of experiences draws very close to what Benjamin had in mind. In order to explain this, I need to refer to his essays on the chrontope concept where he deals with forms of spacetime in the literary experience. The innovating notion of experience which emerges from these texts betray the influence of Ernst Cassirer’s view on the persistence of the mythical in modern societies, but most of all, they are inspired by someone he never mentions, Henri Bergson.² When he discusses time representations in *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope*, he invariably favours a time of becoming, of continuous anticipation of future events (on the basis of elements present in memory). Similarly, in *The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism*, he writes that real time is experienced as an “emerging whole, an event”:

The ability to see time, to read time, in the spatial whole of the world and, on the other hand, to perceive the filling of space not as an immobile background, a given that is completed once and for all, but as an emerging whole, an event – this is the ability to read in everything signs that show time in its course, beginning with nature and ending with human customs and ideas (all the way to abstract concepts). (25)

Bakhtin usually calls the lived time real time, historical time, or horizontal time. The abstracting mind exerts no influence in the temporal

experiences, which is why the theoretical reflections about timelessness of principles and essences (the Platonic world placed vertically above the existing one as a parallel world) are left out. In historical time, the experience of the individual surges with every new information brought up by history. Time and again, the past is integrated in the current moment of consciousness. This explains why Goethe holds a central position in this essay. Goethe allows the historical past to affect the present, and together they generate the future. The past, “produces in conjunction with the present a particular direction for the future, and, to a certain degree, predetermines the future. Thus, one achieves a fullness of time” (Bakhtin, *Bildungsroman* 34).

Benjamin, Bergson and Bakhtin equally find one another in their criticism of every form of metaphysical reductionism as far as experience is concerned. For all three, the aversion is prompted by a philosophy of time. Benjamin targets the “abstract” repetition of temporal events and Bergson targets the spatialization of time, as it has become common in Western rationalism, while Bakhtin targets narrative forms in which idealistic representations dominate temporal development. More specifically, he considers the abstract temporal development of the adventure novel, and its mechanical and arbitrary succession of moments of chance, to express a view on human experience that is all too reductionist. Just as Bergson, he believes that abstract concepts of time create the illusion that the past always determines the present. The abstracting mind reconstructs the present from the knowledge of the past and establishes causal relations between all possibilities of the present, on the one hand, and the existing condition, on the other hand. Real experience, the experience we have when we undergo strong emotions or when we are in a Zen-like state, performs the converse: it is a present that redefines the past as a whole of experiential data that can be re-interpreted. The existing moment is nothing other than a virtual rearrangement of the past. Abstract and concrete time, in other words, are interrelated as necessity and freedom.³ The individual that liberates him- or herself from the abstract calculus and linear de- or reformations of experience, discovers that the real experience consists in the fact that past, present and future are interrelated in an endlessly transforming movement. The fact that Bakhtin – in this and in other works – emphasizes to such an extent the folkloric tradition and the temporal concepts present in this tradition, can be interpreted as a plea for a literature in which an expanded concept of experience becomes a priority. In Bakhtin’s view, only non-theoretical (wo)man is able to do this. Consequently, the individual has to draw lessons from popular (wo)man’s elementary philosophy of time, a philosophy that combines the sensitive

and the intelligible: “Folkloric man demands space and time for his full realization; he exists entirely and fully in these dimensions and feels comfortable in them.” In some cases, modern literature has learned to construct a narrative world that “in no way does [...] exceed the limits of the real, here-and-now material world, and [...] does not stitch together rents in that world with anything that is idealistic or other-worldly” (Bakhtin, *Forms* 150). The Russian scholar has approached this concept of everyday experience also in a purely philosophical manner – thereby anticipating the contemporary discourse on “singular events” we owe to thinkers like Badiou and Deleuze. In his *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (written between 1919 and 1924), he connects the historical fullness of time with ‘eventness’, a notion that emphasizes the choice and creativity present in concrete historical acts. In discussing this Bakhtinian key concept, Gary Saul Morson illustrates it by describing the situation in which it is absent: “When the present simply actualizes what had to happen as in the transcendent world views of metaphysics, *events lack eventness*” (Morson, *Narrative* 22; our italics). Morson, in his comments on Bakhtin, sometimes terms “eventness” as “prosaics”, because, in his view, apart from being poetic, an aesthetic experience can equally be prosaic. Prosaic are those experiences in which the everydayness is charged with an intensity that, on the one hand, is drawn from the concrete and sensory/sensitive, yet, on the other hand, is also founded in detachedness and intelligibility. Prosaics is to be found in many novelistic texts; it refers, still according to Morson, “to Tolstoy’s idea that what really matters in history and individual lives is the small things, the countless ordinary events that constitute daily life, rather than the grand events or dramatic crises on which historians and novelists typically focus. Life is made by ‘tiny, tiny alterations,’ which we do not notice precisely because they are so ordinary and undramatic” (Morson, *Prosaics* 58). A fine example of this can be found in the work of 19th century novelists. The prosaic experience in their writings

leads to a moral emphasis not on dramatic decisions at great moments – the stuff of romance, adventure, and the heroic – but on small decisions at every ordinary moment. [...] Not kingdoms but sinecures change hands in Trollope, and Jane Austen’s plots are shaped not by the clash of armies but by the abrasion of words and gestures. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima tells the monks that their smallest deeds, even the very expression of their faces, can make a big difference, because a kind or malevolent expression may affect the mood of a passerby, which in turn can affect others’ moods and actions in an ever concatenating chain of deeds and feelings. (Morson, *Contingency* 683)

Conclusion

From all this, I would like to conclude that the modern novel – and the 19th-century novel in particular – became aware of the surplus value of literature as an epistemic form, and that the essayistic attitude, already present in the work of Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne and other humanists, flourished in these novels. To novelists of the likes of Balzac and Tolstoy, or to poets such as Charles Baudelaire, it seems an evident fact that knowledge represents more than philosophical systematics alone, and constitutes more than the contingencies of the spontaneous praxis; they operate “beyond the rigid and the trivial”, the reason why they seek to enrich their *écriture* by means of a prosaic notion of experience, or, in other words, by way of an essayistic attitude that brings the singular of everyday events to the fore. In the 20th century, the essayistic, physiognomic and prosaic gaze will develop into an important undercurrent in the literary world. Associating the essayistic attitude with everydayness often acquires a political nature, so near and very dear to Walter Benjamin. The literary views of Georges Perec and the actions of the group around Cause Commune he joined some years, constitute a major event in this history.⁴ “The Cause Commune group developed a utopian way of perceiving: For Duvignaud, it means ‘getting around the structure of conventional ideas, rules and values’ and ‘bringing to the surface [...] forms, symbols and gestures that lend the trivial world a richer image of its own life’, so as to make real ‘the fascinating utopia of unthought ideas and ways of being’” (Schilling 199).

In recent times, disappointingly, this political inspiration has largely faded away. The attention paid to the essayistic has sadly evolved into today’s highly individualistic discourse on the singularity of the reading experience. Many disciples of Heidegger and deconstructionist thinkers practice a form of literary criticism that allows the singular to be put forward as the object itself of their own essayistic text. These literary critics disband the political call of literature, prying it loose from the social dimension of everyday life. Benjamin applied essayistic observation and expression as a tool to mourn the rise of liberal ideology. Contemporary literary criticism, however, rather seems to mourn from *within* a neo-liberal ideology. In the contemplation of the Heideggerian or deconstructionist theorists, the essayistic perception becomes melancholy cynicism and – to quote Benjamin from his *Kunstwerk* essay – “a school for asocial behaviour” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 119).

NOTES

¹ “Der Journalismus bemüht sich, die grosse Masse der Ereignisse aus dem Bereich der Arbeit, in dem sie immer nur eine begrenzte Menge von Zeitungslesern betreffen können, in den des Müsigganges zu transportieren, wo sie in Gestalt der Sensation von allen Zeitungslesern zu konsumieren sind. Ihm kommt es auf ein Erlebnis an, das dem Bewusstsein wie angegossen sitzt. Er stellt fest, dass etwas ein Erlebnis war im Feuilletonteil ein 'unvergessliches', im politischen Teil des Blatts ein 'historisches'.” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1183-4) “Hätte die Presse es darauf abgesehen, dass der Leser sich ihre Informationen als einen Teil seiner Erfahrung zu eigen macht, so würde sie ihren Zweck nicht Erreichen. Aber ihre Absicht ist die Umgekehrte und wird erreicht. Sie besteht darin, die Ereignisse gegen den Bereich abzudichten, in dem sie die Erfahrung des Lesers betreffen könnten.” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 610)

² Henri Bergson is an author appearing only once in Benjamin’s work (in the essay “On some Motifs in the work of Baudelaire”).

³ A ‘lifelike’ representation of human actions which shows (wo)man its state of ‘freedom’ is properly founded in a concrete representation of an experience of *durée*: “Every demand for explanation in regard to freedom comes back, without our suspecting it, to the following question: ‘Can time be adequately represented by space?’ To which we answer: Yes, if you are dealing with time flown; No, if you speak of time flowing. Now, the free act takes place in time which is flowing and not in time which has already flown. Freedom is therefore a fact, and among the facts which we observe there is none clearer. All the difficulties of the problem, and the problem itself, arise from the desire to endow duration with the same attributes as extensity, to interpret a succession by a simultaneity, and to express the idea of freedom in a language into which it is obviously untranslatable.” (Bergson 221)

⁴ In a recent volume on the concept of ‘everydayness’, Derek Shilling discusses the “democratic programme” implicit in Perec’s literary work. In an essay written in 1965 (“Approaches to What?”) Perec explicitly deals with “the collective need to ‘question’ the objects, rhythms, gestures and lived spaces that compose everyday life” (Schilling, 197). Schilling concludes: “the unnoticed will regain meaning only if we prove ourselves able to be ‘astounded’ by it and see within these shared elements a framework for collective memory. [...] What Perec’s essay promotes is [...] a commitment to open-ended questioning and a playful approach to the lived environment through which the subject reinvents patterns of use and even the functions of objects.” (Shilling 198)

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»Profana iluminacija« skozi esejistično pisanje in mišljenje. Benjamin in Bahtin o vrednosti vsakdanje izkušnje

Ključne besede: literarna teorija / esej / Benjamin, Walter / iluminacija / Bahtin, Mihail / prozaika

V senci pionirjev literarnega kritištva – ruskega formalizma, praškega strukturalizma, nove kritike – ostaja vzporedna tradicija mislecev v iskanju takšnega pojmovanja literature, ki bi bilo uporabno v kontekstu filozofije kulture. Predstavniki te tradicije – dialektični misleci, kakršna sta mladi Lukács in Walter Benjamin, postformalistični neokantovci, kot je Mihail Bahtin, ter francoski poststrukturalisti, kot so Blanchot, De Certeau, Foucault in Deleuze in Guattari – skušajo povezati literaturo s teorijo vsakdanje izkušnje. Na eni strani jih zanima opisovanje »odtujene« oblike izkušnje, na drugi strani pa se zanimajo za bolj avtentične oblike izkušnje. Da bi razložili slednje, se nekateri zatekajo k esejistični obliki pisanja. Drugi namenoma uporabljajo esej, da bi se pri svojem izražanju izognili načinom mišljenja, ki jih obsojajo kot preveč abstraktne, preveč sistematične, preveč represivne.

Članek pokaže na »esejističnost« kot sredstvo za reševanje vsakdanje izkušnje pred odtujenim načinom življenja. Esej so, v nekaterih od njegovih zgodovinskih preoblek (od Montaigna do *The Spectatorja*, od Louisa Sébastiena Merciera do poznega Benjamina) upravičeno povečevali kot žanr, ki je posebej prikladen za raziskovanje vsakdanjega življenja in za spodbujanje napada na abstraktno mišljenje, ki hoče nadzirati navadno življenje.

Za Benjamina je bila literatura vir navdiha pri oblikovanju »esejističnega« načina mišljenja. V svojih najdragocenejših izraznih oblikah sega literatura vse do »profane iluminacije«, ki pomaga pisateljem in bralcem, da se znebijo praznega pojma izkušnje, kot so ga uveljavili razsvetljski misleci. Ta razmislek vodi k nadaljnjima dvema opažanjema. 1. Moderni roman, kot ga je pojmoval Mihail Bahtin, skuša spodbijati starejše, bolj abstraktne oblike literarnega mišljenja na ta način, da vpeljuje v svoje pisanje pikolovsko analizo vidikov vsakdanje izkušnje. Te estetske inovacije bi lahko imenovali »pojav esejističnega mišljenja«. 2. Esejistično nagnjenje zgoraj imenovanih pisateljev in mislecev meri na analiziranje vsakdanjosti zaradi etičnih razlogov. Bahtinovi učenci, kakršen je Gary Morson, so razvili pojmovanje »prozaike«, da bi pokazali na etično funkcijo literarnega mišljenja. Etična funkcija prozaike se razlikuje od tiste, kakršno zagovarjajo dekonstrukcionisti, in je prej bližje ideji singularnosti, kot jo je opredelil Alain Badiou.

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