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Döblin's Epic: Sense, Document, and the Verbal World Picture

Devin Fore

I long for the critic of language who would be young and strong enough to sweep, in a great reformation of language, the abstract substantives out of language with an iron broom.

—Fritz Mauthner

The Contingency of the Senses

When Rudolf Leonhard invited Alfred Döblin to contribute the inaugural volume of a new reportage series, *Outsiders of Society*, Döblin agreed to write an account of one of the most sensational homicides of recent Berlin history, the poisoning of the cabinetmaker Karl Link at the hands of his abused wife, Elli, and her lover, Margarethe Bende. The case was replete with all of the fantastic elements of a stranger-than-life story—a domestic melodrama, a homosexual affair, a murderous intrigue, and a courtroom spectacle—that had earlier made the trial of the two women a gigantic media event in March 1923 and that seemed to guarantee the commercial success of this first installment of *Die Schmiede's* new “Pitaval” crime series.

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Döblin found no shortage of source material for the resulting book, *Two Friends and Their Poisoning*. In addition to the testimonies of twenty-one witnesses during the trial, there were the expert opinions of “a little flock of schooled men,” enlightened scientists and psychiatrists brought in to collect and anatomize the dreams that Elli had while in prison, to scrutinize the motivations and mental dispositions of the two outsiders, and ultimately to determine, through state-of-the-art scientific instrumentation, whether one of the lovers or Link himself bore the burden of guilt for his death. The problem, however, was that the distinctions between victim and aggressor were so inscrutable in this case that guilt could not be ascertained with any certainty. Perhaps all of the characters in this story, including the deceased, were guilty. Or none of them. “One was hardly in the realm of ‘innocent’ or ‘guilty’ anymore.”¹

The most remarkable documentary source that Döblin used in his investigation was the six hundred letters that Elli and Grethe exchanged in the five months that preceded and followed the poisoning. A correspondence that had begun modestly soon became an “instrument of autointoxication,” Döblin noted: “At first they didn’t write to each other much. And then they discovered the stimulations of writing” (*TF*, 20–21). Even on the days when they saw each other, Elli and Grethe traded an average of four letters per day, apparently so preferring epistolary exchange to less sublimated forms of intercourse that they regularly met in the street silently to exchange letters filled with hyperbolic confessions of love and declarations of eternal solidarity. “The letters displayed a writing compulsion in its purest form,” testified one expert. They were “evidence of a passionate love for one another that grew morbid” and showed “an emphatically pathological nature” (*TF*, 66). What became clear, as this expert explained, was that the letters themselves were implicated in the crime; they were not simply its evidence but part of its very cause. The same specialist’s subsequent description of the letters as a sexual fetish that Elli and Grethe preferred to an actual encounter with the paramour’s body suggested that their “asocial” perversion was not lesbianism but graphomania.

Fascinated by the vast textual corpus produced by his protagonists, Döblin assumed the dual role of psychiatrist and literary critic. It was a role for which the physician and author was uniquely suited. He situated the letters at the core of *Two Friends* and liberally integrated excerpts from them into his clinical narrative as if they were pieces of dramatic dialogue. Döblin’s faith in

1. Alfred Döblin, *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (Patmos: Artemis und Winkler, 2001), 71. Hereafter cited as *TF*.

the veridicality of his reportage faltered, however, as the case of Link and Bende undermined the foundations on which objective reportage was based: if reportage, like journalism, is a genre that presumes the event to be anterior to language, in the case of Link and Bende the event came second. The murder was conceived in—and thus made possible by—an epistolary romance that had literary contours long before Elli began to slip rat poison into her husband's meals. And so the women's letters did not simply reflect the act or depict it mimetically; they were not evidence of the murder. The cause of the murder, one expert suggested, was a "condition much like intoxication," the "sweet fever" of a writing compulsion (*TF*, 39, 22)—*Empfindsamkeit* redux—that had intensified to the point that Elli and Grethe could no longer distinguish their phantasmic projections from their extratextual, "real" lives.

How could the seasoned author Döblin help but be intrigued by this romantic dementia, this folie à deux that had so destabilized the boundary between literature and fact? Caught in a feedback loop between a crime that was itself conceived in and as a literary act, on the one hand, and its representation in his own reportage, on the other, Döblin began to question the capacity of realist literature to depict actual events. And so, to the reportage that he had composed using the conventional means of literary realism, Döblin appended an essay that undermined the very technique of reflectionist representation. His resigned epilogue to *Two Friends* registered his doubts about the faithfulness and adequacy of the story:

If I survey the totality, it is just like a story: "Along came a wind and blew the tree over." I don't know what kind of wind it was or where it came from. The totality is a tapestry made of many individual pieces. . . . At places, the parts aren't close to one another. . . . But everything is nonetheless seamless and bears the stamp of truth. It has been cast through our forms of thought and feeling. That is the way it happened—and even the actors believe it. But it also did not happen that way. (*TF*, 79)

As is apparent here, Döblin sensed that literature's (and, one could also surmise, his own) foundering capacity to compose a logical and self-consistent totality was the consequence of a failure to provide a convincingly causal account. No causality ("along came a wind and blew the tree over"), no totality. This suggested to Döblin the obsolescence of transitive concatenation as the method or device that would ground the mimetic practices of literary realism: "We know nothing about mental continuity, causality, about the stuff of the soul and its nodes. You have to systematically fail to explain [the facts]. The principle of causality always fakes something" (*TF*, 80). This was

one reason that Döblin was so incapable of determining the guilty party, for how is it possible to ascertain guilt in the absence of causality and of the very distinction between agent and object, aggressor and victim? *Two Friends* raised the question whether it was even possible to transmit information about the world accurately through stories—whether, in other words, narrative was still an adequate technology for communication, given the qualitative changes in the conditions of experience that seemed to have eliminated the very causality on which narrativity was founded.² It was the same preoccupation with the communicability of experience that motivated Walter Benjamin's famous 1936 essay on Nikolai Leskov, "The Storyteller."

In addition to his critique of narrative concatenation, there was a second polemic in Döblin's epilogue, another target among the formal conventions of the psychological novel: the text's lexical register. Döblin not only disavowed the deep syntagmatic structures of causal plot but also, deploying the familiar rhetorical moves of *Sprachkritik*, argued that the novel's rationalist vocabulary itself failed to produce a veridical image of the (vastly overdetermined) interior psychic processes of Elli and Grethe. The words themselves were too abstract, too blunted, too imprecise:

Stupid summary words used to describe internal processes: attraction, repulsion, repugnance, love, vengeance—a mishmash, a jumbled mass designed for elementary, practical comprehension. Here we have put labels on bottles without having first tested their contents. . . . The pat word "attraction" does not denote a bundle of facts, but instead causes them to be overlooked. This is because the danger with such words is always that we think that they provide knowledge, and they thereby obstruct access to the facts. No chemist would work with such impure substances. (*TF*, 79–80)

In this passage Döblin continues the resigned tone of an epilogue that declared it impossible to deliver an accurate and objective account of the

2. Döblin's concern here reflects a certain conviction, so prevalent among his contemporaries, that the traditional devices of the psychological novel were no longer commensurate with the conditions of modern experience. It was uncertain if the novel still had anything to say about reality. As is well known, the disjuncture between the methods of narrative composition and documentary techniques emerged as a major fault line in the aesthetic debates of the 1920s and polarized artistic groups into two camps: (1) the champions of nineteenth-century critical realism, such as Georg Lukács, who would insist on the formal irreconcilability between the fragmentary, episodic structure of reportage and the causally motivated totality of the plotted novel; (2) authors such as Döblin and the Soviet factographer Sergei Tret'iakov, who would canalize this "crisis of the novel" (Benjamin's phrase) into the montage practices of the experimental documentary text. See Georg Lukács, "Reportage or Portrayal?" in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

events. As a piece of reportage, *Two Friends* was, by Döblin's own estimation, a failure, not only because plot and reality never correspond but also because the text's vocabulary—that class of “stupid summary words”—obscures and even eclipses the events. Because those words “obstruct access to the facts,” reality is “not denote[d]” but “overlooked.” At the end of *Two Friends*, then, the prospects for literary realism as a gnosiological method, as a means of knowing the world and of transmitting this knowledge, remain bleak, for the epilogue makes it abundantly evident that, with respect to both their syntactic and their lexical resources, the discourses available to the author simply do not correspond to the facts.

This epistemological quandary is my main subject here. *Two Friends* provided an apposite point of departure for my inquiry because it is in this text that Döblin first explored and articulated the fraught relationship between writing and experience within—and beyond—the artistic practices and protocols of realist reportage. It was a trajectory that, I argue, ultimately led Döblin to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The latter work engaged with the same concerns around documentarity and authenticity in literature that had pre-occupied Döblin in *Two Friends*, but his 1929 modernist opus no longer attempted a reconciliation with the legacies of nineteenth-century realism and its contemporary scion, objectivist reportage. Instead, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* suggested an unprecedented solution to the challenge of documentarity in literature. Past the structural impasse of his failed reportage *Two Friends*, I read *Berlin Alexanderplatz* not as a piece of fiction, not as “The Story of Franz Biberkopf,” but as an innovative documentary that collapsed the distance between artistic work and extratextual experience. If a correspondence between language and reality was still foreclosed in *Two Friends*, if aesthetic realism still appeared to Döblin in 1924 to be but the sum of so many specious reality effects, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* undoes this postlapsarian condition by transforming language from a specular medium into a productive force that actively constitutes the parameters of lived, embodied experience. These two texts thus constitute dramatically different responses to the same documentary impulse: one reflectionist and dualist, the other productivist and monist.

To account, at least partly, for the differences between the two texts, I borrow certain theories and concepts from Fritz Mauthner, a philosopher of language who was of inestimable significance for Döblin, and coordinate them with readings of several works produced by Döblin between 1924 and 1929 (specifically, his reflections on the relationship between language and experience, his theoretical and practical attempts to bridge the gap between

literature and the natural sciences, but, above all, the alternate versions of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that did not appear in the definitive 1929 Fischer edition).³ Döblin's *epic* practice, I argue, resulted from his encounter with Mauthner's writings. As is well known, Mauthner was an avid reader of and commentator on ancient thought, and many aspects of his own philosophical production engage certain pre-Socratic and pre-Aristotelian conceptions of language and representation that are resonant with an epic poetics. In my account, Mauthner thereby provides both a theoretically logical and a historically plausible point of mediation between Döblin and ancient modes of aesthetic production. Considering Mauthner's influence on Döblin will permit us to specify what so often remain glib and summary invocations of the "rebirth of epic poetics" in the 1920s and to understand how Döblin's own epic practice in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* reconceived the relationship between literary fiction and the body as a ground for experience.

As I have already indicated, in the epilogue to *Two Friends* Döblin began to express skepticism toward both the objectivist forensics used in the courtroom to reconstruct events as well as those literary devices, inherited from the realist novel, that he himself had used to compose *Two Friends*. One striking aspect of this critique is the theory of perception that he proposed in the epilogue and that anticipated its poetologically more systematic elaboration in "The Spirit of the Naturalistic Age," written later that year. In the epilogue to *Two Friends*, he coordinated a theory of literary mimesis with a biological account of perception, suggesting that reportage qua reflectionist literary depiction necessarily fails because there are entire realms of experience—some of them within the very perimeters of our bodies—for which *Homo sapiens* has neither sense organ nor cognitive scheme. Humans are doomed to register only the secondary effects of invisible forces without any understanding of their origins:

You can cut into certain human organs without our noticing; these organs lack sensation. Giant tumors grow inside people without any notice taken of them. A child can be cranky because he didn't get a full night's sleep, but he justifies his mood by claiming that another child hit him. Similarly, invisible projectiles from without can strike us and alter us, but we notice only the change, not the actual cause, the origin of the effect, the projectile; everything then proceeds causally inside us. (*TF*, 82)

3. My reading relies on a new edition, *Berlin Alexanderplatz. Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf. Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Werner Stauffacher (Munich: DTV, 2001), that includes previously unavailable drafts and manuscript versions of the text. Hereafter cited as *BA*.

Because the human nervous system is organized in one configuration, because our senses are oriented toward a limited spectrum of perceptual phenomena, Döblin explained, entire worlds of experience, filtered out by these senses, remain beyond the ambit of consciousness. These perceptual blind spots, in turn, raise the question of the adequacy of literary depiction, for how could one ever expect the author to depict events below the very threshold of perceptibility?

Whereas the epilogue to *Two Friends* dwells on the lack of those sensory organs that would be necessary to provide an accurate mental picture of external reality, “The Spirit of the Naturalistic Age” gives a more optimistic assessment of the human’s evolutionary capacity to develop those absent organs. “One notes,” he wrote there, that “some cultures cultivate certain organ systems to the exclusion of others, . . . develop certain parts of the brain while neglecting others. . . . This is one of the bridges between natural science and history. . . . In the new epoch, different organ systems and parts of the brain will be used physiologically. The weary old parts get a rest. Muscles, eyes, ears, and their neuropsychic projections now take their place in the foreground.”⁴ Senses and organs, he explained, are not ontologically or biologically given but are instead organized and precipitated in and through culturally and historically specific contexts. Already in the epilogue to *Two Friends*, Döblin had implied new mediations between the individual and the collectivity. Indeed, this was why human experience and sensation can never be absolutely singular, private, or individual: feelings—understood to be both subjective emotions and embodied sensations—are not “a private matter” (*Privatsache*) (*TF*, 81), because the very apparatus with which the human organism processes experience is always already a collective and social articulation. It is an account that reflects the popular theories of the Hegelian philosopher of technology Ernst Kapp (1808–96), who conceived of technology as a form of “organ projection” in his 1877 *Foundations for a Philosophy of Technology*. Much like Kapp, Döblin argued that humans devise (or “project”) technological organs to redress their ontological lacks, to perfect their flawed organism, and, ultimately, to consummate the evolution of the species. It is in technology that culture becomes biology, that history becomes natural science. For Döblin, in other words, the human is constitutionally a cyborg that cannot be ontologically distinguished from its artificial prostheses, those “organ systems” that it develops in technology.

4. Alfred Döblin, “Der Geist der naturalistischen Zeitalter,” in *Schriften zu Leben und Werk*, ed. Erich Kleinschmidt (Olten: Walter, 1986), 172–73. Hereafter cited as “Spirit.”

Far more influential for Döblin's "Spirit of the Naturalistic Age" than Kapp's writings were those of Mauthner, who conceptualized Logos as a physical organ, as a material apparatus. Although there has been virtually no sustained theoretical treatment of the connection between Mauthner and Döblin (when Mauthner is mentioned in connection with Döblin, the reference is almost always merely anecdotal),⁵ and although Mauthner is typically invoked only in association with the modernist authors of the Viennese *Sprachkrise*, such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rainer Maria Rilke, he is crucial for understanding Döblin's conceptualization of the relationship between somatic experience and abstract thought—a relationship that is a central theoretical preoccupation of documentary work.⁶

In his *Contributions to a Critique of Language* as well as his three-volume *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Mauthner proposed that the various configurations of the human sensorium are by nature conditional. Senses, he suggested, are inherently contingent: they are *Zufallssinne*. Taking as his point of departure a fragment written by Lessing a year before his death, "On the Possible Existence of More Than Five Human Senses," Mauthner reasoned that there was nothing fanciful in Lessing's speculations about an infinite number of conceivable if unrealized senses (Lessing proposed two in this fragment: magnetic senses and electrical senses).⁷ It was evolutionarily pos-

5. One exception is Birgit Hoock, *Modernität als Paradox: Der Begriff der "Moderne" und seine Anwendung auf das Werk Alfred Döblins (bis 1933)* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997). Hoock's analysis of Mauthner's writings, however, does little to distinguish his thought from that of Friedrich Nietzsche.

6. Döblin sent the first literary work he ever wrote, *Jagende Rosse*, to Mauthner. Unfortunately, the work was subsequently lost because the diffident Döblin mailed his only copy to Mauthner under a pseudonym; when Mauthner returned the text, Döblin was not able to provide the proper identification at the post office, and so the work remained impounded there. See Döblin's account in "The First Look Back." Döblin's enthusiasm for Mauthner's writings continued unabated into his adult life. In addition to owning several of Mauthner's novels, Döblin claimed to also have all of Mauthner's major theoretical texts: *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (1901–2); the introduction to *Spinoza* (1906); *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (1910); and *Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendland* (1920–23). In several letters to Mauthner, Döblin proclaimed his affinity for and debt to Mauthner's work. See the letters to Mauthner written on October 24, 1903; July 5, 1922; and September 28, 1922, all rpt. in Alfred Döblin, *Briefe*, ed. Helmut Pfanner (Düsseldorf: Walter, 2001).

7. The Viennese architect and critic Adolf Loos made similar claims in his famous diatribe, *Ornament and Crime*: "Even today physicists can point to colors in the solar spectrum which have been given a name, but which it will be left to future generations to discern" (*Ornament and Crime*, ed. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell [Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1998], 167). The position expressed by Lessing, Mauthner, and Loos would seem to be corroborated by recent scientific research that proposes that we have as many as seventeen senses. See Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle, *Deciphering the Senses* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

sible for organisms to develop new senses, in other words, that corresponded with new registers of experience and phenomena. For Mauthner, sensory configurations are therefore in no way ontologically fixed but are instead historically and culturally conditioned, always already structured by orders of contingency, or *Zufall*. Viewing subjectivity as an essentially subtractive function, Mauthner posited the existence of three orders of contingency that function as filters to limit the channels of sensory data and thereby reduce the complexity of the environmental conditions for the perceiving organism. As a result, Mauthner argued that consciousness and perceptual objectivity were inversely correlated: the more complex a life form, the more elaborated and rigorous the systems it deploys to limit and organize sensory data and, ultimately, the more completely removed it is from the unmediated perception of pure sensations. The claim that the amoeba perceives everything while the human perceives infinitely less could be formulated more axiomatically: Knowledge precludes Being. It turns out, then, that “the world picture of the amoeba is more objective than that of the human; the amoeba’s orientation within the vibrations of the world will be closer to reality.”⁸ Amoebic perception comes closer to the documentary ideal of objectivity than that of the overly cephalized human.

First among the three registers of sensory contingency was the order of physical and material contingency, what we commonly understand as the limitations that the biological sensory organs place on sensory data. A limited spectrum of light waves is channeled through optical sensory receptors, for example. Second comes an order of contingency organized by the organism’s evolutionary needs and interests: it is a utilitarian register of contingency that, oriented by protocols of conditioned attention, guarantees that the senses transmit only what is useful and expedient to the organism. Mauthner’s theorization of the second order of contingency resonated with the philosophical constructivism of the communist pedagogical theorist Edwin Hoernle, who argued that even ostensibly spontaneous and unmediated sensory perception is subordinated to structures of social organization and to the particular historical configuration of the forces of production. For Hoernle, the eye was always “subject to constant changes. In principle, these changes always followed those enormous revolutions in human society produced by advances in technology, in the forces of production and in the relations of production.”⁹

8. Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, vol. 1 (Vienna: Böhlau, 1997), 438. Hereafter cited as *Critique*.

9. Edwin Hoernle, “Der Mensch vor deinem Auge,” *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, no. 11 (1930): 27.

The final order of sensory contingency, and the one most significant for my analysis of Döblin, was a specifically human register of contingency, that of language and reason. Following Ernst Mach, Mauthner had argued not only that the most abstract articulations of logical thought emerge from ontogenetically more primary somatic experiences but also that language and reason, the third order of contingency, themselves structure sensation in turn.¹⁰ Sensory data are inflected by language, and vice versa. Mauthner's view of the human as an incomplete, neotenic organism that goes through numerous births throughout its lifetime—births into social organizations, into material and cognitive technologies, into language and communication systems—recurs in the more recent theoretical writings of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, who have suggested that language is arbitrary and conventional even as it is embodied and sensorimotor: "Developed out of haptic senses, out of libidinal hands, out of fingertips, the capacities for labor and language are not produced by the capacities for abstraction and inference, but are instead realized in the subject through the principle of concretion and are mimetically present in its pores."¹¹ Because it is through technologies like cognition and language that our species constructs, as Döblin suggested, the bridge between culture and physiology, between history and natural science, language must be understood as a sense organ that is as vital and inalienable to the organism as the eye or the ear. It is a fact of human anatomy.

The work of Döblin's that most evidences the influence of Mauthner's theory of contingent senses is his neo-Spinozist natural-philosophical text from 1927, *The Ego above Nature*, in which he extended Mauthner's Machist assault on the dualist worldview that opposes fact and empirical sensation to thought and language. Moreover, it is a work, as Döblin suggested in 1932, that contained the key to understanding *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.¹² In this

10. "The development of reason results from the development of our senses. In general, reason is only an abstraction for the complexity of our sensory impressions: there is nothing within our reason that does not already exist in the senses, senses that are in a state of developing. And it is the work of the reality that surrounds to develop these senses. Senses are contingent senses" (Mauthner, *Critique*, 332–33).

11. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 159.

12. Alfred Döblin, *Das Ich über der Natur* (Berlin: Fischer, 1928). Hereafter cited as *Ego*. In 1932 Döblin wrote that the texts *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and *The Ego above Nature* present two different approaches to the same subject. The former, he wrote, attempts a literary reformulation of the latter's theoretical disquisition into the epistemological status of experience ("Mein Buch *Berlin Alexanderplatz*," *Der Lesezirkel* 19, no. 5 [1932], in *Materialien zu Alfred Döblin, Berlin Alexanderplatz*, ed. Matthias Prangel [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975], 42).

syncretic text, equally indebted to Aleksandr Bogdanov's "Universal Organizational Science" (Bogdanov's proto-systems-theoretical *Tektologiia* was translated into German in 1922) and to Jakob von Uexküll's treatise on bio-semiotics, *Theoretical Biology* (1920), Döblin asserted the inextricability of physical and cognitive phenomena by arguing that both are organized by and subordinated to common morphological patterns of experience. Because the senses are ambiguously disposed on the threshold between the interior of the subject's mind and the phenomenal world in such a way that their locations cannot be empirically established or hypostatized (*Ego*, 57), Döblin reasoned that the senses must consequently be regarded as mobile functions within the entire nervous system, as labile nodes in the expanded circuitry of the organism that includes the brain: "The eye alone is not capable of sight: it is necessary for vision, but there also have to be nerve fibers that run from the retina to the interior of the body; there also has to be a brain attached; and the brain must lie enclosed in a living person. And then sight becomes possible" (*Ego*, 115). Since perception is possible only with and through the brain, Döblin concluded that the neural network of the entire body is necessary to think and perceive: "The eyes and ears are organs of thought [*Denkorgane*], along with the muscles, innards, their feelings, desires" (*Ego*, 88).

The ideal of a correspondence between language and experience expounded in *The Ego above Nature* stood in direct contrast to the baleful situation described by Döblin in his epilogue to *Two Friends*. While the unfortunate author of the 1924 reportage could not find a category of words that corresponded to phenomena ("stupid summary words . . . obstruct access to the facts"), Döblin explained in "The Spirit of the Naturalistic Age" that this dualist condition was not an irreversible ontological curse but was instead merely the historical consequence of a realist language perpetuated by "theological literature." If the reflectionist aesthetics that underwrite the conventions of mimetic realism are only the secularized, Enlightenment version of an outmoded metaphysical *weltanschauung*, if "art and literature are the actual residence of the old spirituality" ("Spirit," 185), then, according to Döblin, it is incumbent on the author to develop new literary techniques that reintegrate cognition with embodied experience. "The Spirit of the Naturalistic Age" concludes with a call for a revolution in language and an assault on the traditions of "theological" realism under the banner of "antinaturalism."

Döblin's struggles with the epistemological problem of reportage, a literary discourse that claimed to reflect accurately and objectively an extratextual reality, led him to theorize a new literary practice conceived not as the veridical depiction of an event but as itself constitutive of the event. For him,

language and cognition, Mauthner's third order of contingency, could not be anterior to sensation if they in fact played an active role in structuring and conditioning empirical data. This epic, "antinaturalistic" literary practice that would reconnect—but not ancillate—language to experience is the desideratum to which *Berlin Alexanderplatz* would respond.

Turning at last to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, I would like to consider two aspects of the new textual practice that Döblin explored between 1927 and 1929. First, my analysis details Döblin's efforts in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* to produce an embodied writing, a logical discourse commensurate with the body. These documentary efforts, which elaborate on Mauthner's theory of sensory contingency, lead directly to a new, epic mode of production that strives to overcome the aporia of a reflectionist-dualist literature. My study then shifts back to the two aspects of Döblin's critique of objectivist reportage discussed earlier—the abatement of the causal framework of the narrative ("The principle of causality always fakes something") and the concomitant slackening and deformation of the psychological contours of the character-actant (a skepticism toward the "stupid summary words . . . used to describe internal processes")—to demonstrate how *Berlin Alexanderplatz* overturns the metaphysics of a "theological" literature by replacing the static, ontological values of the language of realism with dynamic, morphological ones.

The Documentarity of the Epic

It is telling that the composition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* coincided with Döblin's work on an autobiography, the now-forgotten "First Look Back," which he wrote to mark his fiftieth birthday in 1928 and which was published in *Alfred Döblin: In the Book—at Home—in the Street*. Döblin began to write the two texts in October 1927. The similarity of their openings attests to that shared moment of inception. The first words of "The First Look Back"—"It's midday. I'm sitting in a little Café on Alexanderplatz, and it occurs to me that I have been sitting in this area—here in East Berlin—for forty years, since I first came to Berlin"¹³—recall those of an early draft of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*:

In this book, I will lead you—you, who now take this book in your hand—into a city that most of you know, into Berlin and into an area familiar to most of you, to Alexanderplatz. This place is not the same place that it was

13. Alfred Döblin, "Erster Rückblick," in *Schriften*, 108. Hereafter cited as "First Look."

yesterday. One reads about great transformations . . . and when we walk across Alexanderplatz now, in 1929, we see that subway construction dominates the scene. It has burrowed under the ground, you can see floors deep below you, and we will go down into it, tentatively, on wooden planks, between timber fences, over staircases. . . . I hold the midday paper in my hand: cannibalism in a frozen Finnish bay. Three smugglers of alcohol confess to half devouring their fourth comrade. (*BA*, 819)

While both texts open with the emphatic presence of Döblin himself, an observer of the public life at Alexanderplatz, their trajectories rapidly diverge: whereas “The First Look Back” became an occasion for Döblin’s highly psychoanalytic reflections (their withdrawn and retrospective mood is already evident from the second sentence quoted above), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* eschewed this inwardly oriented anamnestic agenda and turned instead to the world surrounding Döblin at the moment that he was writing, to the subway construction, to the newspaper headline. Indeed, the radical dissimilarity of the two texts would seem only to further underscore their interdependency as two aspects of a single autobiographical project. The two works comprised complementary facets, one intensional and one extensional, of a shared impulse toward self-documentation. “First Look” was the traditional memoir of Döblin’s *Bildung*, while *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was his scrapbook, a diary conceived as a dynamic textual construction site.¹⁴ Or to formulate the division of labor between the two texts even more simply: “First Look” depicted Döblin’s past and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* his present.

The hæcceity of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* explains the striking fact that Döblin introduced as its protagonist a character with no past or psychic interiority. Unlike “First Look,” it is a text with an absolute minimum of analeptic elements, but one that nevertheless has an unmistakably personal inflection. At times Döblin assumes the celebrated tone of a singer of street ballads

14. It should become apparent during my analysis that, if I describe *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as an “autobiographical” text, I do not use the generic designation in its traditional sense. It should in no way be regarded as the product of inwardly oriented retrospection; instead, it represents a new public experimental genre of self-documentation that rose to prominence in the 1920s. While it has little in common with the memoir—those reflections were channeled into “First Look”—*Berlin Alexanderplatz* anticipates what Siegfried Kracauer described in his 1932 article “On the Production of Youth” to be a new, specifically *documentary* phenomenon: texts composed in the immediacy of the present. On the explosion of autobiographical production in the 1920s see Peter Sloterdijk, *Literatur und Organisation von Lebenserfahrung: Autobiografien der Zwanziger Jahre* (Munich: Hanser, 1978).

(the *Bänkelsänger* or the *Moritatenerzähler*);¹⁵ at others, that of a tour guide or a flâneur:

Who am I, you know, I am Alfred Döblin
 someone who this year in Berlin [?]
 nothing in particular
 perhaps more sensitive, perhaps
 Listen to me, Come, I'll walk beside you, this street.
 (BA, 823)

Although this fragment, like many other such traces of authorial facture, was eventually edited out of the final version of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, its author's emphatic presence persisted everywhere in the book. Many contemporary reviewers of the text consequently regarded it as a kind of autobiography, or even a "homecoming" for Döblin after his errant travels through the remote historical past of *Wallenstein*, after the sci-fi dystopia of *Mountains, Seas, and Giants*, and after the metaphysics of *Manas*.¹⁶ As is regularly pointed out in secondary literature on *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, much of the text's montage material was taken directly from Döblin's own life: he borrowed, for example, a case history written by one of his patients and integrated it into the book nearly without any modifications; statistics about the city, current news items, lyrics from songs, the final letter of a suicide, as well as his own notes from his work at the mental asylum Buch, were similarly incorporated *tel quel* into the text. The consequence of this diaristic montage, one contemporary critic noted, is that Döblin assumed a position as an active presence within the text alongside that of his characters and thereby overturned the pseudo-objectivism of the realist novel:

The narrator must return to himself. For a hundred years he has been taught to discover himself dialectically in the hero, to concentrate all of his energy intellectually in the hero to *develop him into a full figure*. It doesn't work this way anymore. But it's still coursing through his veins. . . . I have to be

15. See the discussion of the *Moritatenerzähler* in Harald Jähner, *Erzähler, montierter, soufflierter Text: Zur Konstruktion des Romans Berlin Alexanderplatz von Alfred Döblin* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1984). See also Drago Grah's discussion of Döblin as a *Bänkelsänger* in "Bänkelsängerische Elemente in Döblins *Berlin Alexanderplatz*," *Acta Neophilologica*, no. 5 (1972): 45–59.

16. "Alfred Döblin, no longer a nobody, now a member of the Academy, who celebrated his fiftieth birthday a year ago—now tries a second time to show us Berlin, to describe, to conquer, to overwhelm. . . . This time Döblin returns from the past, the future, and myth back home into his city, Berlin" (Axel Eggebrecht, "Alfred Döblins neuer Roman," *Die literarische Welt*, November 8, 1929, in Prangel, *Materialien*, 63).

myself completely, so that you stay who you are completely, Franz Biberkopf! . . . With Flaubert, Balzac, and Dostoevsky, the *I* of the author is present dialectically in the *He* of the hero. . . . With Döblin, the *I* of the author is a proper and complete *I* alongside the *He* of the hero.¹⁷

The reinstatement of the author-narrator at the center of literary production is reflected in Döblin's turn toward those epic narrative techniques that were programmatically expounded in the essay "The Construction of the Epic Work": "The epic doesn't narrate something from the past, but instead represents."¹⁸ It punctures the containment of the historical preterit with the vividness and immediacy of the present. In an analysis whose terms could readily be applied to Döblin's epic work, the Russian formalist Boris Eikhenbaum noted in a 1925 essay on the storyteller Nikolai Leskov that modern ornamental prose marked a shift away from the "scenic narration" of the nineteenth-century psychological novel, in which the actions of characters are phantasmically imagined by the reader, and toward an "actual narration" in which the gestic-mimic body of the author is theatricalized and becomes a physiologically present figure that is inscribed in the text.¹⁹ By moving the focus of the text away from the mimetic narration of the past ("showing") and toward the mimic vocal presence of the commenting author ("telling"), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* similarly foregrounded the narrator's experiential body.

This valorization of the author's body marked a complete reversal of Döblin's previous call for the "depersonation" of the text in the "Berliner Programm," a manifesto that fifteen years earlier had championed the eradication of all traces of the author from the literary artifact:

I myself will admit that I was once an unreserved enthusiast for the report, for the dogma of an iron barrier. Nothing seemed more important to me than the so-called objectivity of the narrator. . . . But you cannot maintain this position for an entire lifetime. One day you discover something besides the Rhone, the valleys, and the tributaries: you discover yourself. My own self: that is the wildest and most bewildering experience that the epic poet can have. . . . Is the author allowed to speak in the epic work? Is he allowed to leap into this world? Answer: yes, he may and should and must. . . . *The*

17. Willy Haas, "Bemerkungen zu Alfred Döblins Roman *Berlin Alexanderplatz*," *Die neue Rundschau* 40 (1929), in Prangel, *Materialien*, 81.

18. Alfred Döblin, "Der Bau des epischen Werks," in *Schriften*, 223. Hereafter cited as "Epic."

19. See Boris Eikhenbaum, "Leskov and Contemporary Prose," trans. Martin P. Rice, *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, no. 11 (1975): 211–23. Numerous similarities between Walter Benjamin's studies of Leskov and Döblin (in "The Storyteller" and "The Crisis of the Novel," respectively) would confirm the affinity between the two authors.

real poet was always himself a fact. The poet has to show and to prove that he is a fact and a piece of reality, that he is still as good and factual as the invention of binoculars or the Kerr cell. . . . Being a fact oneself and making room for oneself in one's works—that is what makes a good author. ("Epic," 226–28)

With *Berlin Alexanderplatz* he turned his attention to the world of experience that was directly at hand, to his own native East Berlin:

How puzzling: there I was, having spent my entire life in Berlin's East, having gone to school in Berlin, an active socialist with a public medical practice—and I wrote about China, about the Thirty Years War and Wallenstein, and most recently even about a mythical and mystical India. I was plagued. *I didn't turn my back on Berlin intentionally, it just happened that way, it was easier to narrate that way [es ließ sich so besser fabulieren].* Well then, I could also do it differently. One can write about Berlin without imitating Zola. And what I then went on to do next, after the Indian *Manas*, was *Manas* in the language of Berlin.²⁰

As these words from 1955 suggest, prior to writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin believed that turning his back on the immediacy of his environment and experience was a formal concession made to the exigencies of the plotted literary devices that he employed. *It was easier to narrate that way.* But if narration had once been possible only at the cost of proximity to the event, this requisite distance came increasingly in the late 1920s to look like hermeticism. "Too many people write while sitting at a desk," Oskar Maria Graf had complained in 1920 about contemporary literature.²¹ As the author's isolation ("Now the author sits in his parlour" ["Epic," 116]) and the novel's sedentary imperative ("One can only think and write whilst sitting down," Flaubert stated)²² grew increasingly intolerable to Döblin, he pushed his literary production toward a new kinetic mode of writing that collapsed the distinction between his own life and the text's projections. "I've been able to observe this breed of people at the most varying of times and in the most varying of situations—to observe them in the one manner that is truthful, namely, by living, acting and suffering with them."²³

20. Alfred Döblin, "Nachwort zu einem Neudruck," in Prangel, *Materialien*, 46. Italics added.

21. Oskar Maria Graf, "Gegen den Dichter von heute," *Die Bücherkiste* 2, nos. 5–6 (1920): 33.

22. Quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 29.

23. Döblin, "Mein Buch *Berlin Alexanderplatz*," 43.

Döblin's references to Homer and to the tradition of ancient oral poetry in "The Construction of the Epic Work" illuminate several aspects of the epic poetics that motivated *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. First, Döblin observed that the prehistorical Homer knew none of the discursive distinctions between myth and fact, storytelling and historiography, around which modern thought is organized ("Epic," 220). Such a reconciliation between scientific and literary-aesthetic discourse, emblematically staged at the end of the text's second book by juxtaposing Newton's second law of motion with the Furies of the *Oresteia*, was particularly appealing to the "Doctor and Poet" Döblin, who had, he declared, "Two Souls in One Breast":²⁴ that of the rationalist and that of the mythographer. In thus redefining the author's *métier*, epic poetry made available a vantage point from which the distinction between fictionality and objectivity ceased to obtain.

Second, Homer was a cipher for the new presentism in Döblin's epic work. Döblin invoked the bard in "The Construction of the Epic Work" as a representative of a model of authorial production that emphasizes the text's gestural and indexical moments. More recent scholarship has confirmed this association between ancient oral epic and deictic *hæcceity*. In his study of the historical transition from oral noetic economies to literary ones, Walter J. Ong notes that the autonomization of language in a writerly practice realizes a "discourse [that] has been detached from its author," while epic narration dissolves the boundaries between autobiography and literary representation. In the ancient oral epic, the identification between the author and the character can be so strong, in fact, that it "actually affects the grammar of the narration, so that on occasion the narrator slips into the first person when describing the actions of the hero."²⁵ (This slippage is a marker of Döblin's signature *erlebte Rede*.) If the written book, as Döblin suggested, is "the death of real language" ("Epic," 245), then the epic poetry of the 1920s rediscovered a remedy for this morbid condition of language in a model of literary practice that fused production and reception together at the scene of the text's performance and that thereby bound the author, narrator, audience, and character together as "part of a real, existential present."²⁶ This auto-affective plenitude of the epic mode, explicated most

24. These two phrases—"Arzt und Dichter" and "Zwei Seelen in einer Brust"—are titles of short autobiographical sketches published by Döblin on October 28, 1927, and April 8, 1928.

25. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 78. Earlier in the book Ong explains that "writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up the conditions for 'objectivity' in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing" (46).

26. *Ibid.*, 101.

compellingly in Paul Zumthor's phenomenological analyses of the "vocal body" of the epic producer, reconnects the body with language, sensation with representation.²⁷ It was the same link between poetry, orality, and the exercise of force that Mauthner noted in the *Dictionary of Philosophy* where he proposed the etymological filiation between *dichten*, *diktieren*, and *Diktator*.²⁸

Related to the previous point is a third function of the epic mode in Döblin's analysis: the indistinguishability of author and audience that is characteristic of epic poetry. This redressal of the gap between the producer and consumer restores "an honest relationship . . . between the author and the listener" and thereby transforms the text into "the collective labor of the author and the public" ("Epic," 219, 228). For Döblin, epic poetry reconfigured the relations of aesthetic production by upending the hierarchy of author-producer and reader-consumer that had underwritten the literary culture of the novel. And here I should add that Döblin did not invoke the epic paradigm of production with the intention of simply restoring a preliterary tradition; his epic poetics was not an aesthetic restoration unreflective of the two and a half millennia of writing that had intervened. To the contrary, his incontrovertibly *modernist* Berlin epic explicitly engaged with the collective written form that was commensurate with the industrial information society in which Döblin lived: the newspaper. Perhaps the narrator of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* should not be conceptualized on analogy with the singer of street ballads but instead with the newspaper reporter. It is indeed noteworthy that the Soviet factographer Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov proclaimed that "our epic literature is the newspaper" in the same year that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* appeared.²⁹ In Germany the same genealogical filiations between ancient

27. Paul Zumthor has argued that the conditions of oral poetry compose a text inseparable from the setting of its performance in the "vocal body" of the author. His absolute model for oral poetry is the theater, an environment in which the body of the action and the representation are fused together, and where text and performance become indistinguishable. The oral text inhabits the space "between the abstraction of language and the spatiality of the body" (*Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, trans. Kathryn Murphy-Judy [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990], 41). Any account of the proclaimed phenomenological plenitude of oral poetry would have to come to terms with Derrida's critique of the metaphysics that inheres to this phonocentric bias. I would argue, however, that Döblin's work is fascinating precisely because it valorizes the pneumatological presence of the author while dissolving the self as the center of being (the transitional and "medial" nature of his authorial ego, as he wrote in "First Look") by infesting the montaged text with endless quotations.

28. See the entry for *Poesie* in Fritz Mauthner, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Leipzig: Meiner, 1923–24), 2:544–66. Hereafter cited as *Dictionary*.

29. Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov, "The New Leo Tolstoy," trans. Kristin Romberg, in *October*, no. 118 (2006): 49.

epic and contemporary journalism were suggested by Döblin's colleague from Gruppe 1925, the "raging reporter" Egon Erwin Kisch, who spoke of a blind itinerant ballad singer, Methodius, as the model for his own work as a journalist.³⁰ As the new incarnation of the epic, the newspaper permeates all textual registers of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*: headlines announce the contents of each book; actual newspaper articles were incorporated into the body of the text, most prevalently in books 1 and 4; three-fifths of the work appeared in newspapers and journals before the Fischer edition was published in October 1929; the idiom of the writing regularly emulates that of advertisements. As the quote above demonstrates, the newspaper constituted the very point of departure for a book that begins with Döblin standing on Alexanderplatz, recounting news items, "midday paper in [his] hand," but, above all, it is the emphatic phenomenal presence of the author in the text that links ancient epic poetry to the journalistic practices of the 1920s.

Discerning an affinity to the newspaper behind the book's epic-grammatical oscillations between the third and first persons, Benjamin explained that the stylistic devices of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* were unrelated to the Joycean *dialogue intérieur* but were instead derived from dada's arsenal of montage techniques. For Benjamin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is, strictly speaking, a documentary text: it is a text based, literally, on documents. To understand *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, it is not necessary, Benjamin wrote, to take recourse to literary analysis, to employ

technical terms, such as *dialogue intérieur*, or refer the reader to James Joyce. In reality, something quite different is at work. The stylistic principle governing this book is that of montage. Petty-bourgeois printed matter, scandalmongering, stories of accidents, the sensational incidents of 1928, folk songs, and advertisements rain down in this text. . . . The material of the montage is anything but arbitrary. Authentic montage is based on the document. In its fanatical struggle with the work of art, Dadaism used montage to turn daily life into its ally. It was the first to proclaim, somewhat uncertainly, the autocracy of the authentic.³¹

As Benjamin observes here, *erlebte Rede* is a specifically documentary device: like the newspaper, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* derives its authority from the

30. Egon Erwin Kisch, "Von den Balladen des blinden Methodius," in *Marktplatz der Sensationen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1997), 8.

31. Walter Benjamin, "The Crisis of the Novel," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 301.

indexical and evidentiary authenticity of the documents that it incorporates. In the same way that “the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book says more than the text,” one might add.³² Benjamin’s commentary to *Berlin Alexanderplatz* furthermore suggests that the association between the documentary mode and an epic-montage practice was not at all accidental but instead highly motivated. That “authentic montage is based on the document” was made abundantly clear in the work of the Soviet factographers in the late 1920s, who insisted that the documentary text, whatever the medium of its substantiation (film, prose, photography, etc.), could be composed only in accordance with the technics of montage.³³ Michel Leiris made the same claim when he characterized his documentary autobiography *Manhood* as a “group of facts and images” that is structured as a “kind of photomontage.”³⁴ There is no such thing as a documentary novel, for the documentary text in performance is an epic one.

Just as the newspaper journalism of the 1920s emphasized the reporter’s physicality and placed a premium on witnessing, presence, and the lived experience (*Erlebnis*),³⁵ epic narration thrusts the narrator’s body into the foreground. It was an embodied discourse that Döblin realized in the highly fugitive and ephemeral process of writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. “I didn’t have any particular material,” he later commented on its writing, “but I was surrounded by the great Berlin, and I knew the individual Berliner, and so I wrote, as always, without a plan, taking off without any direction; I didn’t construct a plot.”³⁶ Evidence from the composition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* indicates that writing the text was for Döblin not unlike directionless *flanieren*. He apparently had no *ur-version*; rather than work with a storyboard, he turned composition of the text over to the contingencies of the physiological

32. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Selected Writings*, 774.

33. Osip Brik, for example, argued in “The Decay of the Plot,” an influential essay on documentary, that a nonplotted factographic literature must be an epic literature. It must be constructed using the principles of montage. For Brik, the documentary text must, in effect, become epic autobiography (“Razlozhenie siuzheta,” in Chuzhak, *Literatura fakta*, 219–21).

34. Michel Leiris, *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 158–59.

35. “No substitutes for *Erleben* can be found through concepts or through the transmission of knowledge: it requires that the observer be physically near the object observed. The reporter must be a participant observer. . . . Whereas traditional truth-claims depend on a distance between the observer and the world—a mode of living which [Leo] Lania despises as ‘second-hand’—the fact that reporters are concerned with lived experience means that there is an emphasis on physicality in their public image” (Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 186).

36. Döblin, “Nachwort zu einem Neudruck,” 46.

process of writing itself.³⁷ A story—“The Story of Franz Biberkopf”—did ultimately emerge as *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was written, but it was an afterthought in the most literal sense. In his response to a survey, “On the Physiology of Poetic Creation,” which he took in September 1928 (in the middle of writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), Döblin expressed reservations about the schematisms of plot structures, claiming not only that they did not facilitate his writing but that they in fact inhibited it. He preferred *écriture automatique* instead: “Everything is written immediately; at those moments when I ‘draft,’ I’ve already spoiled the game for myself.”³⁸ Just as there would be no protensive “design” of the text beforehand, he wrote in the 1928 survey, there would be no corrections made to the text afterward. His kinetic account of the “physiology of poetic creation” recalls the phenomenology of writing that he described in the prologue to *Mountains, Seas, and Giants*: “My hand leads from left to right, back to the end of the column on the left. I feel the pen in my hand; those are nerves, awash with blood. Blood courses through the finger, through all the fingers, through the hand, both hands, the arms, the chest, the entire body.”³⁹

In elaboration of Mauthner’s neo-Spinozist theory of sensory contingency, Döblin developed a variety of strategies in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that assay the threshold between language and sensation. One is his incorporation of icons ambiguously situated on the threshold between spontaneous perception and abstract logic. These cognates of Otto Neurath’s ideogrammatic ISOTYPE language make the semiotic process of communication indistinguishable from the perceptual act of seeing (fig. 1).⁴⁰ As Günther Anders suggested in his brilliant essay “The Desolated Human: On the Lack of World and of Language in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*,” it is precisely this boundary between

37. Indeed, comparison of the various fragments and versions at the Döblin archive in Marbach suggests that it was only long after Döblin began to work on the text that the contours of a plotted story even began to emerge. For a more detailed discussion see Stauffacher’s afterword to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

38. “My writing is quick and clean. Hesitation means inhibition; it means that the inspiration is weak and that I’m not fully devoted” (Alfred Döblin, “Zur Physiologie des dichterischen Schaffens,” in *Schriften*, 179).

39. Alfred Döblin, dedication to *Berge, Meere und Giganten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1924), 6.

40. Neurath’s ISOTYPE language (International System of Typographic Picture Education) sought to reconcile spontaneous, analog visual perception with cognitive, alphanumeric sentential propositions. On his ISOTYPE work in the 1920s see *Statistische Hieroglyphen* (1926) and *Bildstatistik nach Wiener Methode* (1931), both rpt. in Otto Neurath, *Gesammelte bildpädagogische Schriften*, ed. Rudolf Haller (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1991). See also Neurath, *International Picture Language* (London: Kegan Paul, 1936).



Figure 1. Icons from *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

vision and thought that Döblin's text dismantles: "No colon perforates the unity of gaze and world, no eye says, 'I am looking.' . . . Here [language] speaks about neither vision nor what is seen, but instead *speaks seemingly* [*sie spricht sehend*]; what it speaks is what is seen."⁴¹ Anders's observation makes explicit the connection between these hieroglyphs and Döblin's famous device of *erlebte Rede*, whose "morphological" characteristics are detailed below.

An ink impression of Döblin's hand, taken on April 8, 1928, while he was writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, manifests the interplay between the linguistic and somatic registers out of which the book emerged (fig. 2). Evoking the hands on the walls of the cave at Gargas—forms fashioned at the dawn of representation⁴²—Döblin's handprint oscillates between abstract language and mimetic icon. Here his hand, released from its subordination to abstract discourse and the rule of Logos, assumes its office as an "organ of thought," as the origin of writing. Because it exceeds the abstract matrix of meaning that is composed in the traditional specular literary work, the impression "says more than the text" (Benjamin). Hence the handprint's proximity to reality: like the "bloody fingerprint" in the dada work, Döblin's inked hand itself has a privileged evidentiary status. It is the trace, the impression, the index par excellence⁴³ and, as such, is the quintessential mark of documentarity. As with the handprint, the text of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is a precipitate of both the brain and the hand, a composite of the products of the imagination and insidious fragments of the real. It is a collaboration between multiple bodily organs.

In a section of his *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Mauthner reminded his reader of the kinetic origins of even the most abstract logical thought:

Every real speech utterance is a movement. If a person thinks a word clearly and distinctly . . . , it connects up with a sensation of movement that, in the case of extremely conscious thinking, can be intensified to the point at which it is actually felt. If the speech organs were not hidden, we would see them twitching regularly at moments of concerted thinking much like the fingers of a sign language teacher. To repeat: when language is authentic, it consists of the signs of movement [*Bewegungszeichen*]. (*Dictionary*, 1:199)

41. Günther Anders, "Der verwüstete Mensch: Über Welt- und Sprachlosigkeit in Döblins *Berlin Alexanderplatz*," in *Mensch ohne Welt: Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur* (Munich: Beck, 1993), 15. Hereafter cited as "Human."

42. On Gargas see André Leroi-Gourhan, "The Hands of Gargas: Toward a General Study," *October* 37 (1986): 18–34. Leroi-Gourhan's structuralist analysis is motivated by the question of whether these hands depict iconically or semiotically.

43. On the index see Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index," pts. 1–2, in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 196–219; see also Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).



Figure 2. Impression of Döblin's hand taken in 1928 at the time that he was writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Published in *Alfred Döblin: Im Buch, zu Hause, auf der Straße*

As Mauthner argues, however, it is not just speech that is embodied but language and, further, thought itself. Intellection, conceived here as highly advanced subvocalization (think, for example, of the Soviet cognitive psychologist Lev Vygotskii's designation of thought as *vnutrenniaia rech'*, or "inner speech"), can never quite leave behind its origins in extensity and movement, confirming that even the most seemingly disembodied, abstract discourse necessarily belongs to a body. "Thinking and speaking are movements; I only have to demonstrate that they are the same movements, viewed from two different perspectives" (*Dictionary*, 1:279). Under the section rubric "Speaking and Walking," in his *Contributions to a Critique of Language*, Mauthner reminded his reader that it is not only the hands that function as what Döblin called "organs of thought"; feet, too, are at the origin of thought. The demonstration in "Speaking and Walking" of the inextricability of language and movement evokes the kinetic consciousness of the flâneur, a figure so critical for both *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Franz Hessel's literary "mnemonic for the lonely walker,"⁴⁴ *On Foot in Berlin*, which appeared the same year as Döblin's book. Once again, the reception practices of the newspaper provide a paradigm for this kinetic language, for newspapers are read under conditions that are, from an experiential perspective, completely different from those of novels. They are words perceived in motion. Quite unlike the novel, consumed at home in a withdrawn state of contemplative absorption that screens out the awareness of bodily presence, newspapers are read in the subway, on the street, between conversations, in cafés, over the shoulders of others—in short, in a state of distraction.⁴⁵

The Verbal World Picture

When he began writing *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin did not quite know—or maybe was completely uninterested in—how the narrative would end. His writing would be born out through what he famously called the "productive force" (*Produktivkraft*) of language,⁴⁶ and the story would end, reasonably enough, at the moment he stopped writing it. One notes, for example, that Döblin stated even as late as August 10, 1928, in a preprint of the text in *Die*

44. This phrase is taken from Benjamin's review of *Spazieren in Berlin*, "The Return of the Flâneur," in *Selected Writings*, 262.

45. In a 1929 conversation with Ernst Glaeser, Bernard von Brentano suggested that one has to "compose writings that can be read at the stock exchange." Glaeser: "Yes, but novels cannot be read at the stock exchange." Brentano: "It is unfortunately clear that they can't. That is why I have compassion for the great talents of the novelists whose efforts must go to filling up the free evenings of the working population" (Brentano and Glaeser, "Neue Formen der Publizistik," in *Neue Sachlichkeit*, ed. Sabina Becker, vol. 2 [Cologne: Böhlau, 2000], 184).

46. According to Döblin, the apposite phrase "leads . . . to new conceptions, and is itself a productive force" ("Epic," 243).

literarische Welt that “the work begins with the prison in Tegel, and ends there also,”⁴⁷ and yet, when the book finally appeared one year later, there was no trace of this anticipated conclusion at Tegel. The plot of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* did not precede its instantiation in the text but emerged out of a prolonged struggle with language itself.⁴⁸ Writing is itself an action, and a highly contingent one at that, Döblin explained: “Conception is no longer conception. . . . The thing has transformed itself in the act of speaking, in the act of writing” (“Epic,” 240). One could thus characterize *Berlin Alexanderplatz* with a word of Kafka’s coinage: it is a *Tatbeobachtung*, an observation that is not merely an indifferent reflection but an active production or intervention. In a paraphrase of Heinrich von Kleist’s adage “L’idée vient en parlant,” Döblin stated that writing constitutes a gamble in which the author forfeits his own agency and submits himself to the “productive force” of language. “You think you’re writing, but you’re being written” (“Epic,” 243).

But if there was no telos toward which the narrative of the text arced, just where did the ending come from? It seems that it never in fact ended for Döblin. In a 1931 letter to Julius Petersen, he suggested that the conclusion of the published version “appeared to be tacked on” and claimed that the ending was merely a transition to another work that remained unwritten.⁴⁹ The ending of a text, as he had already made clear, was a completely arbitrary convention: “I’m not interested in the finished book; it is neither complete nor incomplete; for me, it’s not worth reading it. Sure, I ‘rewrite’ every book: indeed, that is always the next book” (“Physiology,” 179). The different versions of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*—the preprints in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*,⁵⁰ the alternate versions in the Döblin archive in Marbach, or the text published by Samuel Fischer in 1929—all tell different stories. This was because each time Döblin wrote the text, he wrote it anew.

47. Alfred Döblin, “Schlacht- und Viehhof,” *Die literarische Welt*, August 10, 1928, rpt. as an appendix in *BA*, 743.

48. Döblin wrote that “every topic can be treated using only one particular style. . . . Form also evokes content. Form conditions content in the same way that content forces us to use a single style and a single form. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is one such formal work. . . . [The language of Berlin] knows only one kind of plot and a single doctrine. If I had tried to force a certain plot on the novel, language wouldn’t have allowed me to do it” (“Gespräche über Gespräche: Döblin am Alexanderplatz,” in *Schriften*, 202).

49. Döblin to Petersen, September 18, 1931, in *Briefe*, ed. Walter Muschg, 2 vols. (Olten: Walter, 1970), 1:175. In the letter Döblin explained to Petersen that he intended to write a second work that would continue *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

50. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* published nearly three-fifths of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* between September 8 and October 11, 1929, before its appearance in book form.

If we follow Barthes's argument in *S/Z* that a defining quality of narrative is its *prohairetic* organization, that a story portrays a course of action always oriented toward the action's necessary result, then a corollary of this rule is that textual closure is a prerequisite of narrative concatenation. It was precisely this *prohairetic* principle of causality that Döblin criticized in the epilogue to *Two Friends* and that he sought to overcome with the open and contingent montage structure of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. His Berlin epic perpetually defers its conclusion and, fraying on its edges, opens onto the unceasing process of meaning production designated by Julia Kristeva as *signifiante* ("signifying," as distinct from "signification"). The discrete codes of language intermingle in the text with the material contingencies of embodied experience. Again, approaching *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as an experimental autobiography sheds light on the interminability of this open text. For it may be possible to break off or interrupt a diaristic autobiography, but it is impossible to conclude it, to write its ending. Indeed, Philippe Lejeune has pointed out that such a text, such a "recording of successive presents," is by its very nature structurally "unfinishable."⁵¹ Any text that would set up an equivalency between contingent reality and writing, as *Berlin Alexanderplatz* does, must by definition veer toward infinity. As Benjamin suggested, Döblin's book mobilized against the purposive, *prohairetic* closure engendered in the plot: "[Döblin's] dialect is one of the forces that turn against the closed nature [*die Verschlossenheit*] of the old novel. For this book is anything but closed."⁵² And the ostensible ending of the otherwise interminable *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has consequently baffled those exegetes of Döblin who remain stubbornly attached to the notion that "The Story of Franz Biberkopf," the book's subtitle, requires interpretation as a self-consistent, closed narrative totality⁵³—even when the text's ending appeared to Döblin himself to be "tacked on," arbitrary and unmotivated by the Biberkopf plot.

51. In "How Do Diaries End?" *Biography* 24 (2001): 100, 102, Lejeune considers "the impossibility . . . of grasping this death of writing": "What a contrast between the simplicity of a diary's beginning and the evanescence of its ending."

52. Benjamin, "Crisis of the Novel," 301. Translation modified.

53. Explanations for this ending range wildly from systems-theoretical to Christian eschatological accounts. A few of the recent submissions are Matthias Prangel, "Franz Biberkopf und das Wissen des Wissens: Zum Schluß von *Berlin Alexanderplatz* unter der Perspektive einer Theorie der Beobachtung der Beobachtung," in *Internationales Alfred-Döblin-Kolloquium*, ed. Gabriele Sander (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1995), 169–79; Helmut Koopman, "Der Schluß des Romans *Berlin Alexanderplatz*—eine Antwort auf Thomas Manns *Zauberberg*?" in *Internationale Alfred-Döblin-Kolloquien*, ed. Werner Stauffacher (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1991), 179–91; and Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, "Der Wissende und die Gewalt: Alfred Döblins Theorie des epischen Werkes und der Schluß von *Berlin Alexanderplatz*," in Prangel, *Materialien*, 150–85.

Concluding the book was impossible (“Where does it begin? Where does it end? One shouldn’t ask these questions,” Döblin wrote),⁵⁴ and so instead of following narrative convention, Döblin inverted it. He ended the book with a beginning. He titled one of the final chapters “Beginnings Are the Hardest” and unveiled there a new protagonist who has “the same papers as Franz, and looks like Franz” (*BA*, 442)—but is in fact not Franz. This new character would step into the shoes of the old Franz Biberkopf, now apparently dead. Although the paradoxical reduplication of Biberkopf at the conclusion of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*—this unwriting of the story at the end—has troubled the text’s interpreters, it makes perfect sense from the perspective of the performative aesthetics of epic poetry. For the epic poet, character consistency is of little relevance. Indeed, having a character die twice, as Biberkopf does, is typical of the pre-Aristotelian epic.⁵⁵ Brecht has similar thoughts in response to the question, posed of *The Threepenny Opera*, “Why does Macheath have to be arrested twice over?” Epic drama, Brecht wrote, “knows no objective but only a finishing point, and is familiar with a different kind of chain, whose course need not be a straight one but may quite well be in curves or even leaps.”⁵⁶ It was only with the historical emergence of the novel (“the death of real language,” according to Döblin) that linear composition eliminated inconsistencies and repetitions in the vitae of the characters and thereby made possible modern entelechial conceptions of psychological interiority. But an epic figure such as Biberkopf—an anthropomorphic device that has no psychological interiority and that is not subject to the same empirical laws that people are—can meet his end and then begin to live a second time.

Biberkopf operates as a sort of textual prosthesis for Döblin: he is not a person but an instrument for Döblin to give form to his own experiences from the time that he began writing in mid-October 1927 to the spring of 1929, when he stopped. The near-exact coincidence of the time of composition with the time of narration corroborates this claim and reminds us that it is more apt to regard *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as a documentary text than as “The Story of Franz Biberkopf,” which Döblin apparently did not even want to appear on

54. Alfred Döblin, “Epilog,” in *Schriften*, 305.

55. “Slight narrative inconsistencies and slips, such as the same man being killed twice, . . . are common to all oral poetry” (Seth Schein, *The Mortal Hero* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 13).

56. By contrast, pseudoclassical drama “creates a growing demand for the supply and, purely to allow the spectator’s strong emotional participation, . . . needs a single inevitable chain of events” (Bertolt Brecht, “The Literarization of the Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett [New York: Hill and Wang, 1964], 45).

the book.⁵⁷ In the same way that Christopher Isherwood wrote in his 1939 reportage *Goodbye to Berlin* that the character “‘Christopher Isherwood’ is a convenient ventriloquist’s dummy, nothing more,” so too is Biberkopf little more than a puppet or a mouthpiece for Döblin.⁵⁸ Devoid of any independent psychic interiority, Biberkopf merely provided the occasion for Döblin to collect, collate, and concatenate whatever caught his eye in the year and a half during which he wrote the text: letters of his patients, overheard conversations, texts of pop songs, formulas from textbooks on physics, street signs, scientific explanations of erectile dysfunction. Such an invented character as “Christopher Isherwood” or Franz Biberkopf turns out to be a compositional device that appears in numerous documentary texts from the 1920s, such as Viktor Shklovskii’s *Zoo; or, Letters Not about Love* (1924) or André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928).⁵⁹ Biberkopf, Isherwood, Alia, Nadja: dummies that provide a red thread, albeit a weak and tenuous one. One reviewer acknowledged that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was not “about” Biberkopf at all but about Döblin:

I, Döblin, depict myself down to the tiniest detail, together with my entire environment. I look at everything I can, I read the newspapers daily, I observe not just one man, Mr. Biberkopf, but a hundred people daily, aware of my own part the whole time: all of this is me. . . . Epic sovereignty does not mean saying *I’m not there, only the hero is there* like an ostrich that hides its head in the sand. Rather, epic sovereignty means being present in everything that you are and that you have.”⁶⁰

Biberkopf is a flat character bereft of the memories necessary for forming a stable self-identity. As his first encounter with the storytelling Jews reveals, he has none of the components with which to construct a coherent narrative

57. When Döblin first gave Samuel Fischer the manuscript, it simply bore the title *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. But *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin recalled, “was a title that my publisher would accept under no circumstances—it was just a train station, he claimed—and so I had to add the subtitle, ‘The Story of Franz Biberkopf’” (“Epilog,” in *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, ed. Walter Muschg [Olten: Walter, 1963], 390).

58. Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (New York: Random House, 1939), 7.

59. Both of these books conclude with the disappearance of the figure that had ostensibly occasioned them. Shklovskii, for example, states at the end of *Zoo* that Alia Triolet, the woman to whom he composed the letters, was imaginary: “Alia is the realization of a metaphor. I invented a woman and a love to make a book about noncomprehension, about an alien people, about an alien land” (*Zoo: Pis'ma ne o ljubvi* [Saint Petersburg: Limbus, 2000], 82).

60. Haas, “Bemerkungen,” 82–83. Another reviewer wrote: “How does Döblin report? Not as a cold observer, not as a poet who gathers things together, but . . . as Franz Biberkopf” (E. Kurt Fischer, “Berlin Alexanderplatz,” in Prangel, *Materialien*, 69).

of his own psychic development. Those had gone into Döblin's "First Look." Like a Weimar Kaspar Hauser, Biberkopf is cast by Döblin into the transformed urban landscape of Berlin in medias res, released from the prison that quarantined him from one of the most accelerated historical episodes of social upheaval and precipitous rationalization and modernization. Again, the history of the text's composition is revealing insofar as it suggests that Döblin began writing the story without Biberkopf. Consider the version of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that I cited earlier, whose point of departure was not Biberkopf but Döblin himself, standing on Alexanderplatz. But even the "definitive" 1929 edition does not provide a physical description of Franz Biberkopf until page 121 and situates most of the Biberkopf plot in the book's second half. It becomes clear, then, why Anders characterized the novel as a "negative *bildungsroman*," a book without a protagonist: "Nothing stands behind [Biberkopf]: no traditions—no bourgeois ones, no proletarian ones, no urban ones, no country ones—no nature, no religion, no denial of religion, no indifference, no milieu, no family. He is inhuman. . . . He doesn't 'have' his own life at all" ("Human," 4–5).⁶¹ For Anders, Biberkopf is without inner psychic substance: he is but an "intersection and playground for the sensations that happen to him," merely the passive excipient onto which the events are inscribed. The prop Biberkopf "*is lived*," Anders writes, "since he himself . . . is abstract" ("Human," 7).

The abstractness that Anders notes in Biberkopf leads me to the final component of this study: an examination of the relationship between Döblin's subversion of actantal continuity (evident in Biberkopf's utter lack of inner psychic substance) and his epic-documentary technique. I propose that this aspect of the text be conceptualized, again following Mauthner, as a shift away from the "substantival" world picture that had organized "theological" reportage such as *Two Friends* and toward the "verbal" one that prevails in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The terms *verbal* and *substantival*, taken from Mauthner, first require some exposition. In *Contributions to a Critique of Language* and *Dictionary of Philosophy*, but most programmatically in the posthumously published *Three World Pictures* (which appeared in 1925, between the publications of *Two Friends* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), Mauthner proposed the existence of three interconnected modal categories of experience, one adjectival, one substantival, and one verbal. An orientation toward immediate sensory impressions, the *adjectival* picture of the world perceives pure qualities and intensities, such as color, heat, and texture, without making any

61. Although Anders's essay has been virtually overlooked in Döblin scholarship, it is, together with Benjamin's "Crisis of the Novel," the most lucid and perspicacious analysis of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

claims as to their stability or permanence. At the moment that these impressions become ontologized, when these intensities become the characteristics of immutable objects and eternal substances (redness, for example, becomes understood as “belonging to” an apple), a shift has been made to the *substantival* worldview, according to Mauthner. While the adjectival picture of the world is sensualist, nominalist, and punctual (“pointilliert,” Mauthner suggests), the substantival is abstract, realist, and metaphysical. It is the world picture of Socratic philosophy. A substantival worldview thus corresponds to what Döblin characterized as “theological” literature in “The Spirit of the Naturalistic Age” and is the discourse of literary realism. Finally, there is the *verbal* picture of the world, which is oriented not toward ontology (*Sein*, a word that Mauthner despised) but toward morphology (*Werden*), toward transformation and mutability, toward time and action: “The verbal world is . . . the world of Becoming, a world conditioned by time; . . . it sees changes in everything, and is concerned only with these changes, only with relations, the relations of so-called things to us and the relations of these things to each other. . . . Being is transformed into Becoming” (*Dictionary*, 3:366). This verbal worldview found its first exponent, Mauthner noted, in the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, the original theorist of flux, to whom is attributed the popular observation that no man can cross the same river twice, because neither the man nor the river remains the same.

The influence of Mauthner’s verbal-morphological world picture is readily evident in Döblin’s theoretical texts from his late Weimar period of production such as *Our Existence* (1933) and *The Ego above Nature*. In both works Döblin dismissed the metaphysics of a stable, substantival perspective. “I can’t find any ‘static’ reality,” Döblin noted in *Our Existence*. “Temporality is the noun of this world. . . . The world exists in ‘processes,’ and what we call ‘world’ is exactly this procedure or this action.”⁶² Much like Montaigne, who famously stated in his *Essays*, “I do not depict being. I depict passage,” Döblin cautioned against “taking the forms of organisms as complete figures. Their relations to the world are constantly shifting” (*Ego*, 53). Although Döblin’s reorientation in the mid-1920s toward a morphological, verbal world picture at first glance bears a certain resemblance to the *topoi* and rhetoric of contemporary conservative *Zivilisationskritik*, there is a much different agenda at play in Döblin’s texts. Absent is the cultural pessimism that prevails in the writings of such figures as Oswald Spengler. For the verbal world picture of Mauthner, with its prioritization of function over substance, of becoming over

62. Alfred Döblin, *Unser Dasein* (Olten: Walter, 1964), 221. Hereafter cited as *OE*.

being, does not lament the irreversible loss of a state of ontological certitude but celebrates the creative forces unleashed in this process of epistemological destabilization.

The turn away from the metaphysical, “theological” orientation of realist literature provides a point of departure for understanding Döblin’s epic poetics. “An epic river of things comes into being; nothing separates them from one another,” Ferdinand Lion noted on Döblin.⁶³ The atrophy of substantial values in the language of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, evident on the formal register of Döblin’s text in his famous technique of *erlebte Rede*, volatilizes fixed objects and characters by dissolving them into the processes and actions in which they are engaged. It is through this *erlebte Rede* that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* thus “verbalizes” its actants, merging first, second, and third persons together indiscriminately. This syntactic transitivity in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is evident in its slippery conjugations in which the pronouns (and even the nouns) are completely fungible: “I smash everything, you smash everything, he smashes everything” (*BA*, 166).

The grammatical destructuring of the text itself perforates the distinctions between individual characters as well as those between characters and objects. And at those numerous moments where Döblin interpolates objective, mimetic depiction with authorial commentary—showing with telling, as we observed above—this grammatical transitivity also collapses the boundary between narration and narrator. “One has only to say ‘room,’” Döblin wrote, “and already one has simultaneously said ‘I’” (*OE*, 399). With suitably jolting perspectival shifts, the text shuttles back and forth between interiority and estrangement, between events perceived through Biberkopf’s consciousness and the distant and removed periphrases of the camera eye that coldly and sadistically depict Biberkopf as a stranger, as “the one who was released,” “the other,” or “the man with one arm.” For Anders, this destabilizing technique revealed the particularly *transitive* condition of speech in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a language “beyond the first and third person”:

Often it’s not even a single person that is the site of language’s instantiation, but the situation as a whole, the situation to which the person only belongs. There the actual spoken word is mixed together with a “subject” and an “object” that are simultaneously realized in the speech, or else the two are linked together in a chain of the smallest possible sentences. This is because the situation simultaneously encompasses person, thing and speech. This, for example, is where speech goes beyond first and third person. (“Human,” 15)

63. Ferdinand Lion, “Bemerkungen über Alfred Döblin,” quoted in Jochen Meyer, ed., *Alfred Döblin, 1878–1978* (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, 1978), 188.

Confirmation of Anders's analysis can be found in the numerous passages in the text in which plural subjectivities inhabit a single sentence. One segment, for example, transitions from the description of a scene with Cilly and Franz composed in the third person to a dialogue between the doctor Döblin and a female patient presented in the first and second persons. *Sie* (she) becomes *sie* (they) becomes *Sie* (you):

Cilly shrieks, but his leg goes right in, she [*sie*] tries to run away, but they [*sie*] both are hopping around, and she [*sie*] has to take him along. Next to the table he thrusts his foot into the other boot. They're [*sie*] about to fall over. They're [*sie*] falling over, there's some screaming, restrain [*Sie*] your imagination, young lady, just let [*Sie*] the two of them have their fun, it's private visiting hours for them, and members with insurance policies can only come later, from five to seven. (BA, 182)

As a result of this uncoupling of character from action, the actants proliferate beyond the reader's capacity to track their moves, to a point where each character becomes more or less a functional equivalent of all the others. This *mise en abyme* of character displacements seemed to bewilder even Döblin himself. In manuscript versions of the text, for example, he confused numerous characters: he called Minna "Gertrud," Paul became "August," and Meck is renamed "Henschke."⁶⁴ Unconcerned with the specificities of which character says what, Döblin threw up his hands: "Der Franz Biberkopf aber—Biberkopf, Lieberkopf, Zieberkopf, keinen Namen hat der" (BA, 335). It was a confusion also registered by one of his contemporary reviewers, who suggested that Biberkopf is not simply one character but several characters: "In Döblin's opinion there are two Franz Biberkopfs in his book. . . . No, there are three Biberkopfs."⁶⁵ Language cuts across the panoply of the text's characters, shattering the conceit of their individuation at the same time that it unites them syntactically. Döblin's disposition toward his narrative staffage could thus aptly be summarized with one of Christian Friedrich Hebbel's phrases, quoted in Mauthner's *Dictionary of Philosophy*: "Every character is an error" (1:189).

64. Werner Stauffacher discusses these confections in his excellent afterword to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. One notes other instances of these displacements: for example, a section of the text that first appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* similarly folded into a single monologue a passage that appeared in the 1929 Fischer edition as a dialogue between two characters. At numerous moments in the text, the distinction between quoted speech and authorial commentary is of so little relevance to Döblin that he dispenses with quotation marks entirely.

65. Hans Sochaczewer, "Der neue Döblin," *Berliner Tageblatt*, October 18, 1929, in Prangel, *Materialien*, 58.

Döblin did not seek to create in the character of Franz Biberkopf a psychologically consistent or emotionally compelling figure; he wanted, rather, to illustrate “what is exemplary about the process” through a series of demonstrational “elementary situations” (*Elementarsituationen*) and “elementary postures” (*Elementarhaltungen*) (“Epic,” 218–19). According to Döblin, character (and here I mean *character* in both of its senses: as a certain narrative function in the literary text and as a designation for the totality of human personality) was a relational and situationally contingent construction. This makes visible once again the theoretical convergence of the pre-Socratic verbal world picture as posited by Mauthner with the mode of pre-Aristotelian epic production pursued by Döblin. The marriage of Heraclitus with Homer that decoupled action from character, verb from substantive, evokes the intransitive property of the middle voice—a verbal conjugation that had once been available to languages of antiquity such as Greek and Sanskrit; that had disappeared with the rise of the ideologies of the individual, philosophies of the will, and their attendant metaphysical distinction between agent and object;⁶⁶ but that began to return, as Barthes noted, in those modernist texts that effaced the distinction between active and passive voice. Like Mauthner’s verbal world picture, the middle voice is located beyond immutable conceptions of selfhood, individuality, and character. Continuity is housed in the verb and the action, rather than in the substance and the actant. “In the middle voice,” the philosopher Charles E. Scott noted, the action “is expressed entirely in the verb form”; it takes place “through its own enactment.”⁶⁷ The subjectivity of the author who composes in the middle voice is thus not “anterior to the process of writing,” according to Barthes, but instead emerges through the very activity of writing and communicating: “In the modern verb of the middle voice *to write*, the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it.”⁶⁸ Or, in Döblin’s words, “You think you’re writing, but you’re being written.”⁶⁹

66. See Jean-Pierre Vernant’s response to Roland Barthes’s talk “To Write: An Intransitive Verb” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); and Charles E. Scott, “The Middle Voice of Metaphysics,” *Review of Metaphysics* 42 (1989): 743–64.

67. Scott, “Middle Voice of Metaphysics,” 746, 752.

68. Roland Barthes, “To Write: An Intransitive Verb,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 11–21.

69. Döblin’s own conception of selfhood was mediumistic and antisubstantivist. In “First Look,” Döblin included the statement of a chiromancer who told him, “You have many moods and disturbances within you, it is something that passes through you constantly, it is something medial. You are a kind of medium” (“First Look,” 53). A subjectivity constituted in the middle voice is one

As the work of the epic producer Bertolt Brecht attests, the verbal world of the epic is an intransitive one. Tret'iakov, one of the most perspicacious observers of the Weimar literary scene and the frustrated Russian translator of Brecht, noted with chagrin that the epic author "had a special technique of hiding the objects" of his sentences⁷⁰—that, in other words, the very grammar of Brecht's writing concealed the distinction between what acts and what is acted on. What remains after this deontologization is an abstract and reversible conjugation, a verb in a gnomic tense, a *gestus* that does not substantivize agency but instead leaves it open as an equation into which values can be inserted and calculated. Like Brecht's epic characters, Döblin's "dummy" Biberkopf has the qualities of a stand-in, a cipher in a formulaic "elementary situation." In the wake of Döblin's withdrawal of narrative agency, the reader of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* becomes acutely aware of the functions themselves that are performed by the characters, and of the labile conjugations of diverse "elementary postures." Brecht, who had enthused about Döblin's writing as a model for renegotiating the fractured relations between individual and collectivity, between the empirical and its subtending social structures, called for precisely this verbalization of the work of art as the necessary response to the changed conditions of truth in contemporary society. "Reality as such has slipped into the domain of the functional," Brecht famously stated in "The Threepenny Lawsuit."⁷¹ As the philosopher suggests in Brecht's *Messingkauf*, "We must make visible the laws that control the course of life processes."⁷² An unmistakable cognate of the theories of the logical positivists,⁷³ the functionalist, de-essentializing program of an epic poetics made an appearance in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, for example, in the death of Ida, rendered as the formula $f = c \lim (\Delta v / \Delta t) = cw$. Anders observed in a footnote that the language of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* "is ungrammatical. One and the same image represents active

that is contingent and fugitive, as Eric Charles White has pointed out: "The 'coalescence' of subject and object transpiring in the middle voice thus describes a destabilization of the self that genuinely changes the subject, reconstituting the self on a new basis" (*Kaironomia: On the Will to Invent* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987], 52).

70. Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov, quoted in H. Richter, "Begegnungen in Berlin," rpt. in *Avantgarde Osteuropa, 1910–1930* (Berlin: Deutsche Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, 1967), 20.

71. Bertolt Brecht, "The Threepenny Lawsuit," in *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. and trans. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), 164.

72. Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 520.

73. On the influence of logical positivism on Brecht see Steve Giles, "Bertolt Brecht, Logical Empiricism, and Social Behaviorism," *Modern Language Review* 90 (1995): 83–93; see also Lutz Danneberg and Hans-Harald Müller, "Brecht and Logical Positivism," *Brecht Yearbook* 15 (1990): 151–64.

and passive. The language is broadly infinitival” (“Human,” 30). Instead of substance, instead of fixed assignments of subject and object, nominative and accusative, Döblin depicts “ungrammatical” verbal infinitives as abstract processes. He summoned not things in their reified givenness but conjunctions of power and effectuality that are protean and combinatory. In the same way that every actor in a Brechtian learning play must unceasingly exchange roles with the other actors, and thereby participate in the dramaturgical conversion of stable character identities into dynamic and processual morphologies, Döblin’s verbal world picture posits a modality of consciousness that sees only “relations” and “types of effectivity” and substitutes for the “single person” the “situation as a whole.”⁷⁴ The substantive, entelechial character is anatomized, disassembled, and reconfigured in the process of this verbalization—reconstructed like Galy Gay in *Man Equals Man*, or like Biberkopf at the asylum Buch.

It seems that this verbal-epic world picture was, in fact, latent in *Two Friends* all along, overwritten only by the “theological” protocols of realist reportage. Indeed, the origins of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*’s grammatical intransitivity, its language “beyond the first and third person,” can be observed in the same transitivity that Döblin had found so intriguing, and confounding, about the case of Elli and Grethe in 1924. Here I understand *transitivity* in its clinical meaning, defined by Eugen Bleuler in his 1916 *Textbook of Psychiatry* as a condition in which “the patient’s own experiences become detached from him, and are ascribed to another person.”⁷⁵ I cite Bleuler on transitivity not to diagnose Elli and Grethe as psychotics but to suggest that their “condition” was strikingly resonant with what I have designated as a verbal-epic poetics, one that disaggregates act from actant.⁷⁶ Transitivity is a psychic condition that, from a grammatical perspective, resembles the “middle voice” that dissolves substance into verb. With *Two Friends*, a single action or experience, uncoupled from its steadfast moorings in an individual consciousness, was transferred between multiple actors. The identification between the two

74. Fritz Mauthner, *Die drei Bilder der Welt: Ein sprachkritischer Versuch*, ed. Monty Jacobs (Erlangen: Verlag der Philosophischen Akademie, 1925), 7; Anders, “Human,” 15.

75. Eugen Bleuler, *Textbook of Psychiatry*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 38.

76. Taking Bleuler’s concept of *Ambivalenz* as a point of departure for a discussion of activity and passivity in the articulation of the instincts, Freud notes the existence of a third disposition beyond this binary that is achieved when “the active voice is changed, not into the passive, but into the reflexive middle voice.” The English translation is accompanied by the editorial remark that “the allusion here is to the voices of the Greek verb” (“Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. [London: Hogarth, 1953–74], 14:128).

women was so consummate that it became impossible for Döblin, as he noted in his epilogue, to determine which one was in fact guilty of Link's death: in the case of Elli and Grethe, we were "hardly in the realm of 'innocent' or 'guilty' anymore." (Although Elli alone was responsible for actually placing poison in the food, Grethe claimed in her letters to bear the burden of guilt. Both were ultimately sent to prison.) Döblin declared himself incapable of drawing a steadfast distinction between Elli and Grethe. As he confessed in a letter to Ludwig Klages written after the publication of *Two Friends*, there was indeed something about the Link case that had remained entirely inscrutable for him, namely, a persistent obfuscation of agency: "There is something unfathomable about the case itself (it involves two homosexual women who poisoned one of their husbands and attempted to poison the other; *who was the active one?*)."⁷⁷ And as he explained in his epilogue, this deterioration of the distinctions between these characters demanded reconceptualizing the relationship between the individual and the collective, between the "private matter" of personal experience and "great laws" (*große Regeln*) of society (*TF*, 81). Döblin never in fact ascertained who of the two was active and who passive, who was the agent and who the instrument. But even if there were two separate characters in this story whom, like those in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, its author could not quite keep apart, there was, from Döblin's perspective, only one deed that spanned both actors, only a single action that was shared between them: *Two Friends and Their Poisoning*.

77. Döblin to Klages, December 23, 1924, in *Briefe*, 1:126. Italics added.