Alfred Döblin

Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) was one of the major representatives of the generation of great German writers that came to maturity during the First World War and found itself removed from the source of its inspiration by the Second. His life and works reflect the extraordinary disarray and creativity of those times. While continuing his medical studies in Berlin and Freiburg, he distinguished himself with his work for the stage and his short stories for the journal *Sturm* (in which *The Dancer and the Body* was first published in 1910), one of the broadsheets of German Expressionism. These stories were published a few years later in a collection with the title *Die Ermordung einer Butterblume* (The Murder of a Buttercup).

Döblin came into his own as a writer while working as a neurologist–psychiatrist in the Berlin public hospital system (his MD thesis had been on Korsakoff's syndrome) and as an army doctor during the war. With his novel *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun* (The Three Leaps of Wang-lun), he developed what he called a new 'epic' style in which he examined social movements and upheavals. He was surely exaggerating, if only slightly, when he told Martin Buber in 1915, 'I never have a conscious intention. I always write completely involuntarily, and that's not just a turn of phrase.' He proved to be nothing if not prolific. *Wallenstein*, a historical novel set during the Thirty Years War, appeared in 1920. This was followed by a dystopian science-fiction work, *Berge, Meere und Giganten* (Mountains, Seas and Giants), in which a future society struggles with a rampant technology in a manner reminiscent of the film *Bladerunner*; but it was his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) which consolidated his reputation with the reading public. Throughout his writing life, Döblin experimented with form. Having already been one of the first writers to adopt the free indirect style, in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* he developed a form of montage, in which a 'village chorus'

sounds out around the circumstances of his simple but not unsympathetic main character Franz Biberkopf, who is an ex-convict trying to make good in a coldly manipulative world. The village chorus includes the narrator himself, in ironic filmic overdub. Montage has its origins in the conviction that the traditional novel, with its focus on the individual psyche, cannot do justice to the nature of experience in a modern city. Although the mass media were in their infancy, Döblin was astute in allowing newspaper headlines, popular songs, emblems and even advertisements to impinge on his narrative. It is a technique that has been replicated hundreds of times afterwards, but critics of the period, including Walter Benjamin, were quick to recognise it as a major formal achievement. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is a city novel that bears comparison with Joyce's *Ulysses* and Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*. It owes its fascination essentially to the way it is told — what some critics have called Kinostil.

Berlin was Döblin's home, his window on the world. He admitted in an autobiographical sketch that he was 'a Berliner with vague notions of other cities and regions.' When the Nazis seized power in 1933, he fled with his family to Paris via Switzerland. Although the French gave him citizenship in 1936, he was never entirely at ease outside of his archetypal metropolis. His eldest son Wolfgang (Vincent), who committed suicide during his military service in the French Army in 1940, turned out to be a brilliant mathematician; although his parents and younger brothers, who had since fled to Los Angeles, only discovered his fate at the end of the war. Like other German writers (Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht), Döblin ended up in Hollywood. A year later he converted to Catholicism, and returned to Europe in 1945, working for the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs. His later novels included a massive tetralogy, *November 1918*, which examines the failed revolution in Germany in the closing months of the First World

War. He died of Parkinson's disease in 1957, and is buried with his wife in Housseras, the same village in the Vosges where his son Wolfgang was buried in 1940. His collected work comprises 17 novels, and a host of smaller pieces.

Perhaps his strongest supporter in the post-war period has been Günter Grass, who has gone on record as saying that 'without the Futurist elements of Döblin's work from *Wang Lun* to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, my prose is inconceivable.' Outside of specialist circles, however, it is *Berlin Alexanderplatz* for which Döblin is almost exclusively known. It was filmed, in an extraordinary faithful rendition by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who in 1980 adopted it for German television in 13 parts (15 hours), and promptly declared it his masterpiece. Although Döblin himself regarded all his works — which range from the jungles of the Amazon to the rivers of China, and extend chronologically from the 17th to the 27th century — as interrelated and taking up questions left unanswered by their predecessors, there is no doubt that having the city as protagonist in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* helped to impose a framework on his teeming, tropical, almost hypertrophic imagination. The novel is a rare celebration of the exuberance and misery of the modern metropolis that is still very much worth reading.

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