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First World War and the Perception of Narrative Time

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The title „Fictional First World War" raises the question of the relationship between fiction and history. The question is, in other words, what value can be ascribed to literary representations of the war in comparison with the historiographical works. As one has to ask whether and how literary representations can supplement the historiographical works, the question of the epistemic value of literature is concerned. This dispute is as old as literature itself, it can be traced back to the debates over the value of fiction between Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle's reply to Plato's ban of the poets from the ideal state became the birth-hour of poetics, and at the same time of any philosophical knowledge of literature. Against Plato, Aristotle revalues literature by comparing it with historiography.

Aristotle defines the difference between history and fiction in the 9th chapter of his "poetics" by stating "that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen". Aristotle concludes that literature depicts "the universal", while history represents "the particular": History, in other words, may have a stronger relation to the factual reality, but for Aristotle, this certainly does not raise its philosophical value. Literary representations, on the one hand, are structured aesthetically, they have a beginning, a middle and an end, the actions of its protagonist obey to the rules of probability. The reality, on the other hand, is at least partially *anaisthetón*: it may appear too big or too small for human perception and thus unaesthetic and imperceptible (the greek term "aesthesis" means perception). Reality knows no aesthetic unity and order, no meaningful coherence. Aristotle illustrates this argument in chapter 23 of his "poetics" with reference to the war:

> "For as the sea-fight at Salamis and the battle with the Carthaginians in Sicily took place at the same time, but did not tend to any one result, so in the sequence of events, one thing sometimes follows another, and yet no single result is thereby produced."

Historical events are partly without any inner connection to each other, their relationship may only be caused by chance or independent from human intentions. Since literary representations never depict reality as it is in regard to this point, it can, according to Aristotle, reach a higher grade of universality and logic and thus may have a higher philosophical value.

Obviously, the relationship between literature and history has changed decisively since the time of Aristotle. As Hayden White (and many other researchers in the field of cultural studies) has shown, the modes of representation in historiographical works follow the laws of literature. Since the 18th century, historical representation began to reject the purely chronological account of "what has happened", and since then it orders historical events according to aesthetic principles. History is ordered to a coherent combination of events, there are motifs for any action, so that the role of chance is diminished more and more. Thus, it became possible that historiography is interested in the causes for historical developments, rather than simply register factual incidents.

Especially in the historical discussion of the First World War, the question of the contingency of the events has always played a crucial role. The assassination attempt in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, is characterized by coincidence in many ways and could easily have failed. This leads to the thought that the World war might not have taken place if the Austrian successor to the throne would have broken off his visit to Sarajevo after the first assassination attempt. "The notion of the power of chance has something as seductive as horrible", writes the historian Herfried Münkler. According to Münkler, the elaborated discussion about the inevitability of the First World War, which has been a prevalent factor in historiographical debate for a long time, had the function to ban the "terrible power of chance". After the war, the historians have

constructed a “master narrative”, in which so many ways led to the war, “that one could literally not miss it”. It has been the methodological merit of Christopher Clark, to presuppose a complete contingency of events in his “The Sleepwalkers”. Instead of asserting a historical determination, Clark analyzes the concrete interactions between minor and major powers involved, thus asking “how” the genesis of the war became possible” (instead of asking “why” the war broke out).

Over a long period of time, the historical representations of the First World War, thus have been focused on the construction of “master narratives”; quiet contrary to what Aristotle would have expected from history. This genre, in other words, is dominated not by randomness, but by an idealized meaningfulness of all events. Below I would like to develop the thesis that the reflections upon the First World War within cultural theory and, above all, literary texts constitute a different model of time. The fictional representations of the First World War are, according to my thesis, always characterized by a discontinuous experience of time, by trauma, shock, and suddenness. By emphasizing these models of time experience, the fictions of the First World War create an antithesis to the historical “master narratives”. While the historians’ gaze can be compared to that of a general who tries to grasp a coherent image on an observation post, literature is more interested in the experience of “small” people, to whom the meaning of the “totality” may not be easily understandable. By modeling a new form of time experience, the narratives on the First World War contribute to the formation of a modern literary style that breaks with the conventions of the nineteenth century.

The First World War has been welcomed by many people in Europe as the promise of a “cultural catharsis”, an ethical regeneration and a “fundamental reversal of history”, which both seemed necessary in the face of a common diagnosis of cultural decline. However, the actual battles of the years 1914 and 1915 in the trenches in France, marked by an unprecedented mechanization of killing, left little of these ethical expectations. On the contrary, technical warfare resulted in entirely new forms of disorientation. Since 1915, the term “shell shock” (or “bomb shell disease”) played a crucial role in the discourses on the

war. It describes a "physical and mental disorder" of former combatants that could prevent them from leading a normal life. In 1919, Sigmund Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" took up the topic of war neuroses. Based on the observations of his collaborators in the hospitals of the war, Freud develops here a new theory of trauma. Freud is particularly interested in the traumatic disturbance of the perception of time. War neurotics experience the traumatic situation – like, for example, the explosion of a grenade – again and again, as if they had pressed on a rewind button. Freud understands the shell shock, in other words, primarily as a repetition compulsion, i.e. as disturbance of the sense of time.

In his essay on the "story-teller", Walter Benjamin has illuminated the consequences of war neuroses for fictional representation. "With the World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then", Benjamin writes in this text that he has written in exile in 1935/36. "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?" For Benjamin, the war is not representable in narratives, insofar he could not be experienced by its participants. "For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by political power," Benjamin writes. In contrast to the utopic ideas of a "cultural catharsis" that have been promoted by numerous writers before and during the war, Benjamin evaluates the war as the climax of a cultural crisis in which all categories of human experience are failing. In his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin depicts a different perspective on the loss of experience in modernity. Here, Benjamin refers to Freud's trauma studies, and he identifies the "exposure to shock" [*Chockerlebnis*] as fundamental for the modern consciousness. Due to the life in masses and the automation of working life, the subject is being shelled by sensations with increasing speed. In the face of this situation, the poet "too has been cheated out of his experience", and this opens, in Benjamin's perspective also an opportunity for literature, at least when a "traumatophile" author such as Baudelaire enters the stage. According to Benjamin, modern life

and modern warfare are beyond of any attempt to "aestheticize" them (as Aristotle had defined the most important potential of literature).

One can conclude two things from Benjamin's argumentation with regard to the fictions of the First World War. Firstly, the world war appears as a climax of a cultural crisis with a long prehistory, which is ultimately the history of modernity. Secondly, when Benjamin asserts that the soldiers of the First World War returned silenced, he aimed primarily at a literature-critical polemic. "What ten years later poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience from mouth to mouth", Benjamin writes: Thus, the "war books" are not able to transport any experience of the war, because the crisis that caused the war has destroyed any possibility of experience. This can easily be understood as a polemic against prominent authors of the genre of "war literature" in Germany, such as Ernst Jünger.

By linking the possibility of convincing fictions on the world war to the potential of human "experience", he presupposes in a rather conservative manners that task of literature is to aestheticize reality, i.e. to organize reality according to rules of meaningfulness, idealization and exclusion of contingency. However, this premise can be disputed. Of course, it is easy the political reasons why Benjamin needed to be polemical against the war books by authors such as Jünger and other authors of the "conservative revolution". However, this polemic ignores the possibility that the "exposure to shock" could also lead to new models of literary fiction.

I would like to discuss this possibility on the basis of Alfred Döblin's story "The battle, the battle!" [*Die Schlacht, die Schlacht!*], which appeared in 1915 in the journal "*Der neue Merkur*". At this time, Döblin was, being a military hospital doctor in Saargemünd, close to the front and its victims. The narration's plot is not very complicated. The main character, a miner named Armand Mercier, is looking for a lost friend, Louis Poinsignon. In order to access the front line, he borrows a uniform from a soldier called Pioupiou, and then he joins the soldiers without being noticed. After he learns that his fried has died of typhoid, he gets into a quarrel with a sergeant. Now Piouiou also appears at the front, accusing Armand to be a spy, whereupon both are sent to the foremost front line. There,

Armand gets killed by his rival Pioupiou, which happens unnoticed amidst the dying at the ongoing battle.

The plot of the narrative, however, is less interesting than the way it is narrated. The narrative's style is extremely paratactic: Most of the sentences are not only very short, but also stringed together and partly even grammatically incomplete – so that they are lacking a subject or a verb. One may take as an example how Döblin describes the landscape that Armand Mercier crosses at the beginning of his search:

> "Cold gray brightness. Naked fields, endless fields. It has roared. It hits the horizon. More clearly delimited, a long drawn-out "dumm"; always organ bass. [*Kalte graue Helligkeit. Nackte Felder, endlose Felder. Es bullert. Es stößt gegen den Horizont. Deutlicher, abgegrenzt, ein langgezogenes ›Dumm‹; immer Orgelgrundbaß nachschwingend.*]"

These are five sentences without a single grammatical subject. Only two of the short sentences have something like a subject, but only the impersonal "it" that marks an action without a recognizable agent. The landscape appears to be depopulated, no people are named as actors or even mentioned in the text.

Above all, the dialogues in the narrative are characterized by paratactic breathlessness. Here, Döblin imitates the style of military language which concentrates on the most necessary sentence elements, thereby omitting all embellishments of speech: "Hollah, hol-lah! The gentlemen there! Where do the gentlemen want to go? You in the car! Do you have passport! [*Haben Sie Pass!*]", a sergeant is quoted. Immediately, Döblin's narrator takes on this style of military language. One can see this, for example, in Döblin's description of Mercier's response to the demand to prove his identity. "Soldiers are passing. To steal a uniform. Where are the wounded? Where a battlefield? Armand Mercier places himself in a niche next to the passport inspector, studying the people. He needs size 1,80. [*Soldaten kommen durch. Eine Uniform stehlen. Wo liegen Verwundete? Wo ein Schlachtfeld? Armand Mercier stellt sich in eine Nische neben den Paßkontrolleur, studiert Menschen. Braucht Größe 1,80.*]" Döblin's narration

here imitates the military jargon of the passport inspector – but it transfers the tone of commanding into the confused stammer of someone who has lost track of his situation. The brevity of the sentences points to Mercier being constantly pressed for time and hounded: For him, the proximity to the front line leaves no time for superfluous words.

If anyhow possible, the linguistic laconicism is increased once more at the moment when Mercier finally reaches the front line. "Again, it rattles not far away: bang, bang, bang! As Armand (...) marches and his bones are getting moved, he feels how beautifully fresh the air is. Thinking: Luis Poinsignon is dead, and how beautiful it must be to march, to run, to climb, to shoot." And some sentences later on Mercier's everyday life as a soldier: "Two days: shoveling, getting something to eat, keeping watch." Marching, climbing, shoveling, eating, keeping watch: The everyday life of the soldier is reduced to a variety of small procedures that have no place anymore for an acting subject, but just for a list of verbs. The repetition of the same activities – "two days: ..." – hints at a mechanical distribution of the tasks corresponding to the automatized working environment at the beginning of the twentieth century. Under the conditions of technical warfare, the actions of the soldiers at the front line are, contrary to all heroic expectations, equivalent to automatized industrial work: "Secretly digs the shovel; nothing rattles, you root around, whisper, groan in the dark. (...) The night is passing by, listening post is coming back, relief."

By abandoning any claim to wholeness und tightness – be it that of an action or even only of a sentence –, Döblin's narrative cancels the alliance between literature and philosophy formulated by Aristotle's "poetics". Almost systematically, the narrative negates all the elements that Aristotle hat attributed to literature in order to legitimize his valorization of fiction: the replacement of chance by inner probability, the construction of a coherent plot structured by a beginning, middle and end – in short: the formation of an idealized *aisthesis*, perceptibility. Döblin's representation of the world war narrates about the hopelessness for the protagonists and narrators alike to find coherence in reality. Therefore, the reality appears to be accidental and incomprehensible. While Aristotle has claimed that the literary text offers an

exclusive path to philosophical knowledge – via its universality of representation –, this claim is negated by Döblin's text, because the reality of the war offers no prospect of universal logic and knowledge. "How that is! Ahead, right, left, soldiers are stumbling, they are running, one doesn't hear anything; wood dolls are tilting; as if one would slap away the legs of a running mutton," Döblin's narration reports the storm attack on the German front.

One moment later, the disorientation is increased, when Döblin's hero Armand is getting hit in the back by Pioupiou's bayonet: "The Prussians are shooting with water, with cold water, with ice! From behind! Strike against the back. Bite into the shoulder blades, something cold, long, a fishbone that does not stop pushing forward into his neck; cannot be swallowed. [*Die Preußen schießen mit Wasser, mit kaltem Wasser, mit Eis! Von hinten! Stoß gegen den Rücken. Stich gegen die Schulterblätter, etwas Kaltes, Langes, eine Fischgräte, die gar nicht aufhört sich nach vorn in den Hals hinaufzuschieben; sich nicht schlucken läßt.*]" Being pierced into the back by a bayonet is a "exposure to shock" in a very narrow sense of the word: on the hand, as a surprising (and ultimately fatal) injury, on the other hand as a moment of disturbance and confusion. The confusion of the protagonists produces an ironical effect, as the deadly wound here is reported in the terms of absolutely everyday things: cold water, ice, fishbone. By mimetically imitating the thoughts of his protagonists, Döblin's narration anticipates the associative style of the avant-garde-novels of the early twentieth century, which are oriented at oral language. Furthermore, also the technique of onomatopoeia in Döblin's narrative, by which the sound of the battlefield is evoked, points to avant-garde aesthetics. "There! Radumm, dummdumm, bang-bang, bang!" Immediately after war, the transformation of language into pure onomatopoeia became the hallmark of Dada literature. The repeated "dumm" in the quotation, of course, marks at same time the non-intelligibility and the impenetrable nature of warfare for human perception (since "dumm" means "stupid").

All these elements do not only characterize Döblin's individual style of writing about the world war. In numerous other texts modernization and technical warfare also evoke a specific temporal structure that can be

characterized as a concentration on the particular present moment, as a structure of *suddenness*. "Anybody who talks about the future is a bastard, it's the present that counts [*Celui qui parle de l'avenir est un coquin, c'est l'actuel qui compte*]", writes Louis-Ferdinand Céline in his *Journey to the End of the Night* (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*) from 1932 about the life at the front line: "Invoking posterity is like making speeches to worms [*Invoquer sa posterité, c'est faire un discours aux asticots*]."

What comes across in Céline's novel from 1932 as the content of a reflection about the temporality of life at the front line, can be recognized in the form of a mimetic imitation within the language of a narration in many texts that have been produced during the war or immediately afterwards. For example, Blaise Cendrars' narration "I have killed" ("J'ai tué") from 1918 is composed by a staccato-likes, breathless sequence of words that evoke the atmosphere of particles of reality – which are raining down on the subject in overwhelming abundance and speed.

> "An arch opens over our heads. Sounds drop out of it in couples, male and female. Gnashings. Hisses. Ululations. Brays. It coughs, spits, trumpets, shouts, cries, moans. Steel chimeras and rutting mastodons. (...) Music of the spheres. Breath of the world. [*Une arche s'ouvre sur nos tetes. Les sons en sortent par couple, male et femelle. Grincements. Chuintements. Ululements. Hennissements. Cela tousse, crache, barrit, hurle, crie et se lamente. Chimères d'acier et mastodontes en rut (...) Musique des spheres. Respiration du monde.*]"

As in the case of Döblin, the sensory impressions of the battlefield induce a loss of accountability: Here, again, no actors appear on the stage, but only an a-personal "it". Therefore, the sounds appear to be randomly, unpredictable and without any recognizable meaning. However, in contrast to Döblin's narrative, the state of being overwhelmed by the sensuous impressions is not only presented as horror and "shock" experience, but also as a source of aesthetic pleasure. The phrase "music of the spheres" refers in a certain way to a natural

form of art, produced without any human intention. The biblical metaphor of the "arch" as well as the allusion to the prehistoric biology in "mastodon", the model of "music of the spheres", all these images refer to the creation of the world. War is represented here as a fracture of temporal continuity, and at the same time as a painful but also aesthetical pleasing rebirth of the world.

A few pages later, Cendrars revisits the image of world-creation, quite literally, when his narrator reflects how his equipment at the front could be imagined as a product of a global production community. "All races, all climates, all beliefs have collaborated." Since Cendrar ascribes a high aesthetic value und power to the war, it doesn't come as a surprise that he, contrary to Döblin, thinks that war can even have a higher sense of reality than the civil everyday life. "Here I am, nerves taut, muscles tensed, ready to leap into reality", the narrator announces before encountering the enemy at the front line. Cendrars depicts the fight not as the place of a loss of reality, but in the contrary as the moment when reality is intensified and therefore clearly visible again.

Ernst Jünger, too, plays in his narrations and his semi-autobiographical texts with the topos of the anesthetic, with the war being completely beyond any approach of representation. "Who may speak of war who was not inside our ring?", he writes in his essay "Battle as inner experience" ("Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis") from 1922. Again and again, Jünger insists that the experience of the war has transformed every person involved to an extent that it is hardly comprehensible for anybody not involved. The experience of war leads to a "doubt concerning the validity of our values", and for Jünger this means in the first place, that we doubt ourselves and our ability of rational control. "In war, when shells fly past our bodies at high speeds, we sense clearly that no level of intelligence, virtue, or fortitude is strong enough to deflect them, not even by a hair", Jünger writes in his essay "On Pain" ("Über den Schmerz") from 1934. This essay stretches a long arc over the cultural history to support the argument that modernity is characterized by a new form of life, which, according to Jünger, can best be described as a "second and colder consciousness". Jünger underlines very strongly that this form of consciousness should not be confused with the "act of self-reflection associated with tradition psychology". This has its

reason in the circumstance that the "colder consciousness" of modernity is not attained by techniques of self-reflection, but rather through the usage of new, technical media of observation and perception: photography, telescopes, but also communication media such as film and radio. All these media form exceed and expand human perception with regard to time and space, and they shape both in a way that they are condensed. In spaces where "catastrophe plays a central role", Jünger writes, "the dispatch of command must be more dependable, systematic, and secure. We are approaching the point where a news report, public warning, or imminent threat needs to reach us within minutes." Thus, the war creates a new organization of time and space: an increased speed as well as a condensed time, both at the expense of continuity. At the same time, war is the place *par excellence* where the "second consciousness" can both be experienced and learned.

Accordingly, the war for Jünger becomes the place where an intensified reality – thus a more real reality – is perceivable. Jünger emphasizes his personal experience as a soldier on the front line in almost each of his publications. In his debut novel "Storm of Steel" ("In Stahlgewittern") from 1920, the title page not only informs about the author's name, but also it identifies him as a former lieutenant and company commander in the "Füsilier-Regiment Prinz Albrecht von Preußen (Hannover Nr. 73)". Not surprisingly, then, that Jünger's texts circle around the possibility of communicating this experience to readers who have not participated in the war. Jünger's strategy of doing so can be describes as an specific aestheticization of the world war: His literary works don't try to achieve universal truths of literature, but rather they try to communicate the atmosphere of a sudden recognition of particular, dangerous moments.

Towards the end of the 1920s, Jünger's text more and more describe the reality of the war as a completely different, alternative reality that deviates from "ordinary" reality due to a radical different structure of temporality. In "The adventurous Heart" ("Das abenteuerliche Herz") from 1929, Jünger describes a small fictional scene that captures in his understanding the essence of "horror" particularly well:

"There is a type of thin, broad sheet metal that is often used in small theaters to simulate thunder. I imagine a great many of these metal sheets, yet still thinner and more capable of a racket, stacked up like the pages of a book, one on top of another at regular intervals, not pressed together but kept apart by some unwieldy mechanism.
I lift you up onto the topmost sheet of thy mighty pack of cards, and as the weight of your body touches it, it rips with a crack in two. You fall, and you land on the second sheet, which shatters also, with an even greater bang. Your plunge strikes the third, fourth, fifth sheet and so on, and with the acceleration of the fall the impact chase each other closer and closer, like a drumbeat rising in rhythm and power. Ever more furious grows the plummet and its vortex, transforming into a mighty, rolling thunder that ultimately bursts the limits of consciousness.
[*Es gibt eine Art von sehr dünnem und großflächigem Blech, mittels dessen man an kleinen Theatern den Donner vorzutäuschen pflegt. Sehr viele solcher Bleche, noch dünner und klangfähiger, denke ich mir in regelmäßigen Abständen übereinander angebracht, gleich Blättern eines Buches, die jedoch nicht gepreßt liegen, sondern durch irgendeine Vorrichtung voneinander entfernt gehalten werden. Auf das oberste Blatt dieses gewaltigen Stoßes hebe ich dich empor, und sowie das Gewicht deines Körpers es berührt, reißt es krachend entzwei. Du stürzt, und stürzt auf das zweite Blatt, das ebenfalls, und mit heftigerem Knalle, zerbirst. Der Sturz trifft das dritte, vierte und fünfte Blatt und so fort, und die Steigerung der Fallgeschwindigkeit läßt die Detonationen in einer Beschleunigung aufeinander folgen, die den Eindruck eines an Tempo und Heftigkeit ununterbrochen verstärkten Trommelwirbels erweckt*.]"

The war is not explicitly mentioned in this passage, but the association is clearly established by words such as "drumbeat", "Stoß", and "Detonationen". The "I" addresses the reader as a "you" and is willing to let him participate at the experience of horror, which is described as a successive acceleration of speed and noise beyond a level of conscious perception. Thus, the passage does refer

implicitly to the war, but the representation is inscribed into literary tradition, such as the genre of the gothic tale. In particular, there is an intertextual link to Edgar Allan Poe's narration "A Descent into the Maelström", as Karl Heinz Bohrer has worked out in his analysis of Jünger's "Aesthetics of Terror" ("Ästhetik des Schreckens"). Jünger's literary representation of the First World War aims, as the recourse to the literature of (late) romanticism reveals, at the evocation of a completely different layer of reality, in which time and space are not governed by a structure of continuity, as Newton and Kant have postulated. Jünger's protest against the "mechanics of time" is characteristic for the fictions on the First World War in general. In one way or another, the author appears to the readers as an initiate, whose experiences with the structure of time are no experiences in the conventional sense any more. Therefore, his reports about his experience must take on new narrative forms.