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Material Movements in Texts by Anne Dudën

There has been scant attention paid to the philosophical influences on Duden’s work which this essay examines through the intersections of Duden’s texts with radical philosophy (Adorno, Irigaray and Deleuze). When viewed in a theoretical framework, the striking dissolutions of selves and bodies in Duden’s texts may be seen less as an expression of a ‘female reality’ than as a challenge to the conception of a rational, unified, disembodied self and of the consequent subject-object relations in Western culture. I argue that the texts articulate experiences which re-draw the oppositional model, expressing instead fluid interactions between self and world. However, self and world do not become merged, and I turn to Duden’s aesthetics to reflect on the in-between space where dualisms cease to function and re-configurations become possible.¹

Aber Material ist stumm. Wo kämen wir hin, wenn wir auch noch aufs Material hören würden.²

The above quotation from the text ‘Herz und Mund’ comes towards the end of a difficult text in which we read of a traumatised narrator and her experiences in hospital while recovering from extensive facial injuries.³ It expresses the narrator’s frustration that she literally cannot speak because the destroyed mouth is now ‘eine zugestopfte Fleischteilhöhle mit daruntergemengten brockigen Ersatzteilen’ (wires and plastic etc.) and that her subjectivity and the suffering of her body, the ‘Rollstuhlklumpen’ (Ü 245), are not acknowledged or heard by the hospital staff. Her body, which appears to have no means of articulating its pain, is reduced to dead, silent matter.

On another level, however, the quotation reveals Dudën’s awareness of the silencing of the body in Western culture and the positioning of matter and the body as inert and silent in dominant accounts of formation of selves. In this text and the ones I examine below, there is a questioning of oppositional structures where the active subject is dis-embodied and privileged over passive objects and where movements immanent to matter and the body are not recognised. The way matter and the body are written in Duden’s texts suggests that they are not brought under the control of a rational active mind but have an agency of their own. This does not mean that there is a simple reversal of the opposition whereby object/matter becomes active and the subject/mind passive.
Rather the movements of matter entail a shift in perspective where the notion of activity itself is transformed. The critique of oppositions also frequently involves an intense and fluid mode of relating to the environment on the part of the narrator and thus a complicated narratorial stance. For instance in ‘Herz und Mund’ the structure of an active subject or mind and a subordinate object or passive matter is disturbed. The narrator – who would normally be a subject – is positioned as matter which is, however, far from silent. It is matter which is speaking to itself, feeling and perceiving and it is from this perspective that the text is narrated. The question ‘where will we end up if we listen to matter’ is therefore mock rhetorical, for we are listening to matter, to the movements of the narrator’s body throughout Übergang. However, the question is also a challenge to a culture which privileges the qualities of a dis-embodied active mind. Where else might we end up if we listened to the movements of matter?

I shall examine what happens to the subject-object binary in Duden’s texts when we are presented with matter that moves and articulates this agency. By tracing this theme through examples taken from Übergang, Das Judasschaf and Zungengewahrsam, I will argue that the writing frees us from a framework which can only think the subject as active and the object as passive. Indeed, we find many places where dualisms do not function at all, and in order to understand the quality of this writing and the experiences of the narrators we need to replace the concepts of distinct subjects and objects with a more dynamic understanding of relations between subject and object, self and other. But firstly, I will briefly summarise the arguments of philosophers who criticise the hierarchical and violent subject-object relations which predominate in and define Western culture.

Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialektik der Aufklärung criticise Western Enlightenment culture for privileging active subjects over passive objects and repressing other possible modes of relation between individuals and between humans and nature. They write: ‘Die mannigfaltigen Affinitäten zwischen Seiendem werden von der einen Beziehung zwischen sinngebendem Subjekt und sinnlosem Gegenstand […] verdrängt.’ The subject-object binary here appears as an imposition on multifaceted affinities and differences which are repressed. This dualistic oppositional structure describes one model of identity construction in which the active Enlightenment subject is defined in opposition to passive, inert matter. It is this concept of self which the