CHAPTER 4

Bodies and Minds: Art and the Politics of Degeneration

4.1 Introduction

In a vivid passage in her Junius Pamphlet of 1915, Rosa Luxemburg argued that the War had uncovered the true nature of capitalism:

The cannon fodder that was loaded upon the trains in August and September is rotting on the battlefields of Belgium and the Vosges, while profits are springing, like weeds, from the fields of the dead... Shamed, dishonored, wading in blood and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands. Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteousness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics – as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity – so it appears in all its hideous nakedness.¹

This passage gives us a very particular vision of the embodiment of a militarised capitalism, one very different from the patriotic unity promoted by the state or the pristine armoured bodies dreamt of by Jünger and others on the radical right. Across the political spectrum, critics imagined that the War would unmask the true nature of society; for Luxemburg, that unmasking revealed only corruption and horror.

We might read Luxemburg’s beast as a grotesque parody of the Volkskörper, her account challenging the ‘spirit of 1914’ at a time when that spirit was still able to inspire. Luxemburg presents a degenerate social body, but locates the source of that degeneration in capitalist social relations. If we set this image beside the bodies of the soldier-males of the radical right discussed in the second chapter, the distinction is especially clear. Those bodies were produced through the externalisation of purported sources of degeneration, their violent purging in rituals of masculine hardness directed at a series of enemies, not least the left and Luxemburg herself, who was murdered in the counter-revolutionary frenzy of early 1919. In the Junius Pamphlet, workers’ bodies, their material death and decay, do not give rise to new men but literally fertilise

capitalist profit. The ideological cover of pristine bourgeois order, of hygiene, is torn away in war, exposing the filth through which it is dialectically constituted. Luxemburg’s imagery may have offended many at the time of writing but, as I detailed in the second chapter, her vision of war as a hideous beast resonated with more and more people as the War went on, particularly those artists and writers whose politicisation was shaped by their experience of war. This was unsurprising given the material bodily violence of the War on both fronts.

The War remained a key theme throughout much of the Weimar period, shaping many critical cultural responses to capitalist modernity. George Grosz’s *The Faith Healers* (Ill. 3) is a famous example of anti-war art that also draws out the complex intersections of military and medical practice. Initially drawn during the War as part of his ironically-titled collection *God is With Us*, *The Faith Healers* was reprinted in the Dadaist journal *Die Pleite* (Bankruptcy) in 1919. Faced with a skeleton, the doctor proclaims ‘KV’, the acronym for the notorious diagnosis of *Kriegsverwendungsfähigkeit* (fit for active service) pronounced by doctors on wounded or ill soldiers. The satire is blunt, with the doctor’s willingness to proclaim the fitness of the skeleton underscoring the voracious appetite of the military for virtually any body to throw into the fight. This bodily dimension is emphasised by the contrast between the well-fed officers and the emaciated future soldier, a distinction that played on struggles over the classed differences in military provisioning. The intimate relationship between medicine and the military (the synthetic and the analytical branches, as the doctor in Ernst Toller’s *Transformation* put it) is symbolised by the two prominent crosses worn by the medical staff, the Red Cross on the orderly’s sleeve and the Iron Cross on the doctor’s coat.

Walter Mehring parodied the medicalised conception of national health and wholeness through a similar invocation of the diagnoses of KV in the inaugural issue of the Dadaist journal *Der blutige Ernst* (Bloody Earnestness).

In the year 1914 the outbreak of the health-promoting (*gesundenden*) world war turned all medical knowledge on its head through a fundamental discovery: How sweet it is to die with God for king and capital. One will be healed again à la Christ: At the command of their superior, the lame walked and the deaf heard. Our dear God revealed himself daily in the wonder formula ‘k.v.’, and the overburdened doctors, who marched armies out of the military hospitals, were relieved by state-approved faith healers and prosthesis-cobblers.²

² Mehring 1919, p. 3.