

# Book Review: Pre-Fascist Masculinity

Jay Sherry

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Klaus Theweleit. *Male Fantasies. Volume One: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (1987); *Volume Thro: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (1989). Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press.

Reviewed by Jay Sherry

I have a confession to make. Whenever I come across a book that seems to have a connection to Jung, I turn to the index to see if he is mentioned—and if so how perceptively he is treated. I had to wait for the second volume of this work to find a solitary reference to Jung, and the page reference was wrong and the comment seriously off the mark. This in a book whose topic and methodology are surprisingly similar to Jung's own. The general bias against Jung among academics does not stop them from developing lines of thought that closely parallel his or that could benefit from a dialogue with him.

*Male Fantasies* (first published in Germany in the late 1970s) is nevertheless well worth reading, for in it Theweleit explores the emotional dynamics that were the motor force that propelled the Nazi juggernaut. His research base was the copious literary output of the men who served in the Free Corps units active in post World War I Germany. These authors were army veterans who were unable to accept defeat after the Great War and so carried on the fight against Germany's "new" enemies: workers, Bolsheviks, and East European nationalists. In typical German fashion, they worked hard, churning out several hundred novels and memoirs. These books Theweleit analyzes in order to understand the attitudes and motivations of the German people after World War I. Although scholars debate the exact nature of the relationship of this generation to the later ascendancy of the Nazis, the psychological lineage is beyond doubt,

Theweleit rejects the interpretation of fascism proposed by Adorno and Hockheimer of the Frankfurt School of social analysis, which was based on Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. He relies instead on the later psychoanalytic work of Klein and Mahler which focused on the pre-oedipal rather than oedipal stage of unconscious personality development. It is at this point in his argument that he so totally misunderstands Jung:

The process traced here has been described psychoanalytically as a "fantasy of rebirth." In a clear attempt to defuse their significance, and with some elegant side-stepping, psychoanalysis has traced fascist endeavors to escape the family by becoming "new men" to origins in the mama-papa relationship. *Jung presents mama, and incest, as the actual object of these men's desires.* (Vol. 2, p. 241, italics mine)

Yet Jung, though understanding the positive mother complex better than Freud, broke theoretically with Freud over this very point, Freud's literal interpretation of the incest wish that seems to surface in patients capable of a positive orientation to

their unconscious lives. Jung understood earlier than anyone else that the theme of incest was symbolic of a longing to reconnect with positive elements of the matriarchal stage that “modern man” had repressed in his development of a patriarchal culture. Nowhere is such repression more evident than in insecure men, struggling to sustain their self-esteem in the face of powerlessness.

The first volume of *Male Fantasies* deals with the fascist hatred of women. Analyzing the images of women in his material, he found that they fell into the categories of either “virgin” or “whore.” The virgins were usually sisters or nurses (wives were almost totally ignored), and the whores were the working class women whom they found among the enemy. The men projected their fears of the unconscious onto these women. The lower woman was an object of fear because the masses (socially and psychologically) were indiscriminate. Their lack of social boundaries threatened the fragile ego boundaries of the insecure proto-fascist soldiers. Women represented for them the liquid-organic inner world that holds so much terror; ultimately they represented the body as source of pleasure which must be suppressed at all costs. Thelewit goes into great detail about all the facets of this anxiety as symbolized in the men’s fantasies: the dominant image is that of the flood.

What makes a soldier-ego so fragile that it must turn itself into a dam to hold back the flood? That is the question Thelewit poses for himself in Volume Two, a psychohistorical tour de force. Here, he addresses such issues as the effects of their socialization and trauma of war on their emotional development.

The Great War touched the masculinity of several German male generations in its most sensitive area; in the conviction that German men were born to be warriors and victors. It deprived them of the victors’ they considered their “birthright” and subjected them, as Germans, to a narcissistic wound of the first order. (Vol. 2, p. 357)

This sense of woundedness led to an intense rage that easily found targets. Thelewit calls them “grown-up children” and it is at this point that a greater familiarity with Jung could have given his presentation more coherence (just as appropriate use of the anima concept would have helped him interpret many things in Volume One). The war was to be these young men’s grand initiation, but defeat interfered with that bloody ritual. The “elders of the tribe” (Father Germany) were discredited by the disillusioning bloodbath that left the soldiers adrift, so the initiates felt compelled to carry on the ritual themselves. Unfortunately, this process became an end in itself without the appropriate *rite de sortie*. They despised the world of bourgeois stability and were content to live out a perverse existence as part of the endstage of the cult of the warrior which had been cultivated in Germany for decades.

Cultural critics had often noted that first Prussia and later Germany were turned into giant barracks. Now the Free Corps legions wanted to wage continual war: their rage was so great that the blood compensation would be enormous. Continually threatened as separate individuals, these soldiers found strength and identity’ only through

group activity. Strength was equated with hardness; so a brutally constant regimen was established to transform flesh into body armor, the sort of tough skin that was incapable of feeling either pleasure or pain. The operative fantasy was that of becoming steel, of a metal cog in a military' machine. The body was to be molded, rather than celebrated; instead of orgasm, an exploding grenade.

Despite the intellectual thrust of his work, Theweleit is a rare scholar who continually evokes the physicality of his material. This inclusion of war's body is especially evident in the illustrations which are an essential component of what he is aiming at. They are not linked to the text in a conventional manner but have a life of their own, providing a parallel visual depiction of his thesis: text — conscious, illustrations — unconscious. They are an outrageous amalgam of images from several decades of German life: period photos and postcards, art, Max Ernst prints, posters, and the much later countercultural comics of the 1960s.

This syncretism is very important to appreciate, since Theweleit's strategy is to provoke us into connecting to this material in a personal way. We are led to ask: where are these forces today? Where are they embedded in contemporary society, and how are they being expressed? Obviously not all male group behavior is "fascism," but the recurrence of fascist elements requires us to try to locate the mind-set that precedes the violent attitude toward the feminine that we associate with fascism. The dynamics will be expressed differently in each culture. Two proto-fascist examples of the moment in contemporary America relate to the issues raised by Theweleit. First, the lyrics of some rap groups reinforce blatantly sexist stereotypes and condone violence against women. Second, it was recently reported at the U. S. Naval Academy that dating a female midshipman "is called 'going over to the dark side,' a phrase describing the forces of evil in the 'Star Wars' movies." (*New York Times*, p. A 12, October 10, 1990) This archetypal fantasy illustrates how a male group can project its sense of threat onto women cast in the role of dark, evil seductresses.

*Male Fantasies* is a sprawling, ambitious work that is essential reading for anyone interested in masculine psychology and especially its unconscious ambivalence toward the feminine.

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