

published in: *newsletter MODERNE. Zeitschrift des Spezialforschungsbe- reichs Moderne – Wien und Zentral- europa um 1900*, 5. Jg., H. 2 (Septem- ber 2002), pp. 12-16.

1 Blei, Franz: *Erzählung eines Lebens*, Leipzig 1930.

2 Merriam-Webster's *Reader's Hand- book*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster 1997, p. 46f.

3 Schweikle, Günther/Schweikle, Irmgard (Hg.): *Metzler- Literaturlexikon*. Stuttgart: Metzler 1984, pp. 32-34.

4 Bruner, Horst/ Moritz, Rainer (Hg.): *Literaturwissenschaftliches Lexikon. Grundbegriffe der Germanistik*. Berlin: Schmidt 1997, pp. 30-33.

During the last few years, memory has become an important topic in the field of cultural studies and the question of subjective and collective memory is being discussed at many conferences. Thus it is worth mentioning that the Austrian writer Franz Blei (born in 1871 in Vienna) often reflected this query in his works, especially in his 1930 autobiography *Erzählung eines Lebens*,<sup>1</sup> where the relationship between memory versus truth or reality is a central topic. This article will give some insight into Franz Blei's autobiography, to be precise, into its introduction, in which he expounds the problems of memory in autobiographical writing. In addition, it will outline the main arguments in earlier works of Franz Blei and point to the heritage of his ideas through philosophical examples. But first of all it is necessary to give a brief overview of common definitions of the literary genre of autobiography, and to compare these definitions with some theories of memory, especially that of Jan Assmann.

»Formal autobiographies offer a special kind of biographical truth: a life, reshaped by recollec- tion, with all of recollection's conscious and unconscious omissions and distortions«,<sup>2</sup> we read in Merriam-Webster's *Reader's Handbook*. The *Metzler Literatur Lexikon*, a very common litera- ry encyclopaedia in the German speaking world, states that, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, an auto- biography records primarily the mental and emotional development of one's personality by reflecting one's social and intellectual environment. Generally, an autobiography has one sin- gle perspective, a point from which the narrator can see, interpret and describe an entire life. From this point of view the narrator tells the story of this special life in chronological order, he chooses and recollects the facts, he brings them into a conscious or unconscious system and (re)constructs their meaning by connecting certain situations of life. Motifs for writing an autobiography are: the search for identity, self-reflection, apology, urge to confess, etc. Generally speaking an autobiography is characterised by subjectivism; often, it possesses his- torical and political truth or authenticity in the description of feelings and opinions. More than this, it analyses the intellectual and cultural mainstreams of a particular era. Even though this genre leans toward formal hybridity, it is a first person narrative, most of the time the story is told by an »I«, which suggests an identity of the narrator and the character of the story.<sup>3</sup>

No German encyclopaedia forgets to quote Goethe's *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1833) as the embodiment of classical autobiography.<sup>4</sup> A famous example in French literature is Stendhal's *Souvenirs d'égotisme* (1832, printed in 1892). However when talk- ing about this topic we should not forget that autobiographical references in literary texts are not rare – a writer normally writes what he knows – and in the history of literature we find many novels with an autobiographical reference, i.e. Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, though there is a significant difference to Blei's autobiography: Blei offers his book explicitly as an autobiography which Proust never did, since he defined his book as a novel.

### Theories of Memory

Let us connect these ideas with some theories of memory: Pierre Nora has compared memory with life. According to him memory as well as life is a permanently developing process open for the dialectic of remembering and forgetting.<sup>5</sup> And referring to Maurice Halbwachs, Nora expresses that the real nature of memory is that it wants to multiply itself and that memory is collective and at the same time individualised.<sup>6</sup> Nora connects memory with distance and discontinuity.<sup>7</sup> Jan Assmann discusses in his book the collective memory, that is which indivi- dual links to a collective »we« and the connecting structure (»*konnektive Struktur*«) of a com- mon knowledge and self-image based on common rules and values as well as on a common past.<sup>8</sup> The past is not an objective entity but constructed by memory, and Assmann distingui- shes between the memory of the individual and the memory of posterity, of future genera- tions of the individual. The process of memory resembles a reference to the rupture of forget- ting and suppressing. Assmann is referring to Halbwachs's main theses, according to which memory is associated with the social environment. This social frame forms the basis for the constructing and surviving of memory. But it would be completely wrong to derive from these

5 Nora, Pierre: *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*. Aus d. Franz. v. Wol- fgang Kaiser. Berlin 1990, p. 12: »Ge- dächtnis ist das Leben: stets [...] in Entwicklung, der Dialektik des Erin- nerns und Vergessens offen.«

6 Ibid., p. 13: »Gedächtnis ist von Na- tur aus auf Vermehrung und Vervielf- achung angelegt, ist kollektiv, viel- heitlich und doch individualisiert.«

7 Ibid., p. 23.

8 Assmann, Jan: *Das kulturelle Ge- dächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und poli- tische Identität in frühen Hochkul- turen*. München: Beck 2<sup>1997</sup>, p. 16f.: »Was einzelne Individuen zu einem solchen Wir zusammenbindet, ist



die konnektive Struktur eines gemeinsamen Wissens und Selbstbilds, das sich zum einen auf die Bindung an gemeinsame Regeln und Werte, zum anderen auf die Erinnerung an eine gemeinsam bewohnte Vergangenheit stützt.«

9 Cf. Ibid., pp. 31-36.

10 Ibid., pp. 36 f.

11 Ibid., p. 42.

12 Ibid., p. 52.

thoughts that collectives would have memory.<sup>9</sup> According to Assmann, Halbwachs et al., only human beings have memory, but this memory is developed through communication and interaction, and in this way the collective influences the memory of its members. Individual memory results from his/her participation in the communicative process. We remember that Halbwachs thought that only sensory perception but not memory would be individual.<sup>10</sup> He defined the past as a social construct which rises from the need for meaning and the contextual frame of the particular present time. More than that, the past is a cultural invention, it organises the past experiences in a present and future context.<sup>11</sup> According to Assmann autobiography is part of the communicative memory: biographical memory refers to intrinsic experiences, in short the »recent past.«<sup>12</sup>

The common features between the definition of autobiography and the theories of memory mentioned are: Both point out the special kind of biographical truth resulting from reshaping through recollection and its inherent omissions and distortions no matter whether they result from conscious or unconscious strategies. Memory is not seen as an ontological entity, it is rather constructed. It is a construct created by the individual but not independent of the social environment. It does more than construct the past, it has a particular function in the present, and it determines the present as well as the future.

### Fiction versus reality

What are the specific characteristics in Franz Blei's autobiography? It is striking how intensively this text reflects reality and subjectivity. Let's start with the title: Blei called the book *Erzählung eines Lebens* (*Story of a Life*). The term ›*Erzählung*‹ indicates in German a fictional genre and no one would expect it in an autobiography. This creates the first rupture because an autobiography commonly refers to historical reality. The idea of ›*story*‹ is reinforced by the »he« narrator. As mentioned before, autobiographies are generally written by an »I« narrator. But then most parts of the book are a relatively conventional autobiography which tells the life that was being lived »between the war that founded the German *Reich* and the war that threatened it, and the fact that *Reich* affected my existence in manifold ways like everybody else's.«<sup>13</sup> The text does not show many differences to other contemporary autobiographies – of course, it brings more reflections than descriptions of experiences or particular situations, but according to common definitions this is not really an exception. The introduction is very interesting: Blei reflects autobiographical writing and his suffering from it: »A writer does nothing more than communicate the essence of his life and experience or that which he thinks these should be – and he does it in the way of writing.«<sup>14</sup> Blei begins with the remark that an author can write about nothing outside of his horizon of experience, that he can only communicate his own life. That means he can write nothing beyond the framework of his own knowledge. As a consequence then all writing would be autobiographical writing. And this circumstance leads Blei to his suffering from the text, because then writing an autobiography is not necessary. That's why he informs his readers that the publisher asked him to write this book. After his confession he thinks about the reasons for this project, using the text for reflections on memory and on the subject of the main character – himself:

Ich mußte mich, als meinen Biographen, doch vor allem fragen, ob er auch sicher ist, den nackten »Autos« im Netz seiner schön hintereinander aufgereihten Sätze zu fangen [...] Die Frage ist, ob man sich als Autobiograph nicht in der auf den Kopf gestellten Situation befindet, daß der Fisch den Angler fängt, der nur so tut, als angle er den Fisch und suche ihn dabei auf dem Grunde, wo er sich zu verbergen sucht als in einer Ruhe, die er nun endlich haben will, um ungestört zu sterben, mit allem Desinteressement, wie es mählich versagendes Funktionieren mit sich bringt. Überschauen eines Lebens von einer vermeinten Höhe der Erfahrung aus – welch ein schlimmes Wort!<sup>15</sup>

The change from the »I« to the »he« narrator in the first sentence of the quotation accentuates the distance inherent in memory. And more than this Blei denies the autobiography's reference to reality. According to him, it is not possible to find this reality because it is not clear, whether the fish (i.e. the story) is not catching the fisherman (i.e. the writer and the main character). In formulating sentences, a new reality is constructed which obscures the view of reality. That corresponds to the ideas of Halbwachs who pointed out the construction of past through memory.



13 Blei 1930, p. 16: »Zwischen dem Kriege der Reichsgründung und diesem der Reichsbedrohung verlief mein Leben, und die Tatsache des Reiches spielte mannigfach in meine Existenz wie in die eines jeden.«

14 Ibid., p. 7: »Ein Schriftsteller tut nichts anderes, als daß er das Wesentliche seines Lebens und Erlebens – oder das, was er dafür hält – schreibend mitteilt.«

15 Ibid., p. 7f.





16 Ibid., p. 11: »[...] sich zu erinnern, zu besinnen, mit einem gewissen Eigensinn zur ›Wahrheit‹ Bericht zu erstatten über die gehabtten Erwartungen, eingetretenen Enttäuschungen, die Erlebnisse und deren Ablauf, ihre Geld-, ihre Liebesaffären, Liebhabereien und Vorurteile, Erfolge und Mißerfolge. Man erfährt doch recht wenig aus der Statistik, die mitteilt, daß in diesem Jahre so viele Menschen geboren wurden und so viele gestorben sind.«

17 Ibid., p. 12: »In den Lügen über sich haben ja bis heute die Menschen immer mehr Wahrheit ausgesagt, als in den ›Wahrheiten‹.«

18 Ibid., p. 20: »Erinnern? Vergessen ist wohltuender. Je mehr erinnert wird, um so größer wird die Konfusion in unseren geschichtlichen Kenntnissen. Man sollte in unseren Archiven die Mäuse züchten und nicht fangen.«

19 Ibid., p. 20: »meine Person, diese fingierte Einheit.«

20 Ibid., p. 21: »Der vielgekante und vielgelesene Mensch verliert immer mehr sich selbst, um Effekt seines Effektes auf Zahllose zu werden, die ihn eigensinnig nach einem monströsen Bilde fingieren, das der davon Betroffene schließlich auch für sich selber wird.«

21 Cf. Blei, Franz: Der moderne Mensch. In: Ders.: Wedekind, Sternheim und das Theater. 15 Kap. Leipzig 1915, 9: »Der bürgerliche Mensch der Großstadt, der ›moderne Mensch [...] ist nicht der Mensch einer Klasse, sondern aller Klassen, nicht einer bestimmten Bildung, Erziehung oder Politik, sondern aller Bildungen, Erziehungen, Politiken. [...] Dieser ›moderne‹ Mensch ist ohne unmittelbares Leben und ohne Gestalt. Er hat sich kraft seines einzigen Titels, des Geschäftes, zweier nicht von ihm geschaffener Dinge, sie ändernd, bemächtigt, die ihm, jedes in seiner Weise, Tag für Tag, oft zwei, dreimal des Tages beweisen müssen, was gar nicht wirklich ist, nämlich, daß er, der ›moderne‹ Mensch, existiert. Presse und Theater müssen ihm sagen, d. h. er sagt sich durch Presse und Theater, daß er ist und nicht bloß so tut; daß er handelt und nicht bloß zu handeln scheint.«

22 Cf. Ibid., pp. 5-8.

23 [Blei, Franz/ Brod, Max]: Komödie auf Reisen. In: [Dies./Schabach, Erik-Ernst]: Das Zaubertheater von Medardus, Prokop und Sylvester. Leipzig 1915, pp. 209-304.

To remember, to reflect, to report with a certain obstinacy to truth the former expectations, the experience and their way, the money and the love affairs, the preferences and prejudices, success and failure. One cannot learn very much from statistics, which inform how many people were born and how many died in that year.<sup>16</sup>

By mistrusting numbers and statistics, Franz Blei portrays his mistrust in reality and suspects that there would not be the right dates to catch reality. This leads him to the question, if there would not be more satisfaction in telling lies than in reality: »Until today people have told more truth in their lies than in their ›truths‹.«<sup>17</sup>

Searching for truth makes Blei suffer: »Remembering? Forgetting is more pleasant. The more we remember the greater becomes the confusion in our historical knowledge. In the archives people should breed mice and not catch them.«<sup>18</sup> More difficult than searching for truth is the construction of the subject: »The I has varieties« he diagnoses and he speaks of his person as »this imaginary entity«.<sup>19</sup> He connects this fragmented subject with communication:

A well known and well read man loses himself more and more. In order to become an effect of his effect on numerous people who imagine him stubbornly after a monstrous image. So that in the end the person affected becomes this image for himself.<sup>20</sup>

Scrutinising reality and the subject of the fragmentation of the »I« are important topics in Blei's entire oeuvre. Already in 1915 he wrote in his essay *Der moderne Mensch*, the modern human being would no longer belong to a particular class, a particular education or a particular political faction, he would belong to all classes, complete several forms of education and live under various political systems. This modern human being would have no firsthand life experiences and for that reason he would create the media and the theatre to prove to himself that he actually exists. By means of press and theatre he would tell himself then that he is really alive and does not merely seem to act. And finally Blei diagnoses the loss of the ability to perceive reality directly.<sup>21</sup> In another essay entitled *Apologetisches*, published also in 1915,<sup>22</sup> he argues that the individual would live in a closed abstracted world with no direct connection to the real world to which he has only points of reference. Thus the individual becomes a type, a representative of the masses. The expressive pointing out of individuality in modern times is – according to Blei – only a theoretical item, in reality the modern human being is only part of the masses. The process of technical and economical invention involved a loss of individuality. So far Blei's ideas correspond with Ferdinand Tönnies' who diagnosed that community has changed into society.

### The Break with the Fictional Contract

In his literary production Blei brakes the fictional contract which says that every literary text has its specific reality. By reading a literary text the reader accepts the presented text-interne reality as if the presented events were real. At the same time the reader knows the other reality outside the text. In a 1915 published drama, *Die Komödie auf Reisen*,<sup>23</sup> which is based on the Ulysses story, Blei uses contemporary places, characters and circumstances: the cave of Polyphem is a run-down garage. Other places are a Grandhotel in Paris, the famous beach of Heringsdorf, the police, many tourists or La Goulue – a character well-known from the graphics of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. All these places do not belong to the story of mythological Ulysses they are part of modern, contemporary life. The border between reality and fiction is no longer clear. And when fiction is ruptured by reality – how real can reality still be?

Analogous things happen to the characters in the text: In the introduction to the drama we find for example the name of the famous actor Richard Pallenberg, who plays the role of the author »Homer«. We hear that the actor Pallenberg should primarily play himself and handle his role as Homer less important. Contrary to the contemporary practices of literary communication the acting plane of the character is linked with that of the actors. Furthermore, by importing the author of the antique myth the acting plane of the author is inside the text – and not outside as it should be! More than this there is an interesting dialogue between the actor Treumann, who is portraying Ulysses, and the actor Pallenberg who is playing Homer. Ulysses wants to return home to his wife and refuses any further adventures but Homer reminds him of his contract. Ulysses replies that contracts are made to be broken. What contract should be



24 Cf. Welsch, Wolfgang: Ästhetisches Denken. Stuttgart 31993.

25 Blei, Franz: Die Puderquaste. Ein Damen-Brevier. Aus den Papieren des Prinzen Hippolyt. München: H. von Weber 1909, p. 3.

broken here? First, it is the contract according to which reality in fictional texts is handled as if it were reality, and second, the contract to be broken is that the subject forms a whole. In this drama the actors are characters and at the same time the characters are their own authors. Nobody knows who's who. One is reminded of Wolfgang Welsch, who said that the basis of what we call reality is of fictional nature.<sup>24</sup> And Blei's text also anticipates Jacques Derrida's chain of significant.

This deconstruction of fiction versus reality we can find already in Blei's earliest works. In 1909 he wrote an anthology of essays, entitled *Die Puderquaste*:

Sie haben den Prinzen [d. i. Hippolyt] nicht gekannt und werden seinen Schatten damit vergnügen, daß Sie sein irdisches Dasein für ein Gerücht halten. Er sagte: »Das Gefühl, Ich zu sein, hat nur eine ganz gemeine Bedeutung im Alltagsleben. Diese simple Praxis hat man als Subjekt-Objekt höchst pompös in die Philosophie hineingeschwindelt, die nun ihr Dasein von einem Gegensatz lebt, den es nicht gibt; denn in Wahrheit bin ich Alles und ist Alles Ich.« Habe ich also nicht Recht, wenn ich Sie um des Prinzen Leben Willen bitte, dieses Leben für eine Erfindung zu halten?<sup>25</sup>

These sentences are full of contradictions: Noting that the reader does not know the prince, he imagines his real existence. But this existence is being denied right away, when the narrator calls him a shadow. The next rupture follows in the same sentence, when the narrator says that the reader would enjoy the prince if he received him as rumour although it is hardly possible to take pleasure in a fictional character.

### Nietzsche and the Empiriocritics

For Blei reality and truth are constructions. Behind his ideas we hear the voices of Friedrich Nietzsche and of Empiriocriticism. Nietzsche's postulation of God's death leads to the drama of emptiness in a world without myths, and at the same time it marks the end of the possibility to think a singular valid truth. In Empiriocriticism every idea of substance is unmasked as bare fiction. Ernst Mach reduces every cognition to a basis of pure sensation. In a phenomenological perspective he defines the world as sum of all sensations and their connections. According to him the »I« is no longer a homogenous entity. And Richard Avenarius refused the idea of a pure consciousness – there would be only a consciousness of »something«. Both argue utilitarianly when they say that theories could not be classified as right or wrong; they can only be more or less useful. Blei, who was a student of Avenarius in the 1890's in Zürich, follows his professor in refusing a homogenous »I« and he defines analogously to him this »I« as a chain of events. This leads us back to memory: if the subject is a construct and reality is a construct as well, memory becomes an important function in the process of the construction of these categories – and that's the topic of Blei's reflections in his autobiography which give insight into his suffering from the impossibility to describe reality. He can just create a story – one of many stories.

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