

# Literary Research: Narration and the Epistemology of the Human Sciences in Alfred Döblin<sup>1</sup>



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## I

There are novels which display their characters in a constrained, ineluctable situation and observe plot development as in a laboratory—mostly, so as to count the corpses at the end. Such novels are poetic experiments, they probe cause and effect, rules and processes brought to light by their exemplary narratives. Their intent is less representational mimesis than an analysis of natural laws. They are, as Michel Butor put it, “laboratoires du récit”<sup>2</sup> in which truth and knowledge are to be demonstrated based on the evidence of a typical case. The literary experiment, like all research, is conducted in a given historical context of knowledge and the knowable; it is part of an ‘archive,’ which Michel Foucault defined as the “the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.”<sup>3</sup> Literature explores this space of possible statements

<sup>1</sup> This is the expanded and revised version of a text first published in *Internationales Alfred Döblin Kolloquium, Leipzig 1997, Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik, Reihe A*, vol. 46 (1999). I thank Stephen Stern and Helmut Müller-Sievers for helping me with the translation.

<sup>2</sup> Butor, Michel, “Le roman comme recherche” in *Répertoire. Études et conférences* (Paris: Minuit 1960), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Sheridan Smith, trans. (New York: Pantheon 1972), 129.

and discourses by exposing the lives and limbs of its protagonists to its truths. Émile Zola was the first to proclaim the novel an experiment. His manifesto, *Le roman expérimental* (1870), appropriates the rigor of a *médecine expérimentale* developed by the physiologist Claude Bernard. It demands a literature that applies scientific hypotheses and methods to material which is essentially fictional, but nonetheless plausible, as a testing ground for "la connaissance de l'homme, la connaissance scientifique, dans son action individuelle et sociale."<sup>4</sup> Literature is thus considered to be another laboratory in which knowledge about man is elaborated with the same strategies, and with the same claim to truth, as in physiology, psychology, sociology, or genetics. What is interesting in Zola's poetics is not so much its simplification, which would seem to condemn literature simply to repeat scientific inquiry, but rather the epistemological impulse he would have both share: "Le romancier part à la recherche d'une vérité."<sup>5</sup> His formulation expresses the pretension of a poetics that takes its epistemological goal and its conception of truth from the empirical sciences. The process of seeking truth, and the ways of defining it, are derived from contemporary scientific standards, and in Zola's case, from the methods of Claude Bernard, who had introduced experimental intervention into the study of medicine. Zola saw the same approach in Balzac: "Il [Balzac in *Cousine Bette*] est parti des faits observés, puis il a institué son expérience en soumettant Hulot à une série d'épreuves, en le faisant passer par certains milieux, pour montrer le fonctionnement du mécanisme de sa passion. Il est donc évident qu'il n'y a pas seulement là observation, mais qu'il y a aussi expérimentation, (...) puisqu'il intervient d'une façon directe pour placer son personnage dans des conditions dont il reste le maître."<sup>6</sup> It is a scenario that constrains and thus—as Zola remarks—requires observation; at the same time, it remains subject to the controlling interference of the experimenter. As master experimenter, the author commands fate: he both describes and constructs the cases based on the evidence that proves his hypotheses.

As he repeatedly attested in his literary and autobiographical texts, the physician and psychiatrist Alfred Döblin saw himself representing

this tradition of an 'epistemological poetics,' as I should like to call it. Just as Zola learned from contemporary physiology and degeneration theory, Döblin ordained: "Man lerne von der Psychiatrie, der einzigen Wissenschaft, die sich mit dem ganzen seelischen Menschen befaßt. . . ."<sup>7</sup> The extent to which he thereby shared and summarized the medical, criminological, psychiatric and psychoanalytic understanding of his time as well as the investigative approach of these disciplines has been revealed by recent Döblin research. Wolfgang Schäffner, in his convincing and thorough study, provides an analysis of Döblin's literary production, demonstrating its alignment along psychiatry's technological and disciplinary standards of normalization, and its congruity with psychiatric case studies, patient files, juridical expertise and theory at the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup> Schäffner takes Döblin as an exemplary model and shows the convergence of literature and psychiatry as one of the central points from which knowledge about man is generated and registered in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the literature on Döblin has tended to use the author's scientific works for merely illustrative purposes, Schäffner not only situates the Regensburg patient histories and the psychiatric publications of Dr. Döblin in the context of contemporary theory, he also demonstrates their epistemological contiguity to his literary production.

My readings are greatly indebted to Schäffner's research, though with a—perhaps minute—displacement. Whereas Schäffner emphasizes the continuity between literature, human sciences and, significantly, their associated disciplinary and normalizing practices, I would stress their discursive difference: literature's specific textuality embedded within—yet nonetheless irreducible to—statements and discourse in the Foucauldian sense. Literature would then no longer be another kind of science, as Zola believed, but rather a self-reflexive, heterogeneous and fictional archaeology of knowledge. The reflexive relationship between literature and knowledge—and not simply the different scientific paradigms subscribed to by Zola and Döblin—marks a decisive difference between both authors. Fiction does not just repeat the logic of discourses: it can render them

<sup>7</sup> Döblin, Alfred, "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker (Berliner Programm)" in *Aufsätze zur Literatur* (Olten/Freiburg: Walter 1963), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Schäffner, Wolfgang, *Die Ordnung des Wahns. Zur Poetologie psychiatrischen Wissens bei Alfred Döblin* (Munich: Fink 1995).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>4</sup> Zola, Émile, "Le roman expérimental" in *Les œuvres complètes* vol. 41, Maurice LeBlond, ed. (Paris: Bernouard 1928), 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

transparent and regulate the textual and epistemological conditions of truth production via a 'Poetologie des Wissens' (poetics of knowledge).<sup>10</sup> According to Schöffner, madness, machines, minds and physiological processes, insofar as they are and produce discourse, are inventions just like literary texts (Schöffner 1995, 386); as such, they can be subjected to an analysis of their internal textual structure. In transcending academic disciplines and discursive genres, however, literature claims radically different discursive premises than does science. It is precisely at this point that literature deviates from the parallelism between 'epistemological schema' and 'narrative pattern,' and frames its own limits of what can be known and what can be narrated, the conditions under which statements emerge. Every story writes its own poetics of knowledge, correcting and transforming these frontiers of the 'seeable' and the 'sayable.'<sup>11</sup> Textual structure, narrative strategy, and forms of authorship must be taken seriously as the constituents of such a poetics capable of playing the scientific games of truth in a completely different, i.e. literary, manner.

Döblin is an exemplary case as regards the question of modern literature's relationship to knowledge. In his short text, *Epilog* (1948), he retrospectively described his entire work as a grand epistemological project, as a question which he pursued from book to book, one which changed continuously and which constantly needed to be reformulated, to be approached from a different angle. "Jedes Buch endet [für mich] mit einem Fragezeichen. Jedes Buch wirft am Ende einem neuen den Ball zu."<sup>12</sup> He saw his literary work as a gigantic experimental progression, as a battery of tests, the theme of which remained, albeit in constant variation, "man and his mode of existence" ("der Mensch und die Art seiner Existenz").<sup>13</sup> As he announced much earlier in *Der Bau des epischen Werks*, his aim was to render transparent the principles and determinants of 'reality' by storytelling. The object of this phenomenological and analytical scrutiny is "man": "Es sind da starke Grundsituationen, Elementarsit-

<sup>10</sup> I adopt this concept from Wolfgang Schöffner und Joseph Vogl, cf. Schöffner, *ibid.*, and Joseph Vogl, "Mimesis und Verdacht. Skizze zu einer Poetologie des Wissens nach Foucault" in *Spiele der Wahrheit. Michel Foucaults Denken*, François Ewald and Bernhard Waldenfels, eds. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1991), 193–204; and Joseph Vogl "Einleitung," in *Poetologien des Wissens um 1800*, Joseph Vogl, ed. (München: Fink 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Vogl, "Mimesis und Verdacht," 195f.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Döblin, "Epilog" in *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, 389.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

uationen des menschlichen Daseins, die herausgearbeitet werden, es sind Elementarhaltungen des Menschen, die in dieser Sphäre erscheinen und die, weil sie tausendfach zerlegt wirklich sind, auch berichtet werden können."<sup>14</sup> Döblin's poetics of reporting (*berichten*) attempts to fashion a literary anthropology of modernity by exposing his protagonists to the realms of technology, war, the city, crime, sexuality and social organization. Döblin constantly shifted his anthropological field-of-work, moving from the Thirty-Years War to the German Revolution of 1918, from the colonial "Menschheitsversuch"<sup>15</sup> on the Paraná, to the Chinese Wang Lun sect. I would like to examine two of the narrative experiments which I consider particularly representative of a specific constellation of literature and knowledge—not only in Döblin's oeuvre but also within a fundamental structure that relates the modern human sciences to literary strategies. The novels *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and *Hamlet* exemplify this constellation by taking as their subject the central disciplines and paradigms of anthropological knowledge in modernism (such as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, behaviorism and criminology) and then offsetting them with a religious vision of man. From the start, this combination reflects heterogeneity and discontinuity, the characteristics *par excellence* of a modern understanding of man. Michel Foucault has shown the extent to which man, an "invention of recent date," became the cornerstone of Western knowledge around 1800, so as to constitute what Foucault calls "the human sciences."<sup>16</sup> The disciplines studying living organisms, the production and circulation of goods and the transformations of language ("labor, life, language") began to interpret man simultaneously as the subject and the object of knowledge, what Foucault called the "empirico-transcendental doublet." As a result of this focus on man as the epistemological center of modern knowledge, the question of the totality of the human being itself becomes ever more preoccupying. As the nineteenth century began to construct a system of knowledge that treats 'man as a whole,' its knowledge was beset with the same fragmentation as that of its object. The concentrated effort of anthropology around 1800 was to grasp man in his totality, but by doing so, contradictory processes developed

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, "Der Bau des epischen Werks," 218f.

<sup>15</sup> Döblin thus named his *Amazonas-Trilogie*, cf. "Epilog," 393.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage 1973), 387.

inside anthropology, which destroyed it as a single discipline at the very moment it intended to stake its claim. Already prior to 1800, it became apparent that man in his totality (der 'ganze Mensch') dissolves at the instant he is apprehended.<sup>17</sup> Beginning at the moment where labor, life, language (here one might add the body, the soul, society, art) can no longer be thought—"without immediately thinking that it is man who is thinking"<sup>18</sup>—self-pondering man disintegrates.

Anthropological knowledge establishes itself as a multitude of incompatible disciplines, each competing with all the others in the goal to assemble man as totality, each internally attesting to his advancing decomposition. At the latest around 1900, the human sciences polarize; they oppose dissecting, quantifying conceptualizations of man to various hermeneutic attempts to reintegrate him.<sup>19</sup> This 'de-anthropologizing' of the modern human sciences is the background of a literary research of man as it is embodied by Döblin's work.<sup>20</sup> If modern literature poses the question of 'man' and the possibility (or impossibility) of his epistemic consolidation, this topic is far from being marginal: nothing less is at stake than the status of literature in the realm of knowledge. To the extent that man becomes the object of progressively specialized, but also increasingly invasive, scientific and administrative attention, he becomes opaque, fragmented and pluralized in the explosion of discourses and disciplines. Literature has two means of replying: either by opposing specialization and fragmentation with regenerative projects, with figures of the 'new,' 'whole,' 'empowered,' or 'reborn' man, or to reflect this complex and scattered image. Literature thus becomes a model for modern human sciences insofar as it reproduces the tension between reintegration and disintegration as a representation of the discourse of human sciences and their effects—but *also* as their deconstruction. My readings would like to show that exactly this tension informs Döblin's oeuvre. His poetics depicts and explores the apparatus of the

<sup>17</sup> Hartmut Böhme draws this conclusion in his preface to a section of the symposium *Der ganze Mensch*, Hans-Jürgen Schings, ed. DFG-Symposium 1992 (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler 1994), 139.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 342-3.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Dilthey, "Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart: Teubner 1968).

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Schnädelbach, "Die Philosophie und die Wissenschaften vom Menschen" in *Mensch und Moderne*, Clemens Bellut and Ulrich Müller-Schöll, eds. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 1989), 19-39, 25.

human sciences on the one hand, and yet on the other hand, it is stamped by a strong theological motif of human salvation. In his writings, a figure of the human being can be glimpsed that, beyond the terms of norm and aberration, health and pathology, delinquency and punishment, has found its place in a world of guilt, expiation and grace.

## II

*Berlin Alexanderplatz*, published in 1929, is Döblin's most famous book, and *Hamlet*, written in 1945/46, published in 1956, is his final one. Both were explicitly conceived as investigations into the truth about "man," but they proceed very differently. Far from being a hero with a complex psyche, Franz Biberkopf is an experimental subject: he is both Adam and Job, any or every man. This emptiness and indeterminacy guarantee the universal range of the experiment: "Dies zu betrachten wird sich für viele lohnen, die wie Franz Biberkopf in einer Menschenhaut wohnen und denen es passiert wie diesem Biberkopf, nämlich vom Leben mehr zu verlangen als das Butterbrot."<sup>21</sup> As is promised in the short preface, the reader is to learn from Biberkopf's story just as Biberkopf himself will have learned at the end from "that awful thing which was his life" ("diesem furchibaren Ding, das sein Leben war").<sup>22</sup> Equipped with little more than a yellow summer coat and a "life plan" ("Lebensplan") committing him "to ask more of life than a piece of bread and butter," he is released into a murky and inhospitable environment: Berlin in the years 1928-29. His resilience and resourcefulness are then put to the test in three trials or "blows" ("Schläge"), as they are called in the novel. The result is not tragic failure, and perhaps not even a "sacrifice," as Döblin was to say later,<sup>23</sup> but rather a successful normalization. The drinker and recidivist Biberkopf is rendered a useful and decent porter. He has been "bent straight" ("zurechtgebogen"), in the sense of an applied social correction.<sup>24</sup> Zola's poetics of "l'épreuve," where the novel is understood as a sequence of trials, has been implemented in both

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Olten: Walter 1996) 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 11. English translation: Alfred Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Eugene Jolas, trans. (New York: Frederic Ungar 1983) II.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. "Epilog" in *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, 391.

<sup>24</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 11.

meanings of the word—as scientific test and as moral torment. The truth about man thereby produced is observed both with regard to its material and to its moral consequence; it concerns not only the novel's characters but also the reader. Literature is here both the laboratory and the medium for communicating the experimental results. In addition to being a story about someone who has been "bent straight," the novel provides instruction for the reader's profit to the extent that he makes Biberkopf's normalization his own. He too will be chastened ("ihm wird der Star gestochen") by the story of Franz Biberkopf.<sup>25</sup>

The experiment performed on the subject Franz Biberkopf—the sequence of events told by his story—is similar to those conducted in behavioral research laboratories in the early twentieth-century. The subject is exposed to various stimuli—in Biberkopf's case progressively more intense—in order to test his reactions. This procedure reveals the law governing his reactions, a "meaning" ("Sinn"), or "fate" ("Schicksal"), as Döblin calls it. When behaviorists staged such experiments, they were interested in the determined sequence of stimulus and reaction. John B. Watson believed that their causal relation made behavior predictable, which in turn, at least theoretically, would make it possible to determine social processes.<sup>26</sup> Watson's theory of behavior was conceived as an exact science and was analogous, as he repeatedly emphasized, to mechanics and chemistry.<sup>27</sup> Behaviorist psychology, developed in America during the first two decades of the twentieth century, quickly became known in Germany (where it was invoked by Brecht, among others<sup>28</sup>). It produces a type of knowledge about man that permits not only an exact description but also control over him. In *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin invokes behavioristic concepts such as stimulus and reaction, and the more basic notion of a behavioral causality. Döblin does not

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> John Broadus Watson, *Behavior: An Introduction to Comparative Psychology*, Repr. 1st ed. 1914 (London: Routledge 1995).

<sup>27</sup> For example in Watson's *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*, Repr. 2nd ed. 1924 (Philadelphia/London: Pinter, 1983) 4; See also Karl Spencer Lashley, "The Behavioristic Interpretation of Consciousness," in *Psychological Review* 30 (1923), 237–272 and 329–353.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hansjürgen Rosenbauer, *Brecht und der Behaviorismus*, Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1970; Viktor Žmeġac refers to parallels between Döblin's poetics and behaviorism: "Döblin im Kontext der literarischen Moderne," *Internationale Alfred-Döblin-Kolloquien 1989 and 1991, Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik*, Reihe A, vol. 33 (1993), 12–25.

simply adopt the conclusions or concepts of the behaviorist paradigm, but cites and exposes its epistemological approach, and in particular its reliance on algorithms and deterministic laws.

This epistemological approach is precisely what is thematized in the scene describing Biberkopf's manslaughter of his lover, Ida. The mortal injury, for which Biberkopf was condemned to four years in the Tegel prison, is recounted in the style of a forensic crime reconstruction. Franz's excitement, the rage he directs at his cursing fiancée, and his muscular tic, acquired during the war, conflate into a single movement which brings a wooden cream-whipper into a powerful collision with Ida's rib-cage. Ida's reaction is captured both through words and through non-verbal expressions: "Schon bei dem ersten Hiebe schrie sie au und sagte nicht mehr dreckeriger Strizzi sondern Mensch. Die zweite Begegnung mit dem Sahneschläger erfolgte unter feststehender Haltung Franzens nach einer Vierteldrehung rechts seitens Idas. Worauf Ida überhaupt nichts sagte, sondern schnutenartig merkwürdig den Mund aufsperrte und mit beiden Armen hochfuhr."<sup>29</sup> Mechanical laws are cited alongside their mathematical formulae, without which the episode would remain incomprehensible, as the novel proclaims. These include the first and second Newtonian laws concerning the states of rest and motion of bodies: "Das erste Newtonsche [njutensche] Gesetz, welches lautet: Ein jeder Körper verharrt im Zustand der Ruhe, solange keine Kraftwirkung ihn veranlaßt, seinen Zustand zu ändern [bezieht sich auf Idas Rippen]."<sup>30</sup> The physician Döblin itemizes the results of these laws in a list of lesions: "komplizierter Rippenbruch, Riß im Brustfell, kleiner Lungenriß."<sup>31</sup> Thus translating human behavior (a scene of domestic violence inspired by jealousy and resulting in a fatality) into the terminology of scientific determinism, Döblin reduces the scene to the forces of action and reaction and derives its logic from the parameters of physical and physiological science. Motives, background, emotions—the elements of introspective narration—are all discarded: "Bei solcher zeitgemäßen Betrachtung kommt man gänzlich ohne Erinnern aus."<sup>32</sup> In fact, the scene does not completely dispense with the Furies. Embedded in the report of Ida's

<sup>29</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 100.

manslaughter is the myth of the Atrides, a chain-reaction of violence which includes Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, Clytaemnestra's revenge on Agamemnon and finally her own murder by "the fruit of her joys" ("die Frucht ihrer Freuden").<sup>33</sup> Orestes, who is hounded afterwards by the Furies. But the intermedial slaughter of this family from Greek antiquity, and Orestes' remorse as embodied by the Furies, appear just as inappropriate in this setting as the Newtonian laws do. Greek tragedy and physics are equally incapable of explaining Franz and Ida's collision; it can neither be described in the language of deterministic logic nor in that of mythical fatalism. It is by using a literary montage technique that Döblin not only exposes this incompatibility but also the heterogeneity of these explanatory elements, which leads to the claimed causality and plausibility of the event *ad absurdum*. Their heterogeneity does not merely lie in the difference of topics, statements or discourses; it is not epistemological but representational. Montage is a clash of representations and of the very possibilities that constitute meaning. The "meaning of it all" ("der Sinn des Ganzen"), the logic of repentance that Franz accepts at the end of the novel, remains thus an unproven postulate in the joints of the montage. Physical laws as well as mythical quotations of the Greek Furies, biblical sacrifice, and the trials of Job not only are incommensurable with one another, but remain disjointed with respect to the "story of Franz Biberkopf" which is primarily a story of delinquency, violence, alcoholism, mutilation, nervous breakdown and normalization.

Quite apart from the realms of both myth and physics, this aspect of the story directly addresses doctors and psychiatrists. In an unabashed parody of biblical trials, Biberkopf is thrice struck by fate: he is betrayed by a friend, he loses an arm, and his beloved Mietze is murdered. After the third blow, the murder of Mietze, and his subsequent breakdown, he becomes the object of medical theorizing and therapeutic attempts in the Buch insane asylum in Berlin. In the discussions of the psychiatrists concerning the stuporous patient Biberkopf, Döblin contrasts various theoretical standpoints of psychiatry in the nineteen-twenties.<sup>34</sup> The old-school physiologists who seek to save Biberkopf's life through force-feeding and blood transfu-

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Döblin, as is well known, studied medicine and psychiatrics and published a doctoral thesis on *Gedächtnisstörungen bei der Korsakowschen Psychose*, which he wrote under the direction of the noted psychiatrist Alfred Hoche in Freiburg/Breisgau. He

sions are opposed by the younger doctors who represent the emerging discipline of neuro-psychiatry: "Die jüngeren Herren haben eine besondere Auffassung von diesem Zustand: sie sind geneigt, das Leiden von Franz Biberkopf für psychogen zu halten, also seine Starre nimmt von der Seele ihren Ausgang, es ist ein krankhafter Zustand von Hemmung und Gebundenheit, den eine Analyse schon klären würde, vielleicht als Rückgang auf älteste Seelenstufen . . ."<sup>35</sup> Their attempts to analyze the patient, and to locate his disturbance in psychopathologic categorizations fail—due, stupidly enough, to Biberkopf's stubborn silence. They therefore take recourse to stronger methods: just like the shell-shocked soldiers of the First World War, the veteran Biberkopf is subjected to electro-therapy ("fardisieren"). The theoretical conflict opposing somatic and psychological causes in certain illnesses had been given essential importance by contemporary psychiatry and neurology.<sup>36</sup> Exactly this conflict is fought out literally over the body of patient Biberkopf, who nevertheless shows a marked resistance to all therapy. Oblivious to the contention between the chief surgeon and the "young guard," both to their diagnostic and aetiological differences, a semiconscious and absent-minded Biberkopf confounds the one and the other. Their common blindspot is revealed: neither can contemplate death. The analysis of the apparatus of 'psychiatry,' conducted by Döblin in the doctors' debate is thereby led to its ultimate limit, to its imponderable dead-end.<sup>37</sup> In light of this imponderable, the disciplinary efficacy of theory upon the patient's body becomes visible. Unlike the traditional diagnosis of a catatonic stupor, which is inclined to let the patient "at least sleep peacefully" ("wenigstens ruhig pennen"), the empathetic, hermeneutic approach<sup>38</sup> of the young psychiatrists takes its final recourse to electro-therapy, "modern torture" ("moderne

worked as a doctor and did psychiatric research in the insane asylum of Berlin-Buch. During the First World War, he worked in a military hospital not far from the Western front. Cf. Harald Neumann, *Alfred Döblin. Leben und Werk. Krankheit und Tod* (Mainz: Kirchheim 1987), 12–34.

<sup>35</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 425.

<sup>36</sup> For a general survey of this debate cf. Esther Fischer-Homberger, *Die traumatische Neurose* (Bern: Huber 1975); and, more focused on the questions of aetiology, narrative, and therapy, Eva Horn, "Erlebnis und Trauma. Die narrative Konstruktion des Ereignisses in Psychiatrie und Kriegsroman," in *Moderne und Trauma*, Inka Mülder-Bach, ed. (Vienna: Böhlau 2000), 131–162.

<sup>37</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 426–428.

<sup>38</sup> Concerning psychiatry's hermeneutic intentions, particularly brought to light by Karl Jaspers' influential approach, cf. Schäffner, *Die Ordnung des Wahns*, 83ff.

Folter"), an unrelenting assault on the patient.<sup>39</sup> Though their intent is to "revisit the soul's oldest stages," their last resort, when confronted with a recalcitrant patient, is alternating current ("Wechselstrom"). The doctors' debate thus demonstrates the structure of the human sciences described by Foucault: in theory, the constant invocation of ungraspable origins ("the soul's oldest stages"); in practice, a disciplinary approach to subdue the soul through corporal regimentation ("modern torture"). The (heavily allegorical) spectre of Death, which promptly appears to the hallucinating patient Biberkopf, is the blind-spot of modern knowledge such as it is represented here by psychiatry. Biberkopf's struggle with this personification of Death, presented in stark contrast to the doctors' debate, recapitulates his life as "suffering" ("Leid"), "baseness" ("Schande") and "fury" ("Grimm"), and not in terms of a medical history.<sup>40</sup> Death summons Biberkopf to revisit all of his life's crimes, omissions and temptations. Again, incompatible worlds collide: scientific debate, allegories of death, crime and punishment, just as Newtonian laws and the myth of the Atrides in the *Ida* scene. Their incompatibility does not simply reflect a disparity of discourses such as it is displayed in the conflicting medical theories—stated even more basically, it concerns modes of representation. These modes or types of representation are incommensurable insofar as they imply entirely different relationships between language and its referent and thus also require entirely different processes to understand them. This incompatibility directly affects the possibility to read, process, and understand Döblin's text.

Döblin's famous montage technique provides the key to the relationship between these divergent materials and perspectives.<sup>41</sup> Everything depends on the reading elicited from such a collage of heterogeneous elements. The fact that the novel might be (and has been) understood as a parable of guilt, redemption, and sacrifice implies a specific association between its disparate elements such as the plot thread, biblical citation, myth and the frequently quoted slaughter-house scenes. It is primarily this combination that produces the motif of "sacrifice," which Döblin later suggested as the novel's

<sup>39</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 426, 437.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 429–434.

<sup>41</sup> For a thorough discussion of the montage technique in Döblin's work, cf. Harald Jähner, *Erzähler, soufflierter, montierter Text. Zur Konstruktion des Romans 'Berlin Alexanderplatz' von Alfred Döblin* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang 1984).

theme. It is induced in the mind of a reader who has been instructed by the novel's preface to search for a deeper meaning to the "radical cure" ("Gewaltkur").<sup>42</sup> *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, with its jungle of newspaper excerpts, billboard signs, biblical and literary quotations, invites a reading which proceeds precisely as an experiment that subjects the reader himself to a test of interpretation. As Döblin announced in the preface: "Dies zu betrachten und zu hören wird sich für viele lohnen, die wie Franz Biberkopf in einer Menschenhaut wohnen. . . ."<sup>43</sup> The reader will "benefit" only if he manages to make the montage's multiplicities converge in a single meaning; yet while the preface suggests, even prescribes, a unifying interpretation, the heterogeneity of the material presented in the novel and the contrast between the modes of representation ultimately fail to support one. It is the multiplicity of types of representation, rather than of discourses, which constitutes the essence of Döblin's montage technique. This multiplicity never allows for a single "meaning" in the sense Döblin promises in the preface. Just as in the scene of *Ida's* death, where the causalities of movement, collision and wounding suggest a deterministic principle but appear absurd when Biberkopf's rage, the kitchen utensil, and *Ida's* ensuing medical complications are considered in a causal sequence. The novel's investigation frames a question but never presents a definite result, or supports a definite answer. The montage "tests" the reader's interpretive skills and may induce in him a reading of the heterogeneity of the material as a disclaimer, as the discrediting of claims to truth. The anthropological exemplarity of the story of Franz Biberkopf depends on the possibility of extracting a "useful meaning" from this narrative. Only to the extent in which the story functions as a 'trial' in the full sense of the word, as a laboratory test and as a moral examination, is it an experiment gauging its readers' faculties of association and learning. The experiment in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* produces a certain knowledge about man, both in the unfolding of its plot and in the course of its reading, while investigating behavioral and interpretive potentials. Paradoxically, however, the meaning of the test for the reader might lie in an inadequacy of his reading, a reading more deconstructive than affirmative of the profit of coherent meaning. Just as Biberkopf's being "bent straight" into a broken if disciplined porter appears a

<sup>42</sup> Döblin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

highly unsatisfactory "happy" ending, it may also be doubted whether the reader emerges safely from the thicket of references. The reader's gain—and with it modern literature's anthropological explanatory—is an outcome as uncertain as that of any experiment.

### III

It is this kind of research in narrative form that *Hamlet*, written almost twenty years later, shares with *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. In contrast to the latter's experimental poetics, which presents a series of tests for the protagonist and the reader alike, *Hamlet's* truth is unraveled retrospectively. The story unfolds around an immemorial family secret that has been triggered by the traumatic war injury of the son Edward Alison. His return home after losing a leg in World War II launches a mechanism of narration and remembrance that ultimately aims at unearthing a deeper truth from his trauma: "völlig verdrängte, abgelagerte Dinge."<sup>44</sup> The trauma associated with his physical mutilation is retraced to one received much earlier in a family conflict. In its narrative structure, the novel *Hamlet* writes what might be called a poetics of psychoanalysis, and Döblin himself called it "eine Art psychoanalytischer Roman."<sup>45</sup> Its narration aims at slowly uncovering repressed experiences, but the stories told by the family members in order to treat Edward's trauma are far from being the plain truth. Instead, they are riddles beneath which one has to carefully unearth the latent truth, as would an analyst when listening to his patients' narratives. The novel thus enacts the adventure of a *talking cure*, a cure that benefits its patient, but whose violent dynamic finally engulfs his entire family.

Psychoanalysis is the inversion of modern human sciences and their experimental setting such as it is re-enacted in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. "By following the same path as the human sciences," Foucault writes, "but with its gaze turned the other way, psychoanalysis moves towards the moment—by definition inaccessible to any theoretical knowledge of man [...]—at which the contents of consciousness articulate themselves, or rather stand gaping, upon men's finitude."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende* (Olten: Walter 1966), 278.

<sup>45</sup> Alfred Döblin, "Journal" 1952/1953, in *Schriften zu Leben und Werk* (Olten: Walter 1966), 402.

<sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 374.

Analogously, *Hamlet's* poetics of knowledge might be seen as the inversion of the poetics of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The aim of *Hamlet's* therapeutic storytelling is a return to origins, both the origins of the family, and of the subject. The cure pushes Edward's anamnesis ever further back in the story of his traumatization, through his early childhood, to conflicts between his parents even before his birth. It is soon clear that a childhood trauma prefigures that of his mutilation in war: "der Pfahl in meinem Körper," as Edward states, "um den ich herumgewachsen bin."<sup>47</sup> This childhood trauma stems from a violent assault suffered at the hands of his father, who suspects him of being the child of an extra-marital affair; the origin of the trauma is thus nested in the mystery of his own origins. The central question, answered only after all the contradictory narratives of father, mother, uncle and sister have been spun, concerns Edward's conception: is he really the child of his presumed father, Gordon, or of his mother's lover, Glenn? This family secret marks exactly the origins of a human existence and, as such, must remain unknown to him. His injury by the Japanese suicide pilot 'repeats' the one from his childhood when he was beaten by Gordon; his trauma therefore does not occur out of the blue, but rather grows out of a sequence of traumatic situations reaching back to an inconceivable primal scene. Everything has been re-enacted a thousand times: "Edward hat jedes Wort aufgefassen [...] Er kennt jedes Wort. [...] Sie sind tausendmal vor ihm getreten und haben bedeutet: Mord. Der fette tobsüchtige Mann ist auf ihn zugetreten und holt mit dem rechten Arm, dem Mordhammer, aus, um auf ihn einzuschlagen. [...] Edwards freier Arm hebt sich schützend, biegt sich vor und legt sich über sein Gesicht, wie er es tausendmal im Traum getan hat. [...] Er steht auf dem Schiffsdeck. Der japanische Selbstmordflieger senkrecht herunter."<sup>48</sup> This invocation of a chain of traumata stretching ever further back recalls psychoanalysis' early theorizing on war trauma in the First World War.<sup>49</sup> When the number of shell-shocked soldiers radically increased during this war, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists argued that every war neurosis following a trauma could be traced back to a predisposition based on a previously damaged psychical constitution. Pre-existing

<sup>47</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Hamlet*, 430.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>49</sup> See Schäffner's excellent reconstruction of war psychiatry, Schäffner, *Die Ordnung des Wahns*, 358–378.



weaknesses (according to the psychiatrists) or family conflicts (according to the psychoanalysts) caused the psychological suffering with which soldiers returned from war—not battlefield experiences. By arguing in this manner, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts downplayed the impact of battlefield horrors on the soldiers' psyches, and promoted a theory that centered on family configurations.<sup>50</sup> When Döblin traces Edward's mutilation trauma back to the drama of his family and childhood, he partakes in precisely this psychoanalytical understanding of war trauma. Just as psychoanalysis would prefer it, Döblin's *Hamlet* understands the father-mother-child triangle as the source of all wishes, fears, drives and sufferings.

This retrospective epistemology reflects a basic constellation of man's self-historicization in the human sciences since the eighteenth century: man inquires after his origins.<sup>51</sup> Psychoanalysis, which Foucault situates in (or at the edge of) the modern episteme, represents a potential disruption of modern human sciences. It reflects the "unconceived" while remaining obsessed (modern anthropology *oblige*) with ungraspable origins, primal scenes, and fundamental drives. The subject's history, as it is understood by psychoanalysis, invokes sexuality and desire as the medium of this origin. This is precisely what Döblin's family narratives are all about: 'Which constellation of desire gave birth to me? And where is my place in it?' is the subject's (i.e. Edward's) insistent question. Psychoanalysis answers this question by telling the story of Oedipus, the story of primal desire and violence between parents and children. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud presents the "Hamlet" fiction as a later variant of the Oedipus myth.<sup>52</sup> It is exactly these two stories, "Hamlet" and "Oedipus," among others, which Döblin's fictional family members recount in their confusion and mutual antagonism. But the novel indicates a decisive difference between "Oedipus" and "Hamlet." The Freudian version of the Oedipus myth justifies a father's aggression against his son—the castration threat—as a punishment for the latter's sexual desire for the mother; it implies a complicity between mother and son and a rivalry between father and son. The "Hamlet" version of the

<sup>50</sup> Concerning the narration of war trauma in psychiatry and psychoanalysis as well as their epistemological impact on the literature of World War I cf. Horn, "Erlebnis und Trauma."

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, ch. 9, part 6: "The retreat and return of the origin," 328–335.

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, Studienausgabe vol. 2 (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 1975), 265–270.

same constellation tends rather to decry the mother's integrity: she is the one who betrays and assaults her son alongside his (murdered) father. "Hamlet" aligns the mother with the usurping pseudo-father where she appears incontestably as a liar and her son's adversary, not to mention being an adulteress and a murderer's accomplice. The truth of "Hamlet," the story recast by the novel as proclaimed by its title, finally replaces that of "Oedipus," dismissed as a self-serving fiction. Accordingly, Edward finally makes his mother the guilty and depraved party, not his father. The result is a displacement of truth and alliance, a shift from the mother to the once-feared father held by psychoanalytic theory as essential to the emergence of a male identity. The "Hamlet" story marks the end of a process of successful male oedipalization; the son leaves the symbiosis or alliance with his mother in exchange for an identification with his father. He accepts his law, just as Edward finally avenges Gordon and dismisses his mother's narratives as disgusting self-incrimination.<sup>53</sup> His trauma is cured, the family is destroyed, but the supremacy of the oedipal triangle is also affirmed.

Döblin stages the narrative game of truth as a contest between revelatory stories, each of which debunks the others. In the multitude of novellas told by the protagonists, the novel stages a metapoetical reflection on the flawed relationship between literature and truth. Although the novellas narrated within the novel seem, at face value, to have little bearing on the family drama, they all circle obsessively around the themes of sexuality and violence, and comment on the relationship between literature and truth. The stories about the making of Shakespeare's King Lear drama, or the poetry of Jaufie Rudel, unravel the political, historical and sexual backgrounds of literary production. What derailments of desire, what political strategies produce literature? And what is the "real truth" behind fiction's sentimental pastiches? Who narrates and with what goal? In the novellas, literature is exposed as a deliberate and strategic lie, as in the King Lear and Princess of Tripoli episodes. Both of these embedded narratives reconstruct the conditions governing the birth of literature, the secret agendas which the texts—Shakespeare's play or Jaufie Rudel's songs—must cover up if they wish to achieve their aims. Literature does not tell the truth, it *performs it*, or—as Döblin

<sup>53</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Hamlet*, 451ff.

himself once formulated it: "Kunst ist nicht frei, sondern wirksam."<sup>54</sup> The stories of Jaufré Rudel and King Lear describe in detail two literary systems, medieval minstrelsy and Renaissance drama, in which truth is sought in a jungle of political propaganda, gender war and historical models of authorship. The sentimental tales of the betrayed old king Lear and of the amorous troubadour Jaufré Rudel, as relayed to us by Shakespeare and Swinburne, are unmasked as ideological constructions and historical humbug. The novellas reenact with historical precision the very situation of their own constitution; narration is never a tale of what truly happened, but always a scheming, strategic, bent version of reality. Poets lie just as patients lie. The family members of Döblin's novel, entangled in the post-traumatic talking cure for Edward's mutilation, tell stories to defend their respective positions, stories embroiled so as best to convince. But to an ear that knows how to listen, the truth is present underneath all the stories' dreamlike distortions and displacements; a subtle listener can extract their truth, as does a psychoanalyst when decrypting a dream's hypertrophic substitutions. Edward takes the position of the patient—but also that of the analyst. He interprets all the stories in the light of the family situation and finally becomes an inquisitor in search of inavowed guilt; he incarnates the affinity, already noticed by Freud, between psychoanalyst and examining judge.<sup>55</sup>

It is striking that the common theme of all the novel's stories—underneath their disguises as myth, poetry, politics, and historical folklore—is sexuality: specifically its spiral of decay into sin, violence, lust and disgust. Salomé, Pluto and Proserpina, Theodora and Titus symbolize the link between violence and sexuality, desire and defilement. Precisely this story is told at length by Edward's mother Alice in the Theodora novella, but also in her life story as she relates it to her son. It is a motif continuously repeated since her youth, when she was seduced by her Greek tutor: "Ich konnte nicht von ihm lassen und ekelte mich."<sup>56</sup> Always the same structure of abasement and lust, always the same couple: the woman caught in the ambivalence of desire and disgust, sullied and humiliated by a man nonetheless

dependent on her. Variations on this theme are heard in the stories of Theodora and Proserpina, and it equally summarizes Gordon and Alice's marriage; the woman sullied by her desire. The disintegration of the family at the end of the book, with Alice's apparent self-abandonment in escapades of nymphomaniac self-destruction, is thus readable as a story of feminine "depravity" ("Verworfenheit"), as Walter Muschg claims in the postface.<sup>57</sup> If the novel has a message—at least to male readers like Muschg—it concerns this destructive aspect of sexuality. Reading the novel's end, one cannot but wonder at the radical moralizing about sexuality that Döblin not only obtains from his protagonists but seems himself to share. The narrator comments on Alice with a biblical citation: "Aber die, die sündigen und unrecht tun, sind Mörder an ihrer eigenen Seele. . . . Sie staunte das fremdartige, halbbedeudete fleischerne Wesen an, das Weib, dessen Bild ihr aus dem Spiegel entgegentrat."<sup>58</sup> Narration and citation merge in a blunt condemnation. Alice's life, the narrative about a war trauma, a misguided marriage and the ruin of a family fuse into the parable of a fall from grace. The novel, which ends with the parents' common prayer at Gordon's deathbed, their redemption in mutual forgiveness, and Edward's entry into a monastery (in a version later scrapped), carries strongly Catholic overtones. Given the incredulity inspired by the novellas, what must the reader conclude when faced with this all-too-pat conclusion? Why indeed should a religious account satisfy more than any other version of the truth?

It has often been said that the end of his "psychoanalytic novel," as Döblin called it, is perhaps too patently marked by the author's previous conversion to Catholicism. But there is a strong link between a psychoanalytical poetics of narration and the Catholic practice of confession. Foucault, in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, traces the modern psychoanalytic narration of sexuality back to its genealogical precursors in confessional practices.<sup>59</sup> Religious confession and psychoanalytical anamnesis not only partake in the production of knowledge about sexual desires, fantasies and practices, but also share a technique of producing narration. But Döblin's shift from a psychoanalytical interest in sexuality within the family triangle

<sup>54</sup> Alfred Döblin, "Kunst ist nicht frei, sondern wirksam: ars militans" in *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, 245–251.

<sup>55</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Tatbestandsdiagnostik und Psychoanalyse" in *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 7: *Werke 1906–1909* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 1966), 3–15.

<sup>56</sup> Alfred Döblin, *Hamlet*, 465.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 579.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Robert Hurley trans. (New York: Pantheon 1978).

toward a Christian demonizing of desire also marks a break between the pre-modern and the genuinely modern practice of producing knowledge. Even if confession is the pre-figuration of the modern talking cure, the kinds of knowledge about man each produces is essentially different. Whereas, as Foucault argued, the coherence of 'man' as examined by the modern human sciences is compromised and fractured in the very instant of his conception, his unity is incontestably reconstituted once placed in relationship to God. Döblin's "Catholicism" might be understood as a retreat from modern science and its psychoanalytic investigative technique towards the confessions of the flesh and a vision of mankind as fallen but worthy of divine grace. Granted that the analyst's attention was prefigured by the open ear of the confessing priest, a historical and epistemic gap still separates the Christian expiatory technique from modern psychic hygienics. Döblin's resort to a religious conceptualization of man re-centers and reintegrates a conceptualization of man threatened with dissolution in the laboratories of science.

Both novels explicitly engage in the production of knowledge and truth about man, but in opposite directions: the one chronologically forwards, and the other backwards. Yet they both develop an archaeology of human knowledge and explore its preconditions, limits and its disciplinary effects on the individual. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* does this by following an epistemology of experimentation, invoking the explanatory models of the natural sciences with their insistence (paradigmatic in behaviorism) on deterministic, universally applicable laws. Its literary montages combine contradictory discourses and incommensurable modes of representation to illuminate common blind-spots and the clefts between apparently contiguous fields of knowledge. *Hamlet*, on the other hand, is aligned along the narrative and rememorative strategies of psychoanalysis and its evocation of an ever anterior, ungraspable truth. The reconstruction and unmasking performed here by narration concern 'faulty' (in both meanings of the word) origins, both of man and of literature. A methodological lesson emerges from Döblin's oeuvre concerning the relationship between human sciences and modern literature. His novels, written with the explicitly pronounced aim of performing research on man, cannot be conceived of as mere productions of an autonomous poetic imagination. Modern fiction, and Döblin's most idiosyncratically, is nested in a broader field of anthropological

knowledge and shares epistemological grounds with the discourse of the human sciences. To read his novels as mere "poetic products," and deny their embedded position within modern knowledge and epistemology, would imply neglecting the fundamental law of their poetics. And yet, on the other hand, they must not be reduced to the statements and discourses that they share with scientific disciplines. Literature neither merely applies nor repeats discourse. Its "poetology of knowledge" remains slightly but irreducibly different from that of the human sciences in the sense that it disrupts and reflects the emergence and effects of such knowledge.

An analysis of literary texts can therefore not confine itself to locating and dating relicts of scientific thought preserved in fictional references. The question raised is how this knowledge is systematized in language, in the regularities but also in the irregularities of representation. A perspective allowing an appreciation of literature would not only mean considering it an "archive of knowledge" but also as singular, eccentric, underhandedly ironical or contradictory epistemology. Döblin's example exhibits the proximity of scientific and literary impulses, but exposes also their irreconcilable divergence. His novels analyze modern anthropological knowledge, they develop and modulate it in fictional experiments—and end up putting their analysis itself to the test. And by doing so, they illustrate one advantage that literature might have over scientific discourses: its ability to render visible certain rules of the game of truth.

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