Weimarama

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Male Fantasies Vol. I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History
by Klaus Theweleit, translated by Chris Turner, Erica Carter and Stephen Conway.

Polity, 517 pp., £35, May 1987, 0 7456 0382 3
Male Fantasies Vol. II: Male Bodies: Psychoanalysing the White Terror
by Klaus Theweleit, translated by Chris Turner, Erica Carter and Stephen Conway.

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Since its appearance in Germany in 1977, Klaus Theweleit's psychoanalytical study of fascist literature has graduated from the status of a cult work to that of a classic. Rereading it in English, a decade after my first, rather sceptical perusal, it is easy to see why. Much of what made Theweleit's book so startlingly original in the mid-Seventies has since become relatively conventional in literary and historical studies, from the Foucaultian analysis of literary discourse, and the exploration of the political history of the human body, to a feminist perspective on sex and power. Yet in the intervening period, the book has not lost its capacity to shock and disturb. Much of its power comes from its author's unerring eye for the startling quotation. Consider this passage from a novel by Franz Schauwecker which was published in 1929:

> They lie next to each other. She lifts her arms and her dress slips off. Underneath it she is naked. Her nakedness assaults him with a sudden glowing shudder, a gust of wind across a placid lake. He says nothing, but with a jolt his breath rushes into his blood, filling it with pearls of pure, quivering bubbles, a gushing froth, just as the blood of men shot in the lungs leaves them lying yellow and silent like corpses, while the blood spurts endlessly, gurgling and seething at every breath – breath which they heave up, groaning, as if by a block and tackle, the air is so heavy and laden.

Sex and death are never very far apart in the literature that is the subject of Theweleit's analysis.

Theweleit is concerned not with the literature of the Nazi movement but with that of its much smaller military precursor, the Freikorps movement of the years between 1918 and 1923. The Freikorps were heavily armed bands of right-wing thugs, including many ex-soldiers, who were used by the Social Democrat-dominated governments of the early Weimar Republic to put down revolutionary uprisings such as those of the Spartacists in January 1919, the Communists in Munich later the same year, or the 'Red Army' in the Ruhr in the spring of 1920. Recently the Freikorps have had their defenders: some historians have suggested that they helped stabilise Weimar democracy in its formative phase, or that they were a basically legitimate means by which the German middle classes defended themselves against the Bolshevik threat. No one who reads this book, however, can come away without feeling that these men were pathological murderers who despised the values Weimar represented and hated the ‘bourgeoisie’ as decadent and corrupt.

For some of the authors of the two hundred-odd novels and memoirs discussed in this book, a continued state of warfare, lasting beyond 1918 and well into the Twenties, was the only way to exist. For others who had not fought in 1914-18, violence was also a psychological necessity. ‘Blood, blood, blood must flow,’ they sang, ‘thick as a rain of blows.’ An attack, wrote Ernst von Salomon, ‘represented the ultimate, liberating intensification of energy; we longed for the confirmation it would bring of our sense that we were made for every possible destiny. In the attack, we expected to experience the true values of the world within us.’ The world within them, according to Theweleit, was full of terrible tensions that sought a violent outlet. As children from traditionally strict bourgeois households, as graduates of brutally disciplinarian military academies, as soldiers in the rigidly hierarchical German Army, they had been drilled to repress desire, and they could find release only in annihilating the symbols of desire they found in the world around them.

Hence the ‘passionate rage’ of the Freikorps soldiers as they murdered the women they found amongst their opponents. Erich Balla, for example, writing in 1932 about his adventures as part of a Freikorps operating in the Baltic area just after the end of the First World War, described how the troop found two Latvian women suspected of helping the Red Army murder some German soldiers: ‘The dull thudding of clubs is heard. Both women lie dead on the floor of the room, their blood exactly the same colour as the roses blooming in extravagant profusion outside the window.’ ‘With their screams and filthy giggling,’ wrote Kurt Eggers in his novel *Rebel Mountain* (1937), ‘vulgar women excite men’s urges. Let our revulsion flow into a single river of destruction. A destruction which will be incomplete if it does not also trample their hearts and souls.’

Such passages – and there are many more of them in *Male Fantasies* – show clearly enough the dialectic of repression and release that powered the Freikorps men’s ‘pleasure in destruction’, as one writer called it, or, in another writer’s rather different assessment, their ‘cold and merciless will to destruction’. It was not fear that lay behind the brutal killing of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht or the assassination of leading republican politicians like Erzberger and Rathenau. It is Theweleit’s achievement, which appears even more striking now than it did a decade or so ago, to have uncovered the more complex psychological roots of this blood-lust and aggression.

It is good news, therefore, that Theweleit’s book has at last appeared in English. The translation reads fluently. But there are signs of carelessness. ‘Lickspittles’ appears as ‘split-lickers’, while *zärtlich* is mistranslated as ‘light’, thus missing the sexual undertone. The legend on the phallic Zeppelin doesn’t just say, ‘Your health, brothers’: it also, in a rare example of a German pun, says, ‘Shove away, brothers!’, as the observer whose eyes lighted upon the jolly waitress straddling the airship would immediately realise. Careless proofreading has caused ten lines of the text to be repeated in the Introduction to Volume Two. A number of pictures included in the German edition have been omitted from the Anglo-American. Some of the pictures that actually are included are just as offensive as the ones omitted, so I can only think that, at least in some instances, legal reasons must have been involved.

The doubts and questions which were raised about Theweleit's analysis on its first publication have also been strengthened by the intervening period. In the first place, the question of what, or whom, he is actually writing about seems more vexed than ever. Theweleit's project began when the historian Erhard Lucas, then completing the third volume of his study of the 'Red Army' and the 'March revolution' in the Ruhr – in its own way a classic of committed historiography – asked him to analyse the large body of literature he had found relating to the revolution's suppression by those who put it down. But if Theweleit's subject is the writings of the Freikorps, why does he devote so much space to a novel like Goebbels's *Michael*, whose author was never in the Freikorps? On the other hand, if he is writing about the literature of fascism, why does he spend so much time on a writer like Ernst Jünger, who never was a Nazi? Come to think of it, why is he so obsessed by Martin Niemöller, who was not only not in the Freikorps but was also a leading figure in the German resistance – a fact to which Theweleit alludes at the beginning, but never satisfactorily explains?

The extent to which one can assume the Freikorps to have been 'fascist' remains in the end uncertain, especially in view of the fact that anti-semitism plays a virtually negligible role in Theweleit's book. It may simply be the case that what Theweleit is describing is not a political phenomenon in the conventional sense at all: that his analysis may be equally applicable to soldiers, secret policemen and torturers of left-wing as well as right-wing views. Where Theweleit actually wants to extend his analysis is not to soldiers and policemen involved in the violent suppression of freedom, but to the bourgeois male. 'I don't,' he writes, 'want to make any categorical distinction between the types of men who are the subject of this book and all other men. Our subjects are equivalent to the tip of the patriarchal iceberg.' Thus the violent contrast which his authors draw between their conventional, bourgeois wives, asexual, pure, anonymous, 'white', and the raging, shrieking, demonic, castrating 'red' whores whom they see on the side of their opponents, seems to Theweleit but a colourful exaggeration of the paler dichotomies common in the conventional perceptions of women by men in general. Elsewhere, Theweleit says that 'fascism is a current reality whenever we try to establish what kinds of reality present-day male-female relations produce.' All this makes it very difficult to isolate what exactly it was that turned a small minority of bourgeois men into Freikorps thugs, or even what made a rather larger number of them fascists.

Theweleit's tendency to expand the application of his analysis further and further, his broad, at times seemingly limitless concept of fascism, his claim that 'the pathway to a non-fascist life is marked out a little further by every act of love-making in which the participants touch neither as images nor as bearers of *names* defined by the social,' his vision of desire as a politically liberating force – all these features of the book stamp it indelibly as a product of the student movement of the Sixties, in which indeed

Theweleit himself was a moderately prominent activist. Viewed from the perspective of the Nineties, his argument appears politically utopian, and – given the work that has been done by Peter Gay and others on exposing the gulf that lay between the prim nostrums of Victorian moralists and the pulsating realities of the sexual culture they were trying to define – historically inadequate.

Moreover, the book's structure is as rambling and disorganised as ever. One can appreciate the fact that Theweleit is caught by his own argument that regimentation, order and discipline are fascist and repressive, so that instead of lining up those ideas and arguments in nice, neat rows and marching them out before the reader in an orderly fashion, he prefers to let them sprawl all over the place, come back again in a different guise, or wander off at a tangent. It doesn't make the book particularly easy to follow. Then there are those pictures – a couple of hundred of them at least, drawn from sources as varied as American adult comics, inter-war cinema, Modernist art, World War One posters and postcards, Nazi murals, 19th-century caricatures, and, of course, that wonderful source for the eroticisation of political symbolism, the early 20th-century illustrator 'Fidus'. Intended as a commentary, sometimes direct, sometimes oblique, on the text, these illustrations are as often as not a distraction from it. Yet they share with the text a propensity which one ought, perhaps, to see, in the end, as positive: both words and pictures, rather than compelling the reader to reach conclusions, are open-ended; they raise questions, suggest ideas, which go well beyond the subject of the book itself.

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