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Sex, Metaphorical Drugs, and the Dissolution of Boundaries in the Perception of Time: Robert Muller's *Tropen: Der Mythos Der Reise* (*Tropics. The Myth of Travel*) From 1915 Serves as an almost Forgotten Example

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Abstract

Mental disorders are characterized by changes in the subjective structure of time (duration, speed, continuity, past/future reference). Examples include the time slowdown experienced in depression and the accelerated perception of time in mania and certain forms of schizophrenia. Other disturbances of time perception, such as blackouts, memory gaps, feelings of being "outside of time," or interruptions in the linearity of time, have been described in various psychiatric diseases. Not surprisingly, these phenomena have provided raw material for many authors. A classic literary example is Sylvia Plath's 1953 autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, in which the days drag on and action seems suspended, revealing a narrowing of the future horizon due to the protagonist's severe depression.

A less well-known literary example of mental alteration associated with pathological perceptions of time, partly induced by the tropical environment, is the *Tropen* by Viennese expressionist author Robert Müller (1887–1924), who, similar to Sylvia Plath, committed suicide. Müller's novel is not widely recognized in English-speaking countries, and only excerpts have been translated into English thus far. The purpose of this article is to familiarize interested readers with Müllers' life and describe the various characters and their mental disturbances found in the novel.

Keywords: Changes in the Subjective Structure of Time; Mental Disorders; Robert Müller; Tropics; Literary Expressionism; Austrian Autho

Introduction

The perception of time is influenced by multiple biological variations that may arise from changes in brain function, as well as phenomenological influences of body conceptions. German psychiatrists Erwin Strauss (1891–1975) and Viktor Emil von Gelbsattel (1883–1976) first noted in the early twentieth century that depressive patients

perceive the passage of time as slower than healthy controls [1-4]. Openness to future perspectives also diminishes with the severity of depression. A classic literary example is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* from 1953 [5], which describes a highly subjective experience of time where the main protagonist, Esther Greenwood, likely an alter ego of Plath, experiences time not as objectively or strictly chronological; instead, time is presented in a psychologically colored manner. During depressive phases, time seems slow, heavy, and stagnant.

At times, it appears to race by, especially in stressful moments. The inner experience determines the pace of the narrative. She also feels stagnation—a sense of being stuck. She fears the future and exhibits a kind of paralysis. The "glass bell" symbolizes isolation—underneath it, time hardly seems to move forward, being frozen.

In contrast, schizophrenic patients tend to overestimate time intervals [6]. Déjà vu experiences (the feeling of having experienced something objectively unknown before) occur more frequently in schizophrenics and epileptics and can be interpreted as disorders of time experience, as they falsely present the present as the past [7]. A literary example of this may be "*Die Blendung"* (*the Blinding)* by Elias Canetti, written in 1936 [8]. The protagonist, Peter Kien, a sinologist and book collector, lives in a four-room apartment filled with his library of 25,000 volumes. After he makes the ill-fated decision to marry his housekeeper, who physically abuses him, signs of insanity begin to manifest. Kien lives in obsessive repetition; in his mind, thoughts return compulsively, and arguments play out in endless loops. He experiences the paradox of time seeming like a standstill in motion: externally, it passes, but internally, it circles. He also experiences a decoupling of internal and external time. The objective world (everyday life, social dynamics, escalations) moves forward, but Kien remains stuck in a static scholarly world among his books.

A lesser-known example of the subjectification of time, likely due to the lack of a complete translation into English and its near-forgotten status in German-speaking countries, is the novel Tropen (Tropics) by Austrian writer Robert Müller (1887–1924), published in 1915 [9]. The current article aims to describe the plot of this novel, focusing on time pathologies, and provide a brief overview of Müllers life, which ended in suicide. Tropen is an intriguing work demonstrating several concepts of literary expression and exoticism as found in the mentally unstable characters of this novel.

The Plot

The novel tells the story of an expedition into the South American jungle, which initially takes the form of a classic adventure and treasure hunt but eventually transforms into a tragedy marked by murder caused by jealousy. The story is primarily narrated from the perspective of German engineer Hans Brandlberger, who embarks on the journey to the tropics with two companions, motivated by dreams of discovery, riches, and new human experiences. At the outset, external goals such as treasure hunting and scientific curiosity dominate, but as the narrative progresses, the focus increasingly shifts to the inner journey: the exploration of identity, consciousness, and the self. The novel purports to be an authentic account by the first-person narrator Brandlberger, who recounts a journey undertaken at the turn of the century alongside the Dutchman Van den Dusen and the American Jack Slim through the Rio Taquado region of South America.

Brandlberger has a dual role in the novel; he is both an acting character and a narrating chronicler. Hence, the subtitle: *Documents of a German Engineer.* Both roles switch continuously throughout the novel. Brandlberger is not a classic "hero," but rather a modern, psychologically torn, contradictory intellectual. He is both intellectual and reflective, often overanalyzing rather than acting. Brandlberger constantly examines himself and his environment, which makes him appear witty yet overly rationalistic. He is enthusiastic about grand ideas, cultural concepts, and philosophical designs. The "tropics" symbolize extremes, borderline experiences, and intellectual adventures for him. Despite his strong intellect, he lacks inner stability, fluctuating between fantasies of grandeur and self-doubt, thus exhibiting a fragmented personality. Brandlberger may reflect a certain type of modern man around 1900: alienated, searching, overexcited, not fitting into social structures, and feeling isolated inside. He often views people and situations as experiments or intellectual projects, treating interpersonal relationships as theoretical constructs, ultimately misusing and hurting the feelings of others [9].

In the novel, the jungle serves not only as an exotic setting but also as a symbol of complex inner, psychological, and interpersonal relations.

The Dutchman Van den Dusen is a colorful, ambiguous character who appears less as a realistically developed individual and more as a type and figure of thought.

Van den Dusen comes across as a reflective, strongly theoretical person. He thinks in broad cultural and philosophical terms and attempts to understand the tropics not only as a geographical space but also as an intellectual principle. He represents a conscious, constructed worldview. Van den Dusen embodies a radical ideology that seems somewhat proto-fascist. He thinks in terms of strength, expansion, and the "recreation" of humanity. He views the tropics as a place where European values can be re-evaluated.

However, physically, Van den Dusen appears rather weak, not as a powerful, physically dominant figure. He is pale and nervous looking, with a tense face and a hyperactive state of mind. He is also fat and sweats profusely in the tropical heat. Müller wrote: "*There I met a Dutchman named Van den Dusen. He was originally an officer in the colonial army on Java, then a merchant by profession, with that not entirely unfashionable blend of mercenary spirit that, in foreign service, dares to apply its energy and ingenuity to the most daring tasks. This time, too, he had a whole list of ventures in mind, which he did not keep from me and which, in his opinion, would bring him sensations and riches for the rest of his life*".

Van den Dusen increasingly loses control in the extreme tropical environment and eventually dies, but his death is presented as the symbolic collapse of a colonial European existence.

In the novel, the tropics function not only as a geographical space but also as a psychological and metaphysical force that undermines order, reason, and identity. Van den Dusen's death is violent and occurs within the context of this escalation, with the focus less on the specific perpetrator and more on inner and cultural decay. The third member of the group, besides Brandlberger and Van den Dusen, is Jack Slim, an American adventurer and philosophical-metaphysical thinker. He embodies the idea of transforming humanity through experience, extremes, and self-conquest. In this way, he exemplifies Müller's central theme: the creation of a new identity beyond bourgeois norms. Slim can be seen as a symbol of a new kind of "hybrid humanity." His thinking combines an instinctive, physical side ("guts") with an intuitive life full of lust and vital energy—in contrast to European rationality ("brain"). He represents the idea that lust, instinct, and experience are more important than purely rational thinking. In the text, Slim repeatedly engages in discussions about dialectics, culture, and society. His views are often paradoxical, playful, and profound simultaneously, revealing a certain urge to transcend cultural and moral boundaries.

At the end of the novel, Brandlberger kills Slim. The motive is jealousy and increasing psychological tension within the expedition, particularly concerning the relationship with the Indigenous woman Zana. The novel does not provide a clear moral or causal explanation for the act but embeds it in Müller's typical web of power, desire, violence, and self-destruction [9].

It is also important to note that Brandlberger reflects ambivalently on the act, which calls into question the narrator's reliability. The murder marks the final collapse of the expedition as well as the decay of the narrator's inner order [10].

Müller also uses the backdrop of the tropical expedition to question traditional colonial and exotic narrative patterns of the time. The characters initially espouse colonial ways of thinking and seemingly "civilizing" motives, but the novel shows how these worldviews are exposed and ironized. In particular, the notion of white European superiority and the idea of "civilized progress" crumble in conflict with the harsh reality of the jungle.

Philosophical and Psychological Dimensions

As the story progresses, the focus shifts from external events to philosophical questions about the nature of reality, identity, and the possibility of a "new human being." The tropical landscape becomes a mirror of inner processes—the expedition participants often lose themselves in "tropical madness" or experience confusing states of consciousness. In the end, the metaphorical experience of the tropics is interpreted such that the "tropics" are no longer a place but an inner state: "I am the tropics."

Sex and Drugs

Sexuality is primarily seen as an expression of the "primitive" and the breaking down of boundaries in the novel. Sexual themes are employed to stage a radical departure from bourgeois morality. The narrator and his companions deliberately engage in direct, physical, and taboo-free relationships with local women in the jungle. In the process, lust, violence, and erotic experience are intertwined—sometimes in an almost sadomasochistic manner. Not surprisingly, sexuality is closely linked to the white protagonists' exotic view of the "savages." The depiction of Native American dances, naked bodies, and erotic encounters is often told from the perspective of male desire, emphasizing the foreign, untamed, and lustful aspects of tropical life. The narrator and his companions deliberately engage in direct, physical, and taboo-free relationships with local women in the jungle. In the process, lust, violence, and erotic experience are linked—sometimes in an almost sadomasochistic way—and celebrated as an expression of a "natural" and primitive life that opposes the restrictive sexual morality of European culture.

"Zana weighed as little as a feather when I took her in my arms. I ran a little way upstream until an opportunity arose, then we flew into the bushes. She tore my clothes off, she herself was naked, she bit my lips raw and slobbered all over my face with love".

Brandlberger's completely uncontrolled sexual obsession with the Indian woman Zana ultimately leads him

to kill slim out of jealousy.

For Müller, sexuality also symbolizes mixture and hybridity: the encounter between Europeans and Indigenous peoples is conceived as a potential source of new, mixed identities—whether biologically through sexual union or psychologically through the blending of cultural and emotional experiences.

Drugs

One may assume that alcohol plays a pivotal role in the community of three men in a foreign land, as well as local drugs from the jungle. Somewhat surprisingly, consumable drugs do not play a central, explicitly developed role as a concrete motif (e.g., opium, alcohol, or other substances as a driving force for the plot). Nevertheless, the text is strongly influenced by a discourse of intoxication and ecstasy—albeit more metaphorically than materially.

Müller describes intoxication as a state of consciousness rather than substance abuse.

The novel unfolds an intense, sometimes exaggerated perception of the tropical world. The jungle, heat, colors, sounds, and the unfamiliar, along with the local inhabitants, create a kind of natural state of intoxication that alters the characters' consciousness. This state resembles a drug experience but is not primarily triggered by chemical means. Therefore, a continuous "intoxication" comes from several sources: the experience of the foreign, the intense nature, its exoticism and strangeness, as well as from psychological overload (ultimately leading to disorders of time perception, as discussed below), with a cultural dissolution of boundaries.

While classic drug motifs in literature are often associated with escape, numbness, or decadence (e.g., in Fin de siècle literature, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from 1890/91, where opium is a central motif, or *Alraune* (1911) by Hanns Heinz Ewers, a typical example of late German decadence with morphine as the central drug), Müller is more concerned with the opposite: increased perception and an intensification of the attitude toward life, alongside the dissolution of the European ego. Thus, the tropical space itself acts like a mind-expanding substance.

Changes in Time Perceptions or the Subjectification of Time in the Novel

This novel from 1915 is paradigmatic for the aesthetic methods of literary modernism. Besides addressing themes of foreignness, colonialism, and identity crisis, it presents an interesting, specific conception of time. The text consistently undermines a linear, chronologically organized model of time and replaces it with a subjectivized, psychologically structured experience of time. The representation of time functions not merely as a formal device but as an expression of the epistemological and existential uncertainty of the modern subject.

The narrated world does not follow a strictly causal logic of events. Although there is an expeditionary framework plot, it is repeatedly interrupted by reflections, sequences of perception, and imaginative cross-fades. As a result, the narrative progression loses its teleological coherence, and a dissolution of linear chronology occurs.

This structure points to a modernization of storytelling that suspends objective time measurement in favor of subjective experiential time. The tropical space functions as a temporal counterworld to European modernity. While Europe is associated with rationalization, acceleration, and chronometry (especially at the turn of the twentieth century), the tropics appear as a space of slowed-down, viscous, almost stagnant time.

The local weather conditions, such as heat and humidity, along with the natural abundance and sensory overload, create an atmosphere of permanence and repetition. Day and night cycles lose their structuring function; instead, a state of suspended presence dominates.

This temporal otherness simultaneously destabilizes the identities of the characters.

The dissolution of time becomes particularly evident in intoxicating or ecstatic passages. Perception, memory, and imagination overlap; temporal boundaries become permeable. Past and present no longer appear sequentially but simultaneously. Consequently, this leads to intoxication and the dissolution of boundaries in the perception of time.

Time is not experienced here as a measurable category but as an intense feeling. Duration is replaced by an increase in intensity. This aesthetic of blending corresponds to expressionist techniques in which the inner world and the outer world flow into one another.

The dissolution of temporal boundaries points to a fundamental crisis of stable subject and world relations [11].

Brandlberger states: "*Am I not swimming in my own blood, am I not an architectural islet in the flow of this blood, a shed-like structure half emerging from it? What does it matter that the wetted surfaces are on the inside? It is the most ingenious reversal of a principle, the practical solution to a question of nutritional economy. It is a mechanical invention of the first order, a space- and time-saving method*".

Moreover, in a discussion with Slim, Brandlberger, as an engineer, attempts to draw on the apparently objective concept of time in physics but fails to do so in the tropical atmosphere. "*Not at all," I said, feeling rather weak. "My physiologism," Slim continued, "is spirituality. Let's turn to physics, Mr. Engineer. In order to generate the fluidum that is required in each case, it makes no difference whether you move the body in the magnetic field or whether the field passes by the body. Take the inversion currents! All right, that's my comparison! For a change, I'm not moving the last dimension we can grasp, which is time, but rather performing an empty, objective movement against it*".

Brandlberger is on the edge of madness: "*I also know nothing reliable about Van den Dusen's death. But I have my suspicions. During the bouts of tropical fever that became increasingly severe during the latter part of my stay in the river camp, which was certainly not entirely healthy, I experienced a stage in which the basic human instincts of hunger and love became, to a certain extent, identical. My heightened nervousness mobilized everything that might have been present in me in terms of primal instincts. It overturned inhibitions that had been built up over millennia of culture and anchored in the thirty-member chain of generations.... It is quite possible that I am mistaken about the connection between my impressions and that I only formed certain assumptions about the incident when my imagination had the opportunity to construct a picture of the struggle from my personal eyewitness account of the mutilations to the corpse*".

The subjectification of time in *Tropen* can be read as a symptom of a more comprehensive cultural transformation. With the collapse of traditional models of order, linear time also loses its self-evidence. Narrative fragmentation reflects an era in which belief in progress and teleological conceptions of history are becoming fragile.

Who was Robert Müller (1887–1924)?

Robert Müller was an Austrian writer and journalist of the literary modernist movement. Born on November 6, 1887, in Vienna, he was part of the expressionist and avant-garde literary scene of the early 20th century [12].

Müller initially worked as a journalist and undertook several trips to different destinations, including South America. In 1910, at the age of about 22, he travelled from Europe to the United States. Müller stayed in America for about a year, then returned to Vienna and continued to work there as a journalist and writer. He arrived in New York City with little money and initially lived with relatives in Brooklyn. There, he worked for a time as a reporter for the German-language newspaper *New Yorker Herold*. His time in New York exposed Müller to a multicultural, modern world, leading him to develop ideas about cultural encounters, foreignness, and travel, which are central to *Tropen.*

Besides his work as a reporter, he reportedly got by with various odd jobs, such as a newspaper seller, laborer, or sailor. These experiences strongly shaped his image of the modern metropolis. His trip to South America (1910/1911) also provided raw material for reports and later inspired his novel *Tropen.*

These travel experiences significantly influenced his best-known work, the novel *Tropen*: *Der Mythos der Reise* (1915). In this experimental novel, he combines travelogue, philosophical reflection, and criticism of European colonial thinking. The book is now considered an important modern adventure novel. Müller's texts are characterized by vivid, often experimental language and an interest in psychology, culture, and myth. Despite his literary talent, he remained relatively unknown during his lifetime [13].

As a journalist, Müller wrote feature articles, reports, reviews, and essays. His texts often dealt with modern art, literature, cultural theory, and social developments. He was strongly influenced by the ideas of modernism and expressionism and sought to promote new ways of thinking and aesthetic forms.

An important part of his journalistic work consisted of writing travelogues and cultural-philosophical texts: *The Myth of Travel*. In these texts, he reflected not only on the journey itself but also on questions of culture, identity, and European colonial thinking.

Müller also published political and socially critical essays, especially during and after the First World War. In these, he addressed nationalism, the cultural crisis in Europe, and the role of intellectuals.

His journalistic style was often experimental, essayistic, and philosophical, which distinguished his texts from ordinary newspaper articles and gave them a more literary character.

He died by suicide on August 30, 1924, in Vienna at the age of only 36.

The reasons for his suicide were probably a combination of psychological and personal problems; Müller likely suffered from severe personal crises and depression. His life was often marked by uncertainty, financial difficulties, and inner conflicts. Added to this were financial difficulties, as he often struggled economically as a writer and journalist. His books sold poorly during his lifetime, and he did not have a stable economic situation. Müller also received little recognition as an author during his lifetime.

Today, Robert Müller is being rediscovered as an important representative of Austrian literary modernism. In addition to his work as a writer, Robert Müller worked intensively as a journalist, essayist, and feature writer. He wrote primarily for Viennese newspapers and magazines, covering cultural, political, and literary topics.

Conclusion

The novel *Tropen* (*Tropics*) by Robert Müller (1887–1924) from 1915 is a somewhat forgotten yet complex example of literary expressionism and activism. This novel is not widely known in English-speaking countries due to a lack of a complete translation, and even in Austria and Germany. A renewed interest in Müller's work has only occurred in the last twenty years. *Tropen* somewhat reflects Müller's inconsistent life, marked by multiple (almost never truly successful) activities, including the founding of various political clubs, the publication of magazines, and involvement in publishing and book trade companies, which ultimately drove him into bankruptcy and ended in his suicide. Müller was politically, journalistically, and publishing-wise active in the social public of Vienna. He ultimately viewed all his undertakings as a co-creation of a "work of art of society and the environment."

The perception of time in *Tropen* (*Tropics*) is characterized by subjectification, stretching, fragmentation, and the dissolution of boundaries. Chronological linearity is suspended in favor of a psychologically grounded experiential time. The tropical space functions as a temporal alterity in which the European order of time loses its validity. Therefore, individual experienced time no longer appears as an objective framework but is rather a precarious construction of consciousness. By undermining chronological stability, the novel exposes the fragility of modern concepts of identity [14].

Thus, the shaping of time proves to be not merely a stylistic device but a central structural principle of the novel: it articulates the crisis of the modern subject and clearly locates the text within the aesthetic context of literary modernism [15].

In summary, Robert Müller's *Tropen* is not a classic adventure novel but a multi-layered work that links external action and internal reflection. It combines elements of expedition narrative, psychology, and philosophical reflection, questioning imperialist myths as well as conventional models of identity. The fascinating and disturbing effects of the tropical environment on psychopathological behavior, including individual perceptions of time, are compelling and warrant a broader reading audience, particularly in non-German-speaking countries.

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