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MODERNITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

Literary Representations of Communication and Transportation Technologies

James E. Dobson

Pivotal Studies in the Global American Literary Imagination

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Hanover, New Hampshire James E. Dobson
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CHAPTER 1

The American Modernity Crisis and Disruptive Technologies

Where does our modern world belong—to exhaustion or ascent?
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power.*

Abstract This introductory chapter provides a theoretical and historical account of nineteenth-century disruptive technologies and ways in which these disrupt the phenomenology of autobiographical narrative. The chapter closes with a reading of Mark Twain's *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* in which I argue that this text registers Twain's ambivalence to the mediation produced by his increasingly technologized act of composition.

Keywords Modernity crisis · Phenomenology of autobiography
Temporal disorientation · Typewriter · Modernizing technologies
Self-observation

This book concerns the relation between various new technologies and the formal innovations and experimentation found in American autobiographical writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I call these technologies "disruptive" in an attempt to gesture toward the ways in which these technologies were registered through formal features

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found within a range of autobiographical narratives and to suggest that the problems introduced at the intersection of self-writing, technology, and media at the fin-de-siècle continue to be felt in our present moment.[1] Disruption as an aesthetic feature, of course, brings to mind the fragmentation of narrative that we have long associated with the literature of this period, but there are other ways in which we see disruption manifested within narrative—from representations of geographical or temporal displacement to regular and rhythmic punctuating events. Each of the following four chapters focuses on the autobiographical representation of two main categories of what were experienced as disruptive nineteenth and early twentieth-century technologies: transportation, the train and the automobile being the two most important modes, and communication, primarily the telephone and the typewriter. I do so in order to demonstrate the complex relationship between the literary representation of lived experience that we find in self-reflective American autobiographical writing and the phenomenological disruptions produced by these modern and modernizing technologies.

But why autobiography? Several landmark studies of nineteenth-century fiction including Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines* have argued that literary texts are the crucial site through which we can witness the troubled relationship between technology or machine culture and humans, but in focusing on fictional characters and plots and ignoring autobiographical writing, the historicist "cultural relay" of this body-machine complex, to use Seltzer's terms, displaces two important relationships: the mediation between the author as narrator and subject of the literary text and the historical complexities involved in writing about one's own past while bridging the gap between that past and the present. Autobiography, like the major transportation and communication technologies discussed in each chapter, mediates between an inside and an outside, between the assumed privacy of interiority and lived experience and the publicness of the generic conventions deployed by literary narrative and its dissemination. It is also the case that self-observation or just its promise, which provides the spine or structure of autobiographical narrative, foregrounds the phenomenological problem of representing past events to ourselves. This genre or mode of writing, even with texts that claim to only represent the present, involve aspects of retrospection that are simultaneously susceptible to interference from the moment of composition and troubling for a fully determinist account of any autobiographical narrative as resulting from only present concerns.[2]

At the same time, autobiography, as Georges Gusdorf reminds us, must remain structurally incomplete: "autobiography is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed."[3] The writer of autobiography or autobiographical prose might be said to be haunted by this incompleteness at the core of the autobiographical act.[4] Autobiography, finally, is a modern, nineteenth-century "technology" through which we have gained some sense of what it is like to be another person in the world. Autobiography gives us limited access to the complex internal lives of others and makes it possible to know some of the rich variety of human experience.

Throughout this book I use the terms modern, modernity, and modernization not just to signal the major changes brought by fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century culture, a moment that many literary critics tend to associate with the origin of full-fledged modernism, but also, and more importantly, to highlight an ongoing and unevenly developed process best understood through some form of *longue durée* historical analysis. Different modes of historicism, and not least the methodology referred to as the "new historicism" that has held a lock on American literary studies for the past few decades, has prevented a full inquiry into mechanics of time that are operative throughout the nineteenth century and central to autobiography. In claiming temporal coincidence, the contemporaneity of the text and its cultural context, new historicist practices erased the complexities of lived experience while simultaneously positing an organizing logic existing within a singular temporal order. This is not to say that history does not matter—far from it, for the historicity of the literary works under question in the following pages is quite important and indeed central to my arguments—but that in reading these works, we need to be able to select from many different possible contexts and potentially much larger contextualizing periods.[5]

This historical framing is important because the problems that appear with significant force within the twentieth-century modernist moment do not suddenly and spontaneously appear *de novo*. Many of the features of modernization that were of interest and concern to my coterie of authors began in Europe during the era of Enlightenment and continue through to the present. This process of modernization, marked by an increasing attempt to address and understand the public through rationalized abstractions, statistical tables, and reference to the population, was the subject of critique as early as Søren Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* (1846). The late nineteenth century was an age characterized by some

rather marked ambivalence toward the modern project. While many Americans were excited by the scope and promise of modern social and intellectual reconfiguration, others expressed their dissatisfaction with the promises and outcomes of modernity and the modern project. The three major autobiographers taken up by this book—Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, and Henry Adams—as well as a range of important thinkers and critics appearing alongside these writers, all understood the modern project to mean the institutional, intellectual, and social reconfigurations emerging out of the age of Enlightenment. Among these diverse modern projects, we should count the abstractions and concepts such as the idea of the public sphere, the nation-state, empiricism, reason, individualism, and individual rights. The rapid technological innovation that has been frequently paired with these projects gave many people cause to believe in modernity's myth of progress.

Yet at the same time, there was some doubt that life was improving as a result of these reforms. Robert Pippin adds to the above list of modern projects a clarifying statement of belief that came to be under increasing pressure in fin-de-siècle Europe: "Above all else, modernity is characterized by the view that human life after the political and intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is fundamentally better than before, and most likely will, thanks to such revolutions be better still."[6] Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Pippin's star witnesses to the European indictment of modernity, gives voice to the discontent rising from across the continent. Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) enumerates his "criticism of modernity" beginning with what he takes as a self-evident truth that "[modern] institutions are no longer any good."[7] By this Nietzsche means a whole range of institutions that by the end of the century have degraded and emptied the value out of people's lives. Following this line of thinking, we might characterize Nietzsche's whole intellectual project as an attempt to deflate the pretensions of an Enlightened modernity that has become convinced that it has truly "progressed" beyond the past.

The modernity crisis, as we might call this transnational moment of doubt and dissatisfaction with the modern project, was widespread, but we have yet to connect its many different manifestations. For example, critics have neglected to examine the intersection of many of these modern technologies to disruptions in phenomenological experience and the understanding of the life narrative. In the USA, the constant exposure to new technologies and environments was believed to cause what was then called the "modernity disease" of neurasthenia. Respected medical