CONFLICT WITH THE PERCEPTION OF TIME AS FERTILE GROUND FOR COLLECTIVE INSECURITY: THE FRIGHTENING REALITY OF SCIENTIFIC FACTS AND THEIR TRANSFORMATION IN LITERARY FICTION

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This essay examines a selection of literary texts dealing with both fascination and fear caused by scientific discoveries in the field of geology and archaeology. By focusing on English and German authors Jane Loudon, Herbert George Wells, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and Adalbert Stifter as exponents of the fictional transformation of anxieties and hopes related to the ongoing debates in natural history in the nineteenth century, I will show how the preoccupation with archaeology and geology as a literary theme has changed the perception of past, present time and future. The works of the above authors depict scenes, of which the limits surpass that of previous scientific discoveries, by transforming archaeological excavations of contemporary cultures into the future and adapting “plots without man”1 to describe the Earth’s own future. As the texts reveal, geology and archaeology as literary themes could undermine the prominent position of the human subject.

The slow transformations in human culture and Earth’s history brought to light by natural sciences may have contributed to some collective insecurities which spread throughout the nineteenth century. These collective insecurities were triggered, on the one hand, by the awareness of the slow development in human culture and Earth’s history and, on the other, by the fast rate of technological progress. Regarding the perception of the past, the conception of a teleological progress is undermined by the long period of mankind’s absence and by natural history pursuing no higher goal. The disturbing effects of realizing man’s marginal position in the history of the Earth are the source for either fantastic or fearful literary visions of past and also of future societies.

The interrelatedness of fear and fantasy has fascinated scholars and literary authors for a long time. Fear can promote or inhibit fantasy just as fantasies trigger or lessen fear. This process is not limited to

subjective perceptions of individuals, but can be effective for nations, cultures and global movements. Nowadays, fear and fantasy seem to have reached a new global level: war, terror, global warming and natural disasters dominate imagined constructions of the Earth’s future. Not only do fearful fantasies play an important role in present-day culture and literature, but also many kinds of threatening possible past and future worlds are conceptualized.\(^2\) Fiction in general and literary fiction in particular offer the possibility to act out hopes and fears of contemporary culture and also to compose images without any link to extra-literary reality.

In my essay, I aim to open up perspectives on fear and fantasy, their connection to scientific discoveries and the resultant change in the perception of time.

In the first section, some general thoughts related to the relativity of time measurements are addressed: in the same way as there is a cultural consensus that a day is divided into twenty-four hours, the conception of past and future and their respective scope varies from one cultural period to another. One fact which radically changed the perception of the past was the scientific exploration of the Earth’s history. Archaeology and geology\(^3\) were two new disciplines which challenged the commonly held notion of the Earth’s age. The fear of, and fascination with, new sciences and technologies are not as recent as one might think. They played an important role in the culture and literature of earlier periods too. The destabilization of the human subject – which was characteristic of the dawn of modernism – is increased by the accelerated present but at the same time by the findings of natural science. Space and distance diminished due to modern transportation, contrary to the dimension of time which expanded the past. Even if the effects were not global at the time, similar reactions in culture and literature can be examined, even if they occurred in different countries and literary genres. Therefore, the article focuses on the chronologically restricted period of the early nineteenth century and the geographically circumscribed field of

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\(^3\) I will use the currently conventional terms even if the scientific disciplines and terminologies were not fully established in the nineteenth century.