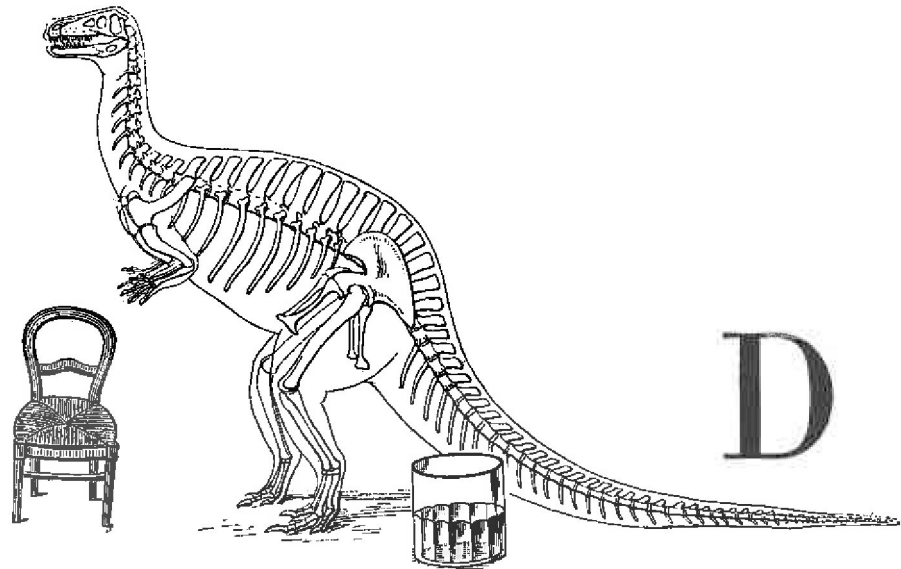


# 'BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES'

## How Max Ernst Plays with a Literary Genre

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### Self-assessments and Influences

'Max Ernst is a liar, gold-digger, schemer, swindler, slanderer and boxer.' The words of a character assessment which Max Ernst drafted for an exhibition poster in 1921. They can be seen as the accompanying text alongside a photograph of the artist below a few important works and collages dating from his Dadaist period. Provocative and mocking self-assessments such as these are typical of Max Ernst, the 'agent provocateur' and 'most highly intellectual artist of the Surrealist movement', who mostly spoke of himself in the third person, and yet wrote more about his own oeuvre than almost any other artist.<sup>1</sup> This constant reflection on his own work is characteristic of Max Ernst's entire artistic career: he had already begun to comment on his curriculum vitae and his artistic creative process at an early date. His self-assessments in writing were continually revised and added to, and were finally published for the first time for the Cologne/Zurich exhibition catalogue in 1962 as *Biographical Notes. Tissue of Truth – Tissue of Lies.*<sup>2</sup> This first detailed description of his entire life was preceded by various other writings, of which I shall briefly mention some here. In November 1921 the

journal *Das Junge Rheinland* published a short article written by the artist himself, entitled simply *Max Ernst*.<sup>3</sup> In a special edition of *Cahiers d'Art* devoted to the artist in 1936, Max Ernst reflected on his own creative process in the essay *Au delà de la peinture* (Beyond Painting).<sup>4</sup> In 1942 the American magazine *View* brought out a special edition on Max Ernst, in which a first self-description by the artist was printed under the title *Some data on the youth of M. E. As told by himself*.<sup>5</sup> For the French public, Max Ernst recounted his life story under the title *Souvenirs rhénans* (Rhenish Memoirs) in the magazine *L'Œil* in April 1956.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to fellow artists such as Hans Arp or Man Ray, Max Ernst chose a decidedly impersonal form of self-presentation for his *Biographical Notes*.<sup>7</sup> It was the usual practice for artists to compose brief autobiographical accounts for catalogues accompanying their exhibitions. Editorial decisions were left to the artists themselves. As a rule, these biographical notes simply served to present the bare facts of the artist's life and career. Not all artists used this standard catalogue appendix for the purposes of self-presentation. Motivated by social criticism as he was, George Grosz, for example, included a few reflections on the position of the artist in capitalist society: 'I am writing [...] in lieu of the so popular, constantly requested biographical notes. For me it was more important to present insights and universally valid demands arising from my life's experience than all the stupid chance happenings of my life, such as the date of my birth, my family tradition, what school I attended, my first trousers, artist's earth ramparts from the cradle to the grave, creative urge, creative intoxication, first breakthrough etc.'<sup>8</sup>

Max Ernst's *Notes*, by contrast, are anything but a list of 'chance happenings', for the artist makes consistent and logical use of the written c. v. to stage and explain his means of artistic expression and his artistic position. His *Biographical Notes* can, indeed must, be interpreted as an autonomous literary contribution to the artist's self-presentation.

Going far beyond brief sketches, he here compiles the basic facts of his life, together with childhood memories, early associations, as well as reflections on and explanations of his artistic approach. The *Biographical Notes* are largely telegraphic in style, often displaying incomplete, elliptical sentence structures, while at the same time following a consistent chronological sequence broken down by year.

It is quite impossible to characterize the *Notes* in any all-embracing sense, as the individual texts constitute an extremely varied ensemble. While some entries dryly summarize the major events of the year in question, such as exhibitions, visits, moves to a new address, or journeys, for other years Max Ernst writes at greater length in narrative fashion, often including anecdotes and memoirs. While most exhibitions are mentioned, often including small-scale shows in galleries, along with important dates in the artist's life, Ernst passes over other events we know about from contemporary accounts, for example public honours bestowed on him. These

are simply not mentioned.<sup>9</sup> While private experiences unconnected with art are often excluded, or treated at best marginally, it cannot be said of these notes as a whole that they are free of emotional descriptions. In the depiction of biographical facts and important events such as marriages or the birth of his son Jimmy, Max Ernst does, however, remain sober and reticent.<sup>10</sup>

All in all, in respect of content, it is possible to discern three main areas to which Max Ernst devoted more lengthy passages and explanations: his childhood memories, the description of his artistic creative process, and the two world wars. The years of the Second World War in particular are depicted in extensive sections of text. They are closely connected with his emigration to America and thus mark an important caesura in his life story.

Max Ernst, who 'was one of the best-read people',<sup>11</sup> as Werner Spies says, studied German, philosophy, Romance languages and the history of art at the Faculty of Arts in the University of Bonn from 1910 to 1914.<sup>12</sup> He attended lectures on the German novel of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries given by the renowned Germanist and Goethe scholar Berthold Litzmann, and was familiar with the literary works of Goethe, Hölderlin, Novalis, von Arnim, Heine, Jean Paul and Grabbe.<sup>13</sup> He was also interested in English-language authors, such as the horror and mystery writer Edgar Allan Poe and the visionary Romantic William Blake, as well as French Symbolists and Surrealists such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Jarry.<sup>14</sup> He attended lectures on contemporary and older philosophy, seminars on the history of art, and lectures on Flemish, Dutch and French painting. He also took an interest in the art of Cologne during the Middle Ages. But over and beyond his interest in the humanities, his attention was also aroused by such subjects as psychology, psychiatry and medicine. Thus the writings of Sigmund Freud came to have a lasting impact and influence upon him.<sup>15</sup>

In his *Biographical Notes* Max Ernst does not go into his university years either in detail or at length, although he does emphasize his intellectual open-mindedness and the breadth of his interests: he 'Carefully avoided every line of study that might degenerate into the means of earning a living. Indiscriminately consumed everything he came across in the way of literature. Let himself be "influenced" by everything, let himself go, pulled himself together again, etc. Result: mental chaos.'<sup>16</sup> Particularly emphasized here is the absence of any mentor or thinker who might have put a distinctive stamp on his later work. Max Ernst represents himself as an independent spirit and declares himself to be self-taught, also in the field of painting. In a questionnaire which he presumably completed for the catalogue of the collection of the Société Anonyme in 1946, he writes as follows (in English) about his studies and training: 'Studies in Painting: none. He learns to express himself by means of art in the same way as the child learns to talk.

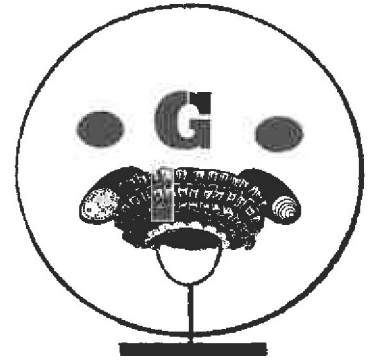
No teaching is needed for the one who is born artist and even the expression “self taught” is a phoney, he thinks.’<sup>17</sup> While he sets out his artistic predilections in the *Biographical Notes*, here too he stresses the variety of influences: ‘In painting too: his eyes drank in everything that came into view, but with more selectiveness: he loved van Gogh, Gauguin, Goya, Seurat, Matisse, Macke, Kandinsky, etc. [...]’<sup>18</sup>

Outside the life of the university, in the years before the First World War he cultivated a literary-artistic circle which included the painter August Macke, Hans Arp, who was temporarily working in Cologne, P. A. Seehaus and the blind poet Peter Ronnefeld. They discussed topics related to contemporary art and the world of ideas. Together with Hans Arp and Johannes Theodor Baargeld (the pseudonym of Alfred F. Gruenwald), in 1919/1920 Max Ernst formed a Dada group of his own, ‘Fatagaga’.

It will be clear by now the extent to which Max Ernst as an intellectually educated and versatile artist was able to base his artistic work, too, on a broad *studium universale*. Against the background of a tradition of celebrated autobiographical writings in the history of literature and art, and of his own comprehensive education, his autobiography must be given a place of special interest in the interpretation of his total oeuvre. Further, it should be asked to what extent his *Notes* represent a confrontation on the part of the author with traditional forms of autobiography.

### Autobiographical Writing

Autobiographical writing is an activity in which the artist assesses and communicates his draft of his own self;<sup>19</sup> the author and protagonist being one and the same. The autobiographical text is to a high degree referential, because its information points to a reality which lies in the past, outside the text, and comes about with reference to a fictitious self-image of the author. The text refers above all to this self-image, which seeks to come across as reality. In the history of Western literature, Petrarch is regarded as the first to have written an autobiography, while in the visual arts, the earliest extant autobiography is that of Lorenzo Ghiberti. The process of ‘I’ thinking and of the reflection on one’s own world of experience, which came to the fore in the Humanism of the early modern period, has been interpreted time and again as an indicator of the dissolution of firm ties to a superordinate religious system. If the Renaissance placed the ‘individual in the field of view for the first time as an inward phenomenon and personality’, the modern world increasingly emphasizes ‘the moment of continuation, correction and fictionalization of one’s own self’.<sup>20</sup> The autobiography then becomes an instrument which can allow the author to interpret decisions he has taken. The intention is for the looking-back-from-now perspective to generate a coherent continuum – to the extent that the author wants to create the image of an individual acting consistently. This recourse to the storehouse of a ‘life lived’ then comes up with only those past events in life





which put the author's now situation across as a succession of stages working towards a goal. Fiction and non-fiction are juxtaposed in a hard-to-disentangle panorama of outward logical consistency.

### **Tissue of Truth – Tissue of Lies**

Max Ernst gave his *Biographical Notes* the subtitle *Tissue of Truth, Tissue of Lies*. This is an allusion to the title of Goethe's autobiography, *Fiction and Truth*, the undisputed pinnacle of the autobiographical genre, its classic paradigm.<sup>21</sup> *Fiction and Truth* set up a model for a genre and for life which, for contemporaries and posterity alike, set the standard for a sensuously-rich shaping of existence.<sup>22</sup> Goethe describes a development complete in itself, whose very outset was accompanied by an extraordinarily favourable configuration of celestial bodies: 'On the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, 1749, at mid-day, as the clock struck twelve, I came into the world, at Frankfort-on-the-Main. My horoscope was propitious: the sun stood in the sign of the Virgin, and had culminated for the day; Jupiter and Venus looked on him with a friendly eye, and Mercury not adversely; while Saturn and Mars kept themselves indifferent; [...].'<sup>23</sup>

For his own *Biographical Notes* Max Ernst chooses a similar, so-to-speak classic opening, stating the time and place of his birth: 'On the 2nd of April 1891 in the small town of Brühl, not far from the sacred city of Cologne, he opens his eyes.' The first sentence is accompanied by a quotation from his poet-friend Johannes Theodor Kuhlemann: 'And he saw that darkness had fled / And felt breath and gaze flash afar.'<sup>24</sup> The reference to the 'small town of Brühl' is not without a touch of irony. Unlike the great German poet, he does not show off with the greatness of his birthplace and the propitious circumstances of the hour of his birth, but by contrast points to the provincialism of the place and the chance nature of the time. In his 'Souvenirs rhénans' we find: 'If one can believe my birth certificate, my origins were modest. My eyes opened towards the end of the last century in Brühl, a small town in the Rhine Province, halfway between Cologne and Bonn.'<sup>25</sup>

By stressing the closeness to 'the sacred city of Cologne' he at the same time refers to a burdensome leitmotif of his childhood: the Catholic faith of his childhood home and the strict discipline imposed by his father: 'Parents: Philipp Ernst, teacher of the deaf and dumb by profession, artist with his whole heart; a strict father, well-built, a strict Catholic, invariably good-humoured. Luise, née Kopp; pretty, well-built, bright of eye, white as snow, red as blood, black as the Black Sea. Loving, good sense of humour, appreciates fairy-tales. Middling income. Lots of children, lots of worries, lots of duties.'<sup>26</sup>

Max Ernst's relationship to the world is described by the artist as a situation which from the very first day was full of conflict and not without its problems. In the *Biographical Notes* he puts it as follows: 'Max, the first-born,

had responsibility, and got the praise and blame, for everything he and the younger members of the family did. Set a good example. Duty, duty and duty again. The word began to seem dubious to him at an early age, and he began to hate it. On the other hand, the words from the Catechism, "Lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and the vain-gloriousness of life", sounded rather lovely to him. Besides the Lord's Prayer and the Catechism, read *Max und Moritz* and *Struwwelpeter*.<sup>27</sup>

Goethe's autobiographical project strives for a synopsis of the ego and the world, of the inward and the outward, and the agenda is one of development.<sup>28</sup> In his preface, Goethe formulates it thus: 'For this seems to be the main object of biography, to exhibit the man in relation to the features of his time, and to show to what extent they have opposed or favoured his progress; what view of mankind and the world he has formed from them, and how far he himself, if an artist, poet, or author, may externally reflect them.'<sup>29</sup> The writer relates his life, which fits together into a practical whole – both in respect of the coherent text, and of the picture it paints of a personality.

In Max Ernst's description of his life, we miss at first this targeted linearity, for, on the contrary, discontinuity and incoherence are sown from the outset. This is true in the purely formal sense, because, being written in the form of notes, it does not have the same illusionary strength as a cohesive text to suggest fictitious reality. In addition, Max Ernst always writes of himself in the third person. In this way he in a sense marginalizes himself (as author), even though he is the subject of his own autobiography. While in Goethe's autobiography the 'I' is the absolute focus – narrator and protagonist coincide – and there is therefore no doubt as to the central theme (of the text and of the individual), Max Ernst understands his own ego as the subject of individual stories or situations, which are placed in various thematic associations in disconnected combinations. While their theme remains the ego, one can only speak of a 'whole' to the extent that the totality of the notes creates the framework for the various combinations and associations. The notes represent a chronologically ordered, combinatorial system, albeit one which at no time seems to be subject to the regulating norm of a unity of purpose, and yet it does convey a structuring connection, like that of a non-linear tissue.

It is revealing that Max Ernst subtitled his autobiographical notes *Tissue of Truth – Tissue of Lies*. The image of the tissue contains the image of the organic weave of everything that constitutes human identity and the construction of the individual ego. Thus Ernst, in allusion to Goethe's autobiography *Fiction and Truth*, while introducing the classical concept of 'truth' confronts it not with the concept of 'fiction' but with that of the 'lie', a term which seems to be used à la Nietzsche, in other words not in the sense of a falsehood or untruth, but as a reference to the constructed character of a life described in retrospect.<sup>30</sup>



### Biography and Oeuvre

In the *Souvenirs rhénans* Max Ernst expressly creates an organic association between his life and his work: 'I had [...] a banal and almost happy childhood. There were however a few jolts. The lasting traces which they left can be seen reflected in my work.'<sup>31</sup>

There could therefore be no more obvious course for us than to look in the *Notes* for an explanation of Max Ernst's artistic position.

At least two leitmotifs of his creative work – the artist's 'life themes'<sup>32</sup> – can be found based in the description of his childhood, and are deliberately singled out as such by Max Ernst: the forest and the 'bird-superior' Hornebom. We can be quite confident in assuming that the importance which Ernst attached to his childhood memories can be seen in connection with his reading of Sigmund Freud, whose works were familiar to him from his university course and from his student friend Karl Otten.<sup>33</sup> Both of the motifs mentioned in the *Notes* will have to be seen as centrally important to an interpretation of his works.

In the *Biographical Notes* the brief depiction of his Catholic childhood home is followed first of all by a description of the young Max's childish enthusiasm for telegraph wires, railway tracks and railwaymen. In associative fashion these are followed by the rebellious children's song 'Humpelbein', whose refrain will remind the reader of the childish word Dada and the language that developed from it: 'Da tria Lameleg Joe / There was a body-child born / By the name of Lameleg Joe.'<sup>34</sup>

There then follow – somewhat suddenly – a number of paragraphs on the subject of the forest, which are closely linked to the memory of his father.<sup>35</sup> Among the key events of his childhood was the observation of his father while painting: ‘Father Philipp at work on a watercolour. A forest, peaceful and yet somehow eerie, and in it, The Hermit. Every beech leaf depicted with well-nigh obsessive precision, each obstinately ensconced in its own aloneness; and yet all part of a greater whole: the beech tree, the forest. The monk absorbed in his book. So sucked up by it that he himself is hardly there at all.’<sup>36</sup>

This memory is followed by a series of questions, ideas and thought-games, which revolve around the link with the figure of the father, with painting, and with the depiction of the forest: ‘What is a Forest? Mixed feelings the first time he entered a forest – delight and consternation [...] Who can solve the riddle? Father Philipp? The Monk of Heisterbach?’<sup>37</sup> In the *Notes*, in which the forest is described with contradictory feelings, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for his confrontation with his father, and as a further step, also as a confrontation with painting as an artistic form of appropriating reality.

The reflections on the forest are at the same time reflections on art; indeed, the forest seems to become the personification of art: ‘What do forests do? They never go to bed early. They wait for the woodcutters to come. What does summer mean to forests? The future; the season in which shadows become words and creatures with a way with words summon up enough courage to look for midnight at one hundred o’clock. All of this belongs to the past, it seems to me. Could be.’<sup>38</sup>

It becomes quite clear that Father Philipp gave his son the impetus to take up painting. But consistent with the Freudian spirit, the father-son conflict is transferred to the son’s questioning of the father’s painting. ‘But he does remember (exactly) that he had a premonition at the time: something must be wrong in the reciprocal relationship between the artist and his model! Oh, little Max, will you ever be capable, with your humble means, of helping to put an end to this nonsense?’<sup>39</sup>

Max Ernst’s forest memories go well beyond childhood stories. They arose thirty years later against the background of the career of an artist who had by now established himself, and who, in rhetorically elegant fashion, claims to ‘remember (with certainty)’ and constructs his biography accordingly.

In 1962, now at the pinnacle of his international success, Max Ernst conceded in a note that he had from his youth yearned to live the life of a famous artist: ‘But how did Max the Beak react to this notoriety, the man to whom a single wild strawberry is a thousand times nicer than all the laurels in the world? [...] The answer is simple: he had been aware of the danger ever since his young years, and that meant that the danger did not exist. The solution was plain as day – act!’<sup>40</sup>



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A second leitmotif of his creative oeuvre and a key figure in his work can also be found as a striking childhood experience in his *Biographical Notes*: 'A friend by the name of Horneborn, an intelligent, piebald, faithful bird, dies during the night; the same night a child, number six, begins life. Confusion in the brain of this otherwise quite healthy boy – a kind of interpretation mania, as if newborn innocence, sister Loni, had, in her lust for life, taken possession of the vital fluids of his favourite bird. The crisis is soon overcome. Yet in the boy's mind there remains a voluntary, if irrational, confounding of the images of human beings with birds and other creatures; and this is reflected in the emblems of his art.'<sup>41</sup> The mythical bird-creature 'Loplop', the private phantom, became Max Ernst's constant companion, indeed, his mouthpiece. Loplop was the messenger of an 'ironically critical separation of the "creator personality"', a detached observation of his own activity, in which Werner Spies recognized the Freudian superego.<sup>42</sup> This figure accords perfectly with the third person singular which the artist chose for his marginal position – one should really say 'superposition' – in the autobiographical texts.

#### **Autobiography and Selberlebensbeschreibung (‘Self Life Description’)**

By writing almost exclusively in the third person, Max Ernst chose a technique which is rarely used consistently in autobiographies, but is certainly not without important literary precedents, such as, for example, Jean Paul's *Selberlebensbeschreibung*, whose English translation simply bears the title, *Autobiography*, but which means, literally – the word is invented – 'Self Life Description'. Etymologically, of course, this is also what autobiography means: a biography written by the involved person, but in the style of a simple biography. The linguist Gérard Genette allows the word 'autobiography' also to cover the case where the identity of the individuals is the same, although the grammatical persons are different.<sup>43</sup>

Max Ernst refers to himself in the third person in various ways: 'he', 'little Max', 'the boy', 'the rascal', 'the son' and later 'the youth'. The autobiographical technique is thus reminiscent of the procedure adopted by Jean Paul in his *Selberlebensbeschreibung*, an autobiography published in 1826 with the subtitle *The Truth about Jean Paul's Life*. This choice of subtitle in itself shows that the work can also be read as a caricature of Goethe's autobiography published not long before. Jean Paul too speaks of himself throughout using various names which reflect the different roles and positions which he occupied in life, and in this way, makes it clear that a basic autobiographical self-reference is impossible. The actual narrating 'I' is not a naturally given reference, but rather the act of narration must always first create its own reference.<sup>44</sup> In comparable fashion, Max Ernst constantly creates and re-creates himself as the firstborn, the son, the little boy, the big boy, and finally as artist.

A further parallel between Jean Paul and Max Ernst consists in the renunciation, as a rule, of linear narration. The autobiographical genre requires a supposed orientation to a succession – prescribed by reality – of past actions and events.<sup>45</sup> Jean Paul, however, dispenses precisely with this ‘narration’ as a means of conveying information; instead, he uses the medium of language to metaphorize and discover a new plane of recognition and perception. Max Ernst does something similar by writing his autobiography in note form, presenting facts concisely and without narrative embellishment, and elsewhere working with longer associative reflections, for example on the forest or memories of the death of the bird and the birth of his sister.

The stylistic trick of using the third person, only broken apostrophically from time to time but otherwise consistently maintained, creates detachment. The narrator – the ‘I’ – detaches himself from his own person and thus also from his own past. The ‘I’ seems to discover itself by the way, through the combination of a whole variety of memories, which in the childhood years are at first juxtaposed in a seemingly random arrangement. The combination of different elements generates a sense of purpose which is not at all linear, clear or obvious.

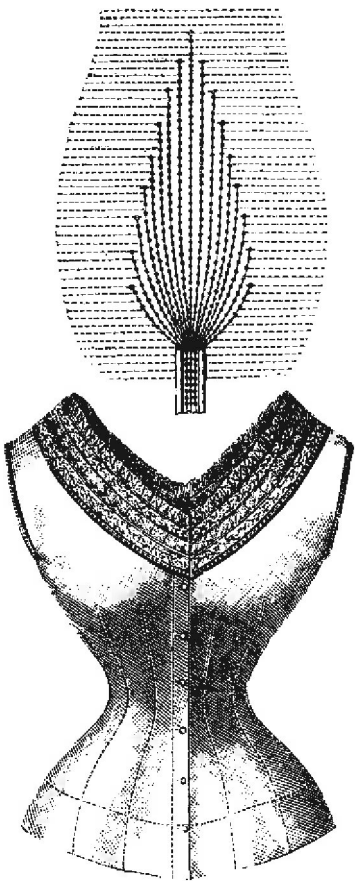
But only at first sight, because in reality what is generated, precisely by virtue of this combination, is a very great measure of coherence. The literary technique of the author is entirely consistent with the strategies he employs in his art. For the 1935 Max Ernst exhibition in Paris, the artist sent out invitations in the form of a cut-up portrait photo, whose fragments were pieced together in such a way as to resemble a reflection in a broken mirror. Between the individual fragments were added the handwritten titles of the pictures on show. In other words they first destroy the unity of the face, in order then, in a second step, to create a new unity of artist and oeuvre.<sup>46</sup> In an altogether comparable fashion, the autobiography of the artist is composed of a large number of fragments, put together by someone who on the surface appears to be a detached outsider. This ‘I on the edge’ resembles the contemplation by the outsider of his own work. Werner Spies thus speaks of the ‘artist in the third person.’<sup>47</sup>

This literary ‘third-person trick’ is consistent with the artist’s theoretical view of art.<sup>48</sup> In the article *What is Surrealism?* dating from 1934, Max Ernst – at least for the time being – acknowledged his adherence to Surrealism and to the definition of the artist as formulated by André Breton, namely someone who emphasizes the strength of psychological automatism and the unconscious as an active element in the creative process leading to a work of art. Ernst, following Breton, stresses the ‘passive role of the “author” in the mechanism of poetic inspiration.’<sup>49</sup> Ernst’s explanation of the collage technique evinces similarities with Lautréamont’s picture of the chance meeting of umbrella and sewing machine on a dissecting table: ‘Collage is the exploitation of the chance meeting of two distant realities on

an unfamiliar plane, the culture of systematic displacement and its effects – and the spark of poetry that leaps across the gap as the two realities converge.<sup>50</sup> The artist thus becomes the executive medium, the servant of his own work of art; he becomes its beholder and is in a sense deprived or relieved of responsibility for his own creation. In the 1932 exhibition catalogue *Art of this Century*, Ernst wrote, in the article *Inspiration to order*: “This “author” is disclosed as being a mere spectator of the birth of the work, for either indifferently or in the greatest excitement, he merely watches it undergo to the excessive phases of its development.”<sup>51</sup>

### Artistic Genius versus Self-Constitution

With this attitude, Ernst turned away from the idea of the artist as creator, and also from the myth of artistic talent, two ideas which had had a strong influence in the 19th century. For Ernst, the artist is only indirectly responsible for the creation of the work of art: “The old view of “talent’ [...] has been thrown out, just as the adoration of the hero [...] has been thrown out.”<sup>52</sup> Max Ernst seeks to resolve the ‘riddle of the artist’ and to break down the assumption, widespread in 19<sup>th</sup>-century artists’ biographies, that ‘special [...] talents and innate abilities are necessary in order to [...] create a work of art, or that the creator of a work of art should be accorded a special [...] place.’<sup>53</sup> In reaction to the traditional adoration of the artist as a hero, Max Ernst radically rejects the idea of the divine genius of the artist and demands instead ‘that we get rid of the old myth of the “ex nihilo” creative artist.’<sup>54</sup> Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, art, in reaction to spreading secularization, had assumed a quasi-religious, a sacral-mythic character. Hegel’s concept of ‘art religion’ represents this development and the social and public status which the artist could aspire to in the modern world.<sup>55</sup> In 1878 Nietzsche observed in *Human, All Too Human*: ‘Art raises its head where religions decline. It takes over a number of feelings and moods produced by religion, clasps them to its heart, and then becomes itself deeper, more soulful, so that it is able to communicate exaltation and enthusiasm, which it could not yet do before.’<sup>56</sup> Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the artist myth in Germany had crystallized especially around the figure of Albrecht Dürer, to whom a veritable ‘cult of genius’ was accorded. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the visual artist and the musician had, in a very special sense, achieved the status of bearers of the growing cult of the artist, on to whom magical and sacral powers were projected. It was now the artist who embodied the ingenuity of the creator, inaccessible to ordinary mortals, and lying outside the rationality of civilized bourgeois society. In *Die Nacktheit der Frau ist weiser als die Lehre der Philosophen* [The Nakedness of Woman is Wiser than the Teaching of Philosophers] Max Ernst answers the question of the connection between his work and the word ‘creation’: ‘The expression “artistic creation”, applied in a religious way, as though it were some sort of mission which the artist had to fulfil, and as though this mission were laid





upon him as if he were a priest, and this god were GOD or the artist himself, and that this mission raised him above ordinary people – no, that's not in my book.<sup>57</sup>

As if to prove and reinforce his own anti-genius, Max Ernst never stopped explaining his own creative process and trying at the same time to demystify it. Ernst wrote of his first collages: 'One rainy day in Cologne on the Rhine, the catalogue of a teaching-aids company caught my attention. It was illustrated with models of all kinds – mathematical, geometrical, anthropological, zoological, botanical, anatomical, mineralogical, palaeontological, and so forth – elements of such a diverse nature that the absurdity of the collection confused the eye and mind, producing hallucinations and lending the objects depicted new and rapidly changing meanings. I suddenly felt my "visionary faculties" so intensified that I began seeing the newly emerged objects against a new background. To capture it, a little paint or a few lines were enough, a horizon [...] My hallucination had been fixed.'<sup>58</sup> In this paragraph, Ernst falls into the first person, which he otherwise so rarely used. The change in the subjective perspective increased the intensity of the depiction of the experience, in which the artist otherwise appears to be only indirectly involved. The road to the invention of the frottage technique is then dealt with entirely without placing himself in the position of grammatical subject, so that it really looks as though Max Ernst wanted to distance himself from the active role of the inventor when he writes: 'He spent the holidays on the coast of Brittany. This was where he was inspired by the sight of a wooden floor. The frottage technique was born. [...] Frottage was merely a technical means of augmenting the hallucinatory capacity of the mind so that "visions" could occur automatically, a means of doffing one's blindness.'<sup>59</sup>

On the fundamental Freudian assumption that childhood is the determining phase for the development of the personality, all childhood associations serve to construct the artist's future self. Thus the invention of the frottage technique also goes back to a childhood experience. The 'banal fever hallucination' of the little boy who suddenly discovers the most improbable formations on his mahogany wardrobe 'didn't reappear in M's memory until about thirty years later (on 10 August 1925), as he sat alone on a rainy day in a little inn by the seaside, staring at the wooden floor which had been scored by years of scrubbing, and noticed that the grain had started moving of its own accord (much like the lines on the [imitation] mahogany board of his childhood).'<sup>60</sup> The technique of dripping was explained by him in 1942 simply as 'child's play': 'Tie a piece of string, one or two metres long, to an empty can, punch a small hole in the bottom and fill the tin with thin paint. Then lay the canvas flat on the floor and swing the tin backwards and forwards over it, guiding it with movements of your hands, arms, shoulders and your whole body. In this way surprising lines will drip on to the canvas. Then you can start playing with free associations.'<sup>61</sup>



Why this constant retreat behind his own persona, why this constant leveling down of his own achievement? According to Thomas Gaetgens, it derived first and foremost from a 'feeling of honesty towards himself', which was based on the vehement rejection of the 'fairy-tale of the creativity of the artist'.<sup>62</sup> However, at the same time Thomas Gaetgens points to the theoretical support which the definition of Surrealism gave the artist for his detachment from his own work. He clearly notes that 'his working method [was] always a calculated chance'.<sup>63</sup> The continuing recourse to the third person, the bird-phantom Loplop, the lifelong reflection on his own creative process, the writing of his autobiography, all these are nothing other than stylistic tricks to provide a new foundation for his own personal creative myth.

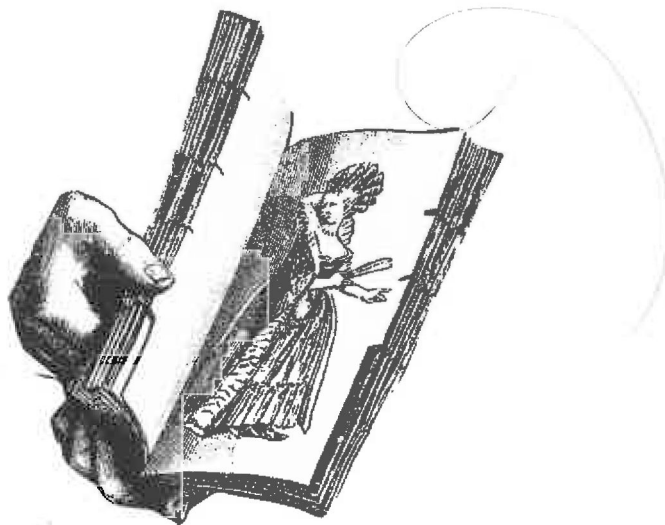
An autobiography is ultimately, and in the case of Max Ernst particularly, not just a product of individual recollective processes. The retrospective visualization of the past is underpinned by social constructions of one's own self. Thus numerous considerations in autobiographical revelation relate to the reader, who ultimately determines the selection of events and actions to be described, and the choice of facts about the self-describing self. If the writer knows that he is at the focus of public attention, he orients his choice of lived-through moments to this potential and many-layered readership. Max Ernst was not only very much aware that he was writing for the public, he was expressly addressing the public that came to his exhibitions.

The ongoing deconstruction of the artistic element by the explanation of questions of technique and the detachment from his own subject by the mediation of the third person is ultimately a tactic of cover-up, a strategy of shrouding and mystification. In the article *Passbild* [Instantaneous Identity] the artist explicitly refers to this strategy of confusion and explains that he wanted deliberately to sketch out an incomprehensible picture of his personality. This 'incomprehensibility' is reflected in his art: 'What they find particularly disagreeable, even insupportable, is their almost total lack of success in discovering his IDENTITY in the flagrant contradictions (apparent) which exist between his spontaneous comportment and the dictates of his conscious thought. [...] Nevertheless, these two attitudes (contradictory in appearance but in reality simply in a state of conflict) that he displays in nearly every domain are convulsively fused into one each time he comes face to face with a fact (such as a tree, a stone, an eye, etc.) and this union is brought about in the same way as that other: when one brings two distant realities together on an apparently antipathetic plane (that which in simple language is called "collage") an exchange of energy transpires, provoked by this very meeting.'<sup>64</sup>

Basically, by his constant reticence, Max Ernst is nourishing his own myth and a modern image of the artist of his own, whose parallels with Marcel Duchamp have already been pointed out in various places.<sup>65</sup> Where

Marcel Duchamp created Rose Sélavy as his 'alter ego', who from then on signed his works on his behalf, Max Ernst similarly deployed his Loplop. One must not allow oneself to be deceived by the factitious nature of this procedure. It is as artificial as it is contrived, and uses similar strategies of confusion, such as the autobiography in the third person.

Ultimately all that remains to be said is that in spite of all the continually professed reservations on the part of Max Ernst vis-à-vis the idealization of the artist, his own autobiographical writings and self-references only serve to generate an ideal artist-image of his own. Viewed in this light, Max Ernst's autobiographical concern is thus not so very far removed from Goethe's, which ultimately also consists in the attempt to reconstruct 'inner life on the basis of an ideal pattern of one's own ego.'<sup>66</sup>



Notes

- 1 Monika Steinhäuser, *Max Ernst Dadamax*, Munich/Zürich, 1979, p. 10; 5.
- 2 *Max Ernst*, exh. cat., Wallraf-Richartz-Museum Cologne, Kunsthaus Zürich, Cologne, 1962. The first version of the *Biographical Notes* had already appeared in French in 1959 under the title *Notice biographique rédigée par l'artiste* in the exhibition catalogue of the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris: *Max Ernst*, exh. cat., Paris 1959. In 1961 they appeared in English in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art: *Max Ernst* the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago 1961, exh. cat. New York, 1961. A large selection of Max Ernst's writings were published in 1970: Max Ernst, *Écritures*, Paris, 1970. The *Biographical Notes* were then continually reprinted in subsequent catalogues. The page numbers in the present study refer to the following (German-language) edition: *Max Ernst. Retrospektive zum 100. Geburtstag* [Max Ernst: Retrospektive to mark the centenary of his birth], exhibition catalogue ed. by Werner Spies, Munich 1991, from which the English translations have been made.
- 3 Max Ernst, 'Max Ernst', in *Das junge Rheinland*, No. 2, Düsseldorf, 2 November 1921.
- 4 *Cahiers d'Art*, Nos. 6–7, Vol. 11, 1936.
- 5 *View*, No. 1, 2 April 1942.
- 6 *L'Œil*, No. 16, April 1956.
- 7 See following autobiographies: Hans Arp, *Unserm täglichen Traum ... Erinnerungen, Dichtungen und Betrachtungen aus den Jahren 1914–1954*, Zürich 1995 [1959]; Man Ray, *Autoportrait (Self-portrait)*, [New York, 1963], Paris, 1964.
- 8 George Grosz, *Eintrittsbillet zu meinem Gehirnzyklus. Erinnerungen, Schriften, Briefe*, Leipzig/Weimar, 1988, p. 75.
- 9 The present author would like to thank Helmut Leppien for the benevolent and attentive interest he has shown in this study. Helmut Leppien has, for example, pointed out that Max Ernst fails to mention the award of the Stefan Lochner Medal in 1961 as well as the Lichtwark Prize awarded by the city of Hamburg in 1970.
- 10 Impressions of Max Ernst and his private life are easier to obtain by studying the autobiography of his son Jimmy Ernst, the memoirs of his first wife Luise Straus-Ernst, or of his fourth wife Dorothea Tanning. Cf. Jimmy Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life*, New York, 1984; Luise Straus-Ernst, *The First Wife's Tale: A Memoir by Luise Straus-Ernst*, New York, 2003; Dorothea Tanning, *Between Lives. An Artist and Her World*, New York/London, 2000. For the sake of completeness, I would also mention the memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim, his third wife, from which however Max Ernst distanced himself in the *Biographical Notes*: Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of this Century. Confessions of an Art Addict*, London, 1979.
- 11 Werner Spies, *Max Ernst, Collagen. Inventar und Widerspruch*, Cologne, 2003, p. 190.
- 12 Cf. Eduard Trier, 'What Max Ernst studied', in *Max Ernst in Köln. Die rheinische Kunstszene bis 1923*, exh. cat., ed. Wulf Herzogenrath, Cologne, 1980, pp. 63–68.
- 13 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 64.
- 14 Karin von Maur, 'Max Ernst und die Romantik – Im Spannungsfeld zwischen Idylle und Schreckensvision', in *Max Ernst*, exh. cat., Munich, 1991, p. 348.
- 15 See on this Werner Spies, *Max Ernst – Die Rückkehr der Schönen Gärtnerin*, Cologne, 2000, pp. 34–37. See also: Klemens Dieckhöfer, 'Max Ernst und seine Begegnung mit Medizin und Psychologie', in *Max Ernst in Köln*, exh. cat., Cologne, 1980, p. 70.
- 16 *Biographical Notes*, p. 286.
- 17 Beinecke Library, collection of manuscripts, YCAL MSS 101, Katherine S. Dreier Papers, Box 102, folder 2507, Max Ernst, 1926–28, Yale University. The present author would like to thank Sophie Collombat for her careful research.
- 18 *Biographical Notes*, p. 286.
- 19 There is an extensive literature on the subject of autobiography. For the following considerations, see e. g.: Günter Niggel (ed.), *Die Autobiographie. Zu Form und Geschichte einer literarischen Gattung*, Darmstadt, 1989; Klaus-Detlef Müller, 'Zum Formen- und Funktionswandel der Autobiographie', in *Aufklärung. Ein literaturwissenschaftliches Studienbuch*, ed. Hans-Friedrich Wessels, Königstein i. Ts. 1984, pp. 137–160; Jürgen Lehmann, *Bekennen, erzählen, berichten. Studien zu Theorie und Geschichte der Autobiographie*, Tübingen, 1988.
- 20 According to the essay by Franziska Uhlig, 'Autobiographisches Enttäusern', which was temporarily published on the internet.
- 21 Harald Schnur, 'Identität und autobiographische Darstellung in Goethes "Dichtung und Wahrheit"', in *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts*, 1990, Tübingen, 1990, p. 28.
- 22 Cf. Bettina Knauer, 'Kombinatorik, Digression und Inszenierung als Schreibweisen vom Ich. Jean Pauls und Joseph von Eichendorffs autobiographische Entwürfe', in *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts*, new series, 1997, p. 187.
- 23 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Truth and Fiction Relating to My Life*. The quotation here is taken from the 1848 translation by John Oxenford.
- 24 *Biographical Notes*, p. 281.
- 25 Max Ernst, 'Souvenirs rhénans', in *L'Œil*, No. 16, April 1956, p. 9 (here translated from the French).
- 26 *Biographical Notes*, p. 281.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Cf. Günter de Bruyn, *Das erzählte Ich. Über Wahrheit und Dichtung in der Autobiographie*, Frankfurt a. M., 1995, p. 35.
- 29 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, op. cit., preface.
- 30 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn*, in G. Colli/M. Montinari (eds), *Friedrich Nietzsche, Sämtliche Werke; Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, Munich, 1980; Vol. 1, p. 873 ff.
- 31 *L'Œil*, No. 16, April 1956, p. 9 (here translated from the original French).
- 32 Eduard Trier, 'Max Ernsts Waldeslust', in E. T., *Schriften zu Max Ernst* (ed. Jürgen Pech for the town of Brühl), Cologne, 1993, p. 31, in Ernst-Gerhard Güse, 'Entzücken und Bedrückung. Max Ernsts Gemälde "Forêt et Soleil", 1927' in *Max Ernst. Forêt et Soleil*, Saarland Museum Saarbrücken, publ. by the Kulturstiftung der Länder, Berlin/Saarbrücken, 1998, p. 9.
- 33 After his return from Vienna, Max Ernst's student friend Karl Otten introduced the artist to Freud's works *On the Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. See Charlotte Stokes, 'Surrealist persona: Max Ernst's Loplop, superior of birds', *The Art Journal*, 1983, p. 225. Cf. also Werner Spies, *Max Ernst. Collagen*, Cologne 1988, p. 49; John Russell, *Max Ernst. Leben und Werk*, Cologne, 1966, p. 14; Heusinger von Waldegg, 'Max Ernst und die rheinische Kunstszene', in *Max Ernst in Köln*, p. 98.
- 34 *Biographical Notes*, p. 282.
- 35 On the theme of the forest in Max Ernst's work, see *Max Ernst. Forêt et Soleil*, Saarland Museum Saarbrücken, publ. by the Kulturstiftung der Länder, Berlin/Saarbrücken, 1998. See also: Helmut Leppien, *Max Ernst, Der Grosse Wald*, Stuttgart, 1967 (*Werkmonographien zur bildenden Kunst*, 121; Reclams Universallbibliothek).
- 36 *Biographical Notes*, p. 282.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.* p. 283.
- 40 *Ibid.* p. 186.
- 41 *Ibid.* p. 285.
- 42 Cf. Werner Spies, *Max Ernst – Loplop. Die Selbstdarstellung des Künstlers*, Cologne, 1998, p. 109.
- 43 Cf. Gerard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris, 1972, quoted in Philippe Lejeune, 'Der autobiographische Pakt', in Niggel (ed.), op. cit., pp. 217–218.
- 44 Cf. Ralf Simon, 'II. Konjunktural-Biographie und Selberlebensbeschreibung. Jean Pauls inszenierte Autobiographik', in *JPG*, 29, 1994, p. 133.
- 45 Cf. Jürgen Lehmann, op. cit. p. 168.
- 46 Held has revealed the way Jean Paul's technique has been incorporated into Max Ernst's art. The application of the same technique can also be observed in the autobiographical writings. Cf. Gerd Held, 'Das gewendete Selbst. Autobiographie und katoptrische Poetik bei Jean Paul', in Friedl. Friedrich (ed.), *Dies & Das. Wie Sprache die vielfältigsten Gesichter macht*, Offenbach, 1995, p. 119.
- 47 Spies, *Max Ernst. Loplop*, p. 107.
- 48 Cf. also Thomas W. Gaeltgens, 'Das "Märchen vom Schöpferum des Künstlers". Anmerkungen zu den Selbstbildnissen Max Ernsts und zu Loplop', in *Max Ernst*, exh. cat., ed. Werner Spies, Munich, 1979.
- 49 *Max Ernst*, exh. cat., Stuttgart, 1970, p. 49.
- 50 *Biographical Notes*, p. 291.
- 51 Max Ernst, 'Inspiration to order', 1932 (original English), in *Art of this Century. Objects, Drawings, Photographs, Paintings, Sculpture, Collages, 1910 to 1942*, ed. Peggy Guggenheim, New York, 1942.
- 52 Max Ernst, 'Was ist Surrealismus?', in *Max Ernst*, exh. cat., Stuttgart, 1970, p. 49.
- 53 Ernst Kris / Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler. Ein geschichtlicher Versuch*, Frankfurt, 1980 [1934], p. 21.
- 54 Max Ernst, *Die Nacktheit der Frau ist weiser als die Lehre der Philosophen*, Cologne, 1970, unpaginated.
- 55 Wolfgang Ruppert, *Der moderne Künstler. Zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der kreativen Individualität in der kulturellen Moderne im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt, 1998, p. 280 ff.
- 56 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-too-Human. A Book for Free Spirits*, 1909–13, 4<sup>th</sup> Section, 150.
- 57 Ernst, *Die Nacktheit der Frau*, Cologne, 1970, unpaginated.
- 58 *Biographical Notes*, p. 290.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 300.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 284.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- 62 Gaeltgens, op. cit., p. 68.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 64 *Biographical Notes*, p. 314.
- 65 See Spies, *Loplop*, p. 109 and Gaeltgens, op. cit., p. 77.
- 66 Jacques Voisine, 'Vom religiösen Bekenntnis zur Autobiographie, 1760–1820', in Niggel (Hg.), op. cit. p. 412.