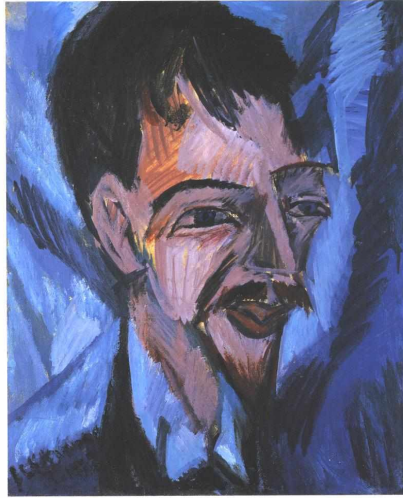


Alfred Doeblin



Beyond Alexanderplatz

ALFRED DÖBLIN

GERMAN MASQUERADE

WRITINGS ON POLITICS, LIFE, AND LITERATURE
IN CHAOTIC TIMES

PART 3 : LIFE

Edited and translated by
C.D. Godwin

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Alfred Döblin (10 August 1878 – 26 June 1957) is now recognised as one of the three great literary figures of early 20th century Germany (alongside Thomas Mann and Bert Brecht). His works encompass epic fictions, novels, short stories, plays, theatre reviews, political essays and journalism, natural philosophy, the theory and practice of literary creation, and autobiographical excursions. His many-sided, controversial, even contradictory ideas made him a lightning-rod for the philosophical and political confusions that permeated 20th century Europe.

In the half century after his death, virtually all Döblin's vast output has gradually been published in modern editions, often with useful editorial commentary. But in the Anglosphere he remains known, if at all, only for *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

Döblin's non-fiction writings, of which this volume offers a small selection, provide indispensable glimpses into his creative process, mind and character as he grapples with catastrophes, confusions and controversies in his own life and in the wider world of the chaotic 20th century.

C. D. Godwin has translated six and a quarter of Döblin's great epic novels, so that all nine epics are now available in English (albeit some are out of print, and two have not yet been formally published as books). He has also translated numerous pieces of Döblin's wide-ranging non-fiction, a sample of which is included in this volume.

His website www.beyondalexanderplatz.com offers translations and commentary on Döblin and other neglected contemporaries.

The podcast [The Epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin](#) presents readers of English for the first time with fascinating details about Döblin's life and works.

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The excerpt from Döblin's Introduction to his selection *The Living Thoughts of Confucius* was translated by Doris A Infield, © Cassell & Co 1942.

'Prometheus and the Primitive' was published on *The Brooklyn Rail's* InTranslation website in September 2014.

'Cannibals' was published in *The Brooklyn Rail's* print edition in March 2019.

DÖBLIN'S WORKS IN ENGLISH

Translated by C D Godwin unless otherwise noted

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Wallenstein, available at <https://beyondalexanderplatz.com>

Mountains Oceans Giants, 2021 Galileo.

Manas, 2021 Galileo

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The Land without Death (The Amazonas Trilogy), 2022 Galileo

November 1918 – A German Revolution:

Vol 1 *Citizens & Soldiers*, 2024 Galileo.

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Part Three

LIFE

Döblin wrote several autobiographical pieces over the years, some tormented, some playful and self-deprecating. The genre-bending compilation in "A First Look Back" gives us the most revealing picture of this complex dual-professional personality.

The letters describing his "Year in Hollywood" reveal the gruelling experience of exile, and also the sensitive matter of his religious conversion that clouded his critical reception in the years after the Second World War. Even today his explicitly Christian writings are largely ignored by a growing Döblin lit. crit industry.

DOCTOR AND WRITER
The Remarkable Career of an Author
Die literarische Welt 1927 [SLW 92-98]

I'm also a medical man, and it's no secondary profession. My career so far, about which you have enquired, esteemed gentlemen, is on the inside always very calm and steady, from the outside has become very quiet, not to say dreary. I was born quite a long time ago in Stettin, and am not yet dead. But it would be wrong to assume that I am really here, and that that is really my very quiet but not at all dreary career.

I was hauled off many years ago, still young, to Berlin, where I have lived ever since in the most peculiar way. It's true. At first I was fed by my eldest brother, may his name be on God's lips. And I studied: Medicine - Medicine because I was already writing while at school, but I despised literature and even more those who produced it. Even towards my own writings I felt roughly what a man with a chronic cold feels about his sniffles. When I completed my medical studies I was in my mid-twenties, and nothing to me was more urgent than to escape the struggle with so-called existence. I went as Assistant to various lunatic asylums. I always felt good among these patients. I realised then there are only two kinds of people I can stand, along with plants, animals and stones: namely children and the mad. These I have always loved, really. And if someone asks what nation I belong to, I shall say: neither to the Germans nor to the Jews, but to children and the mad.

I pottered around for years in lunatic asylums, and wrote a few things about my patients. And it occurs to me that from the asylum at Buch I wrote once of a case of hysteria with torpidity - that was in 1906-07, twenty years ago - which I analysed and traced back to changes in mental dynamics and energetics: I have to say that Freud brought nothing marvellous to me personally. Then I had to leave the asylums, which had become very dear and homelike to me. I wanted to help lighten the darkness in the patients. Psycho-analysis, I felt, couldn't do this. You have to go into the physical, but not into the brain, maybe into the glands, metabolism. And so I gave myself up for several years to internal medicine.

In the land I now entered, they knew nothing of Joseph their new king. They had TB, bad heart, diabetes, and these ailments befell people friendly or fierce, thoughtful or thoughtless. I plodded year after year through wards and especially laboratories. Mice, guinea-pigs, dogs encountered me in the labs; up front in the main building we tried to heal people, and at the back to kill animals. The life was fresher, more active than in the asylum, there was a constant flow of patients. In addition there was a huge insuperable mass of observations and data in books and journals, all wonderfully exact, communicable, verifiable. I stayed in the biology labs deep into the night, and on the way home passed through the Emergency Room where the fevered and the poisoned came in; what a life it was. I'd already forgotten my time in the asylums, and why I'd come here. I was 33 years old, and then - I left that life.

Not willingly. I'd married, so wasn't allowed to stay.

And in this way I had cunningly managed to avoid for many years the so-called struggle for existence - and now had to plunge right in. I'd sunk my teeth deep into Medicine, and now must let it go. It was in this crisis, this sense of loss, that I took up writing again; after a few stories a fat Chinese novel. I was now a general practitioner at the Halleschen Tor in Berlin, served a lot of shifts in ambulances, day and night, every morning for months went to a private hospital,

substituted here and there. I wrote on steps, in empty waiting rooms, could write walking or standing. And thought endlessly often back to the laboratories, the patients in their beds. Then, or somewhat later, I took a job at the Charité, doing biological follow-up work. This – just before the war – was a final flickering. I moved to Lichtenberg; independent practice showed its advantages; and I began from outside to observe science with scepticism. I no longer wanted to be boxed up in hospitals for my existence. Science: I still followed what the newspapers reported, heard what colleagues were working on. But slowly it took on another face. I could use very little of what I'd learned over so many long years. And I forgot more and more of it. It really was not usable. It was erudition, but no real knowledge. I saw how little one has from it. And then, lots of diagnosing. Well, what had I learned during those years in asylums and hospitals? How ailments progressed, what they were – and if it really was these that the people suffered from. It flattered my thought processes – those of my chiefs too – to know how everything progressed. We knew, and that was that. Treatment, effects, we learned on the side. No, we didn't learn, we just peeped over each other's shoulders.

So how did it go, outside? They didn't know as much as I did, many colleagues I came among; – but the life was strange. The patients were strange. They ran in their thousands to quack healers, magnetopaths and the like. And – regained their health. I couldn't say how many funny things I came across in my consulting room – any doctor will tell you. Various means hit the nail on the head, but others ... For months an elderly man came to my clinic, every time pulled a little bottle and a pouch from his pocket and placed them before me; I was supposed to write a prescription. He had old-age complaints; the drops were blue water, the pills contained iron, Blaud's Pills, anaemic girls take them. I sometimes asked him at the beginning what they were for. Well, he always takes them, and they're good. Later it emerged that his sister, who was already dead, had also taken these things. What's more, the man clearly did not see me; I lived in a building previously occupied by a doctor who had prescribed the drops and pills to him or his sister, and now he automatically came to this building and put the things on the table. Once he broke through his reticence, and mentioned as he left that his haemorrhoids were better. Another time he mentioned the pills were for passing water. It seems he's dead now, or in an infirmary. – Humans are wonderful society, you can only be nice to them, embarrassed by your arrogance. I found my patients lying in their wretched rooms; they brought their rooms with them to my clinic. I saw their condition, their milieu; everything went over into the social, ethics, and politics. I often wondered if I had made a bad choice when I abandoned clinical charts and guinea-pigs. It seemed to me: no.

My Chinese book (oh, literature!) wandered from publisher to publisher, from city to city throughout our great Germany. When S Fischer took it, the war came, and – it was again left lying. I was making no economic progress as a doctor, and writing also led nowhere. And to give the business even more oomph I had a child, and a second on the way. But Heaven always had a kind thought for me. For example now, as I sat at the zero point: war broke out, I had to leave, and as a doctor I did not fall into ruin, and neither did my wife and children. After the war, now with three youngsters, the water soon rose to my neck. It's not easy to set up your own practice, lacking any money while you wait. I'd dashed off three novels already, as well as two collections of stories and two plays, which admittedly borders on suicide. Then down from Heaven came the inflation. It ruined many, but put me back on my feet: a short while before I'd been hired as the Berlin critic for a Prague newspaper, which at first was nothing, but now ... When even this manna ceased to fall in the desert, I had in my heart's blindness written another novel, a Utopian

one. I travelled to Poland, but that too was nothing. Then I hit on the notion of writing an Indian book, and borrowed extensively, almost tropically, from my publisher, who so cheerfully printed my books. I was still full of the Utopian perspectives I would set before him from my previous book, which now turned out to be a practice-run for this step. The step succeeded. My fourth son was born. And I lived on advances.

Now I run an insurance-backed neuro-psychiatric practice in Berlin. But I have to confess that the most interesting object of my psychological musings is my publisher. He keeps lending me money. I'd love to know what goes on in the man's head. I wouldn't like to be in his shoes. To put it plainly and relatively seriously, after oodles of medical preparation, after decades of literary work, I am incapable of existence either as a doctor or a literary man. You ask why? Gentlemen, it's easy to work out. You should try an insurance-backed practice and know what the prospects are if you don't toil like a beast from morning till late at night. For me, though recently I've kept a few noontime hours free (not for snoozing), nothing can come of it. And literature? Oh, my poor publisher. My heart breaks when I think of him, for I have all I need. From all my books up until now I have had a real annual income of not even 2000 Mark. That's less than a minor employee earns, a very minor one. A better stenographer with a clue has more than 150 Mark a month; from all those books, including the one just published, I still have only as much as a smart full-time stenographer. Perhaps I would have done better to become a stenographer, smart or otherwise? Rather than write books? No, no.

And now I must utter a big word, that has been a truth in me ever since I began to write and practice medicine. It's truly a fabulous, even if comical, arrangement that when I sit myself down, fantasise and write, someone is ready to pay me for it! When I visit a sick patient and have passed a ruminative quarter of an hour with him, feel perhaps that I have done him some good, then – should I also allow myself to be paid for it? As an assistant doctor I often felt a remarkable sense of shame when I received my salary: every day I can go through these wards, see and experience so much – and be paid for it. When you have a family, six of us, you have to think about money. But something does not fit. And I can only laugh when theoreticians speak of economy and economy and see nothing else ...

Finally, since I'm to speak of my medical profession, a word about medical science, and a word about practice. At the end of this year you will be able, if you have the desire, to read a book of mine with observations and thoughts about Nature. In it I say nothing of illness and health. I feel no compulsion to do so. But I have a suspicion. Please allow me, though, to keep quiet about it. And practice, as I think about it: it's work, activity, and a great deal of content. There are private clinics, and insurance-backed clinics. The insurance-backed practice – let me say this – is the natural one best suited to the doctor, because it places doctor and patient anonymously face to face and leaves financial matters out of it. The current manner of this activity is not good for much, but in principle it's more right, more natural than private practice. I see only one good point about the higher fees: the fees are an offering, an active contribution by the patient that obliges him to do more: to gear himself up for recovery.

I assure you, greatly esteemed gentlemen, who have asked me about the profession that runs alongside my writing: if circumstances should force me to it, I would rather, quite honestly, in this spiritually refractory age of hacks, give up literature in favour of the meaningful, respectable (even if very poor) profession of doctor.

^^^

A DENTIST AND HIS VICTIM

Berliner Tageblatt, 7 August 1927 [SLW 83-89]

As the holidays approached, I thought about all those things I should finish off, need to bring with me, I wanted to head off entirely without ballast. Then one night (how timely, I thought) I was assailed by toothache in a lower wisdom tooth. I knew this tooth, it already had a filling; when it began to ache the year before, a few dabs of iodine had settled it. That Sunday night I thought: "Good, I have enough time before next Saturday, I shall have it dabbed once more."

On Monday I rang the dentist's doorbell. He's away. There's a locum. He'll dab it for me. And he dabbed it nice and brown on Tuesday too. The previous year all had gone swimmingly, but this time a fatal night came, such a dreadful piercing, tightening, squeezing that I waited impatiently for morning so I could run to the telephone. "The dabs aren't working, what should I do?"

"It'll have to come out." I think it over, ask: "Tell me, can you make a good job of that?" I actually ask him this. He: "Of course!"

"With an injection, an anaesthetic?" – "Of course."

The man lives around the corner. I think: "Pulling a tooth, what's the problem?" He may be a locum, but he was chosen personally by my dentist. And so on Wednesday, that awful Wednesday, off I go in a not quite authentic casual mood, around the corner. I shall quite soon have turned the corner. It was shortly before my surgery hour; I wanted it over quickly.

He's a young, slim man, his voice and manner not particularly educated, wears a spotless white coat. No one else is there, I can climb onto the chair right away. I open my mouth wide, his injection passes lower left through the mucus membrane into dark depths. He jabs, jabs, prods again, how deep will he prod, I've never experienced anything like it. When he withdraws the needle I say: "That went pretty deep!" He's at work behind me: "Yes, you have to get to the nerve; that's where it runs." I think to myself: "How does he know where my nerve runs?" Then he stands in front of me. We wait for the anaesthetic to take effect. "Feel it yet?" Now and then he calls me "Mr Dublin" with a "u". I confirm: "Loss of feeling, numbness, no. But what's this: such a strange prickling in the tongue."

"It'll come."

I'm a little uneasy, I try to calm my fate, ask: "Do you do much locum work?"

Yes, and he has his own practice in North Berlin. In the winter he mostly goes to Arosa, as a winter sports trainer. For two months. Terror arises again in me. He asks: "Are you a doctor?"

"Yes, neurologist."

"I've had dealings with nerve doctors. I got the most help from Professor Sch. I had a bad head cold. I still have lingering symptoms, like chewing with my mouth." And he goes to the window and shows me, and I see the curious way his mouth moves. I sigh inwardly, I'm deeply affected. A slight numbness has set in on the left, not a dead feeling like before; the fatal prickling in the tongue is worse. Now he's here with another needle. "What's this one for?"

"Reduce bleeding."

What he did with this injection didn't hurt. But there I sat, really, with knees drawn up! For the fluid in the syringe seemed never to empty out however hard he squeezed. He braced himself

enormously. I thought: He'll break the thin canula, he'll dive right into my mouth. He didn't dive in, thankfully he withdrew the needle; he had done something worse to me.

First he grabbed at my tooth. And broke it off. Then he took two pincers and worked at the stump. Then he was astonished at the blood, so much blood, and swabbed it. Then I said "No," for sensation was returning at the mishandled spot.

"That can't be, so quickly."

Ignoring his objection I stood up. "I tell you it is. I can feel what you're doing. And anyway, I have to open my surgery." I was furious at the helpless fellow, furious at myself.

After half an hour with my patients I had to close the door. The pain! The pain! Never, despite all the neuralgias, had I ever experienced such pain. Flames and fires in my cheek, I could feel it was swollen. A taxi, and off to another dentist, a real one, who was not just around the corner but far off in the west of Berlin. I was in dire need of help. What an awful journey it was. Knees pressed together, I sat with one hand over my left cheek, dreading every jolt. Bright sunshine outside, crowds in the Tiergarten, in the cafés under colourful umbrellas. I had no idea how everything could have drifted from me. My tongue, something had happened to my tongue, it's even worse than my cheek, my tongue is so stiff and tense. At last the KdW department store, and the dentist. I felt better already as I ran around the table in his living room, as he, an elderly amiable man, came in to greet me. It was like rejoining humanity from a robber's dungeon. I complained about what had happened, he gave me a sedative, I swallowed morphine. Then I sat in his chair. He told me all sorts of nice things, something can happen any time, it'll settle down, now the bad tooth can only get better, and – I knew what he was up to, he was diverting me. He told me of interesting biological investigations he had made, on skulls of growing dogs, about the effect of tooth formation on the development of the whole skull; I saw the pictures, saw the skulls. Then he laid me down on the chaise longue, I drank a cognac, and really, I travelled home much calmer.

A bad night, even though I swallowed pill after pill. But next day it felt better. But even though on this day and the next I did a tolerable amount of work, albeit half absent-mindedly, I fell into a growing unease, agitation, tension. "You're so sensitive," the dentist soothed me; there's really nothing to see. But my insides refused to believe him; the pain, the unease were too outlandish, it wasn't just afterpain. He said I could start my holiday on Saturday free of care. But as the children drove off early on Saturday, I lay querulous in bed, chewed at my mouth, made compresses that I couldn't stand, lay stupefied. The glands under the tongue swelled painfully, I could hardly open my mouth.

Finally, that afternoon, in the silent apartment, I was no longer the malingerer: I flourished the thermometer, almost soothed: my honour restored: fever! So there! The amiable amusing doctor, uneasy, came himself to see me. We chatted and had a little laugh. But outside he confessed to my alarmed wife: this is no longer a dental matter, a surgeon must be called. I knew: I had an acute inflammation of the soft tissue of the mouth base, from the august hand of the ski trainer. But I didn't blame him, I wasn't angry, it was a misfortune, I'd decided to go to him, he was so close by. Very early on Monday the renowned surgeon came.

I was glad to see him, the night had dragged end-less-ly by. Now I'd be given morphine. A powerful man with horn-rimmed spectacles: such soothing masculinity. He worked quickly, but with assurance. Yes, swelling, to the right under the chin. More compresses needed, but –

wouldn't it be better in hospital, or a clinic? I'll go to the clinic; will I be given morphine there. And by lunchtime I lay in the clinic, in the west. And – slept, at last, after an injection.

For how long? Until nearly four. Then the room grew drafty, there was a cold wind. I looked out of the window, the window was up, but it was supposed to be hot, "sultry" the nurse had said. The draft, the draft. I crept under the bedclothes, gritted my teeth. My teeth began to chatter, my legs were trembling, my arms shaking. It was a shivering fit. All my medical knowledge had fled, hid away. If I had seen someone lying like this I would have known what it was. So – I lay there freezing, clung on in the pauses, and was cross that no nurse came. But there should be a bell on the side table. I felt for it. Something fell to the floor. It was the bell. Where is it? I felt under the bed. I have to find it. I felt under the table, knocked over a carafe, a glass. Then, trembling, I crawled out of bed, stepped in a puddle, and searched. If only I had my glasses. I crawled to the wall, felt for where the bell-wire must be. Then the shaking grew so violent that I had to crawl back into bed, tucked myself in, seethed, and waited. When the door opened it was my wife, she was shocked. Then the nurse came, the bell was fixed. But already I felt better. So much better, enormously better. My whole body felt warm, hot, flooding, pleasantly hot as if I lay in a bath. But now it was fever. Some fevers come as a fire, make you stupid, your head spins, you're riding a carousel. But there's another kind of fever, and that's what I had. It comforts, opens the pores in the skin, suddenly you're in a swooning tropical climate. It's as if the body has a memory of humanity's primal home in the tropics, withdraws there in sickness, finds itself again, seeks a cure beneath palm trees. How happy I was. Just now peevish and gloomy, I could speak again, laugh. My thoughts were so free, so nimble. The effect of the morphine must have worn off ages ago, yet – there was no pain at all! I felt my throat; it hardly hurt at all. I could open my mouth wider. My fever shot up. I lay there and enjoyed my fever. So what if the professor came, spoke reservedly of "euphoria" and recommended a night-nurse. I – I lay there happy, and moisture flowed off me. You sweat in the tropics. You have to acclimatise. I sweated; I'd had no medicine, no cup of tea, but my body expelled whole torrents. It lasted all afternoon, that night, next day, and faded over days. The fever abated, it was sultry outside, there were thunderstorms, I lay in the tropics, sweated, drank, sweated, drank.

It had been a "septic" episode, but my body had made a crisis of it. It had squared up to the adversary, the bacteria that had made inroads into my interior from the floor of my mouth. They managed one ride and then my body closed in with counterthrusts of fire and water and sweat, erected a wall around them, immolated them. Such force in a living body! What powers it can draw on! Little holes appeared in my mouth, the foe was ejected through them. They trickled forth in pus, I spent days spitting out the horrid bitterness.

The professor, always careful, always assured, laughed at me: "You're over the hill." I was over the hill, I hadn't noticed the path. But as day followed day – I was already girding myself to stand up – I realised. I was like someone who's in danger, but feels terror only after he's overcome it. A twofold difficult return to life: physical, and mental. Resistance to nourishment: "You must eat, you must build your strength." But the revulsion was more than loss of appetite. And the worse way back: the mental. It's all out there, you look through the window, the shops, the traffic, but you don't understand it, you're gazing from so far away, from an obscure distance. Newspapers, books: you're emerging from a different world. And slowly you draw near once again to this world, recognise it all and yourself, meld back into it.

What a tangle of catastrophes all this month. Floods, inundations, revolution, I read all about it in the papers. I had to be dragged back into it. But I'd received a blow. I had almost (how sly, how coyly sly) been wiped out by the hand of a dangerously clueless or untrained dentist, hauled away by a broken tooth.

Nothing you can do against a flood. But against cluelessness there's all kinds of remedies. In the end; even against one's own complacency. Better ten minutes in the car than an eternity of hearses, dear boy.

Postscript: LETTERS THAT DON'T REACH ME
Berliner Tageblatt, 15 August 1927 [SLW 89-91]

My little report 'A Dentist and his Victim' was written for no other purpose and with no other intention than to describe an experience. Instead of going on holiday I was led to the brink of calamity; writing about it softened the shock somewhat. When the report appeared in the paper, the same spot where Robert Musil had recently analysed my *Manas*, it occurred to me I should not have exposed my suffering and misfortune to public gaze, I should be ashamed, people will pity me. But – nobody pitied me. One solitary telephone call asked how I was. Then letters arrived from people who'd suffered similar experiences, or so they wrote, painful plaintive confidences. Then a lady in mourning turned up. She had travelled to Munich for a conference, and they were supposed to continue to a vacation. But the unfortunate husband, strong, well-respected, mid-thirties, suffered a sore throat, and it turned septic, four professors attended him, and he had to die, the great Reaper leaves no leg standing. What could I say to her? She's out of her wits, did they miss something? But her documents show: they had cultured the dreaded haemolytic streptococcus from the sick man's blood, the case was bad from the start. What could I say?

And then letters from dentists. What did they want? Sympathise with me, offer advice? Not one of them sympathised. Not even the one who'd injured me. He sent me a registered letter, in clumsy German, indicating "further steps" to be taken against me. Well, those steps couldn't be worse than the first. But eventually a number of dentists mobilised their National Association on account of my report. And that brought about an astonishing situation.¹

So "torment silenced a man's tongue":² I described my mishap – and these gentlemen don't like it. They don't like it because the report offends their professional status. But I too have a status: I'm an author. What I wrote was my personal experience, and describing such an experience with such an awful fate looming in the background is the right of everybody, and even more so for the particular, almost duty-bound right of an author. Actually I also have another status: that of a suffering person. We sufferers are poorly organised, in contrast to the counterparty of doctors and dentists. Our organisation does not hold together, because a number of us, despite all pleadings and plottings undertake convalescent journeys from which they never return. But now and then, at least as long

¹ A court hearing for "defamation" took place on 20 December 1927, in which Döblin prevailed on "freedom of speech" grounds. Döblin followed up with further newspaper articles. [SLW p. 562]

² Near-quote from Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*, Act 5 sc. 5.

as we're alive, can't we, please, be allowed to say how things go with us? The gentlemen of the dentist fraternity are not of this opinion. They are for order, unconditional reverence lock stock and barrel. Ah no, dear sirs, those of our wretched status know no respect, only hesitant and anxious trust, and in some case no trust. We firmly believe that doctors are there on behalf of the patient, and that doctors, dentists included, ought to listen to us very carefully. You say I defamed dentists wholesale and damaged their reputation? But what do these illiterate gentlemen believe, how different would an attack from the pen of an author look from this doleful report that ends almost entirely in self-accusation? No, I have absolutely nothing against *dentists* – accent on the plural. I mentioned two in my report, one excellent, the other less excellent, and the latter only in the ensemble of a tale in which he plays neither hero nor clown. Alas I myself am the clown. And not once in the ensemble of the tale did I speak with anger of the less excellent dentist, with the same anger with which he now threatens one who even today has not recovered from his tender ministrations.

And now I extract the poisoned teeth from the jaw and between me and between us and the other profession construct a gold bridge. For those outraged slanderous letter-writers who call me “clueless”, a “dilettante”, “ignorant”, “lousy hack” are – not even dentists! Here before me is a letter from one of the most prominent dentists in Berlin, a professor. He writes of the “very great pleasure” my article brought him. “You have no idea how necessary such communications are from time to time for the wider public. You have earned the thanks not just of all those with toothache, but above all of conscientious dentists.” All I wanted, simply and very egotistically, was to describe my mishap. But now I believe the whole incident will become a subject of conversation among dentists. I can retire from the field, and along with others lend an eager ear.

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THE DOCTOR IS IN A General Practitioner's Surgery

Frankfurter Zeitung 6 January 1928 [SLW 98-102]

My speciality is nervous ailments and mood disorders; my patients (I live in the east of Berlin) are almost exclusively workers and low-level employees. Hardly ever does anyone of more elevated status stray through my door. And I confess that this does not bother me. For a while before the War, I had savoured “educated” and better-situated patients.³ I abandoned them with pleasure when I saw their definition of a doctor: someone they pay (or often do not pay) for his attention. They pay money for a doctor, preferably an expert. You have to work hard to satisfy them. I didn't like it. I don't like it. I contribute what I can and what I am. They can't get anything from me by paying. I'm very old fashioned, love ladies and gentlemen as you can see, not Americans though, don't hold with the New Objectivity, rather with Old Character.

What happens in my practice in terms of “social care” – yes, I shall tell you a little of this, as it occurs to me. What was today? I'd been on a trip, spent a day in Zurich, where I read from my books, it didn't go well, so it seemed to me; I didn't sound right. Then I visited friends in Milan

³ Döblin's first one-man practice from October 1911 in crowded Kreuzberg brought little income, so he worked also in private clinics.

who refreshed me, now here I was back at my desk, went to the waiting room door and opened up. A lot of men, around twenty men, a solitary woman in the corner; many days are like this. One of them comes in; he looks at me suspiciously, he stinks of rotgut. He begins to talk, all pally-like, his breathing tubes aren't up to the job, and so on. He keeps giving me dubious looks, finally he says I must be a locum for the lady doctor, and I show him fraternally the way out. In his happy condition he had mistaken the house number, but it's not a problem, he says, next time he'll come to me, long as she cures him.

An elderly man, formerly a self-employed artisan, now helps his wife out at their vegetable store. A car ran into him from behind when he was on his bike, five weeks ago; the posh gent had gathered witnesses while he lay unconscious, he could find only one, and he was shaky. I've seen this man often; he can't really help out in the shop any more, he forgets things; but the insurance backing the car pays nothing, because supposedly he was riding wrongly. But that's not true; the man starts crying again, and swears. I have to work hard: what use are psychoanalysis and suggestion and Coué's autosuggestion and willpower training; I have to struggle with him. And that's what "social care" means here; I have to talk him out of the whole case and the accident, for clearly it's all hopeless. He can't afford a lawyer, the public prosecutor is taking the case on. The man is no bellyacher, despite everything, he'll emerge from the affair embittered, but we'll steer through; some balm will descend for his self-regard.

And then: he's also come for his daughter. She's 23 years old, a sturdy red-cheeked blonde girl, but – she's not kept a job for a year now, she keeps marching out, they "pick on" her. If you ask how, in what way, she keeps her mouth shut at home, but she has told me: now and then there are words specially aimed at her, sometimes they laugh at her, now it happens at home as well. A windowpane broke in the hallway, of course it was her fault, no one said it but it'll come soon enough. Today the man, her father, who is himself so beaten down, sits here because he experiences all this with the girl and is at his wits' end. The girl (I know her, she's come to my surgery a few times) but why? Because of – anaemia! I told her this, orally and in writing. She's been leading me down the garden path. It's the most primitive kind of social care I have to practice here: slowly teach the man the serious term "mental illness", and with my usual cunning try to keep the girl away from society for a time. Because she's a danger: today back home they laugh at her, tomorrow she'll knock one of them down.

Then, one after another, they sit in front of me on the chair that is the GP's bread and butter. They have "sick notes", but are they really 100% incapable of work? That's the question. They want their sick pay, they want to "rest" a bit, these are morbid, brittle people, they also suffer transient "illness", actually they're always a little "sick". Should they be sent off to work? The insurance bureau knows how much is left to the tact and sensitivity of the one making the judgement, their "trusted doctors" understand the social ailment of this patient here, it shouldn't be my decision, that other party, the bureau, can step in. There they sit, one after the other, flourish their sickness certificate, stare suspiciously or gravely straight ahead, and the skirmish begins. I'm a doctor and yet not just a doctor. Organically there is nothing or almost nothing to find in these people. Aches here, aches there, in the head, the throat, the back – that's what he says – one of them looks weak and worn out, another is muscular, but in the end that tells me nothing. Often it's awkward relationships at work that send them off to the doctor, often they see a prospect of unemployment, so they sign on and soon become ill. The task: do what's possible, but also stir up a desire for health, willingness to work. A wearisome task, we can't change the economic system, and must look for ways to ameliorate its worst effects.

A younger man comes in, horn-rimmed glasses, a low-level clerk. He doesn't sit, a physical examination shows signs of a slight angioneurosis. But after the examination he doesn't leave, takes an inordinate amount of time to put his clothes back on, there's more to come. I ask a third time whether things are all right back home, with the wife, the child, press for details, but he refuses, all the time his face is burning red. Then it comes out: it's a domestic dispute, and my medications and examinations won't have much effect.

"Doesn't the wife care for you?"

"No, no, it's my fault. There's someone else involved."

"With you?" – "Yes."

And so it comes out: he married his wife three years ago "out of gratitude" because her family had taken him in after his mother died. He had an affair with the girl, never thought of consequences. Now he's met someone else, a friend of his wife's, he loves her, but she doesn't want to. She won't wreck the marriage. She's a strict serious girl, he's ready for divorce: "today would be best", his wife knows nothing of it, but the girl, who's already had trouble with a previous fiancé, doesn't want to. Why is the man coming to me? He has headaches, can't think, tosses from side to side at night. Understandable, even without medicine.

"Could you come here again, with the young lady?" That wouldn't go well. She's ready to brush him off. Now he weeps and sits down. "Then come here with your wife; she'll be sure to come." It's remarkable that he promises to do so; he's abandoned the game; the man seems to have some very dark mental baggage.

So is this, or the whole business, mental care or social care? They go hand in hand. I can't provide them with more coal or a change of apartment or wife or help them into work. (Oh, the housing problem. Whole treatises could be written on the effect of the housing shortage on marriages, on alcoholism, on abortions and their consequences, on the growth of population and criminality.) You wanted to know something about social care and the doctor's role; I've told you a little about my afternoon surgery today. So it goes on day after day. We are all just private social workers with medical experience. Seen aright, we are plugged in at a critical point (albeit invisibly to the public) as a buffer between those social forces everybody knows about ...

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TWO SOULS IN A SINGLE BREAST

Berliner Volkszeitung, 8 April 1928 [SLW 103-105]

Dr Döblin, neurologist, on Döblin the writer

As a doctor I am only vaguely aware of the writer of the same name. To tell the truth, I don't know him at all. I work in the east end of Berlin in a medium-sized medical practice, really not a big one at all, I am a neurologist and this activity takes up virtually my whole day. I have no great leanings towards literature, find books quite boring, and as for books by the man who, you tell me, bears the same name as me, I sometimes come across them by chance at the homes of acquaintances; but dipping into them I am left completely cold and uninterested. This gentleman seems to have a good imagination, but I cannot follow him down that road. On my income I cannot afford trips to China and India, so I have no way to check up on what he writes.

And anyway, for this kind of thing I prefer original reports, i.e. first-person travelogues, of which I am a keen reader. And another thing: I cannot get to grips at all with the style of this man, the author who bears the same name as me. It is just too difficult, why should anyone tired out after a hard day's work be asked to wade through such stuff of his own accord.

Allow me, please, a general remark, which may come across as a bit political or ethical. More so than his books, I am familiar with this writer's occasional effusions as delivered to me by the newspaper, which of course I read. I must confess I cannot make head or tail of the man, from a political angle or in general. My appetite for knowing him better is not in the least improved by these effusions. Sometimes he seems to stand squarely on the Left, even the extreme Left, maybe Left squared, and then he says something that is either not thought through, which is unacceptable in a man of his years, or makes out that he is above the parties – absurd authorial arrogance. In short: it was you, Editor, who asked for my opinion of this writer, the man with the red nose; the coincidence of names led you to do so, I myself would never have bothered with him, any more than with any other young author, and I say again: the gentleman is almost a complete stranger to me, is of no interest to me, I am not related to him by blood or marriage, and could not care less about his verdict on me, which you tell me you are soliciting from him. Whatever apparently mischievous assertions he may cast will not touch me.

The writer Döblin on the neurologist Döblin

Even though it is Easter, and as you can imagine I am buried under piles of work, questionnaires and so on, I am most grateful to you, Editor, for setting me this remarkable task and in a certain sense enriching my circle of acquaintances. I am currently working on a Berlin novel, I mean an epic work in everyday language, the action of which takes place in the east end of Berlin, around Alexanderplatz and the Rosenthaler Gate. So your request for my comments on the neurologist of the same name was an interesting lead. Maybe this can be another source of material, I thought, along with the Salvation Army, the slaughterhouse and the crime files. So I went over there and now report back. The man is spritely, and makes not too bad an impression. I attended his clinic and sat in his waiting room. A waiting room is the most remarkable milieu you can imagine. And when I introduced myself to the gentleman and we had a good laugh about the coincidence – God knows our origins could not be more different – he told me lots of things which with his permission I noted down there and then.

These general practitioners are not to be envied. I saw the peculiarly stressful work that kept him busy, and this mostly with the strangest kind of patients. I am sure that he is no untypical example of this specialism, but the very fact of his toiling here anonymously endeared him to me. He is my exact opposite,⁴ I realised as he busied himself with practical tasks, spoke, observed: I the perpetual solo dancer, prima donna as my publisher once called me, he a grey soldier in a silent army. I am sure I made no great impression on my namesake. Sometimes I grew rather nervous when he gazed at me in a psychotherapeutic way. I have a few defects in that area, complexes probably, and his experienced nose no doubt sniffed them out. Please do not be angry when I confess that for this reason I did not pursue any deeper acquaintance with

⁴ Döblin is referring not to himself alone. In a 1924 review of a play by G K Chesterton he noted that “[he] is the Antipodes of Shaw; England thinks dialectically in both, bipolar. Against the apostles of sobriety, the fanatics of passionlessness, the Positivists, Empiricists – now comes Chesterton the dark figure. ... Chesterton unveils the poverty of that understanding of which the Positivists are so proud. ... In these two, Shaw and Chesterton, we see revealed what is at work in all of us.” [*Eink*], p. 241.

him. To tell the truth, I did not feel very comfortable sitting across from him; too many unpleasantnesses come to mind in such a situation. But I retain a good memory of the small, slender man with the doctor's pince-nez, and I would be delighted to know, if you can betray the secret, what this anonymous man had to say about me, whom he certainly saw not as a writer but merely as a human being.

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A FIRST LOOK BACK [SLW 108-178]

As Döblin's 50th birthday approached (10 August 1928), and various celebratory activities were being planned, his friend Oscar Loerke proposed jointly producing a little book: Döblin to provide autobiographical material, Loerke a critical overview of his works so far. The outcome was Alfred Döblin Im Buch – Zu Hause – Auf der Strasse (AD in books, at home, in the street). Döblin's extraordinarily artful contribution is provided below, complete. The text in SLW includes a previously unpublished MS draft 'Mother and Daughter'. Several sections appeared in newspapers in July 1928. For this translation I have added a contents list and a few more headings as a navigation aid.

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I. Dialogue in the Münzstrasse

It's midday. I'm sitting in a little café on Alexanderplatz, and it occurs to me: here in this district, in the east of Berlin, I've sat ever since I arrived in Berlin forty years ago. Here I went to school, a few gaps came – university, internship, war, but always a return to the space between Alexanderplatz and Jannowitzbrücke, later even farther east, out towards Lichtenberg. It occurs to me: I'd like to go away from here sometimes, to the west. Where there are trees, the Zoo's

there, the Aquarium and the Botanical Gardens with the steamy hothouses, - ah, those are fine things.

Good day, Doctor.

Good day.

How's it going? In a café, in broad daylight?

It's my usual time. (*If only I knew who this fellow is.*)

How's the practice going?

Thanks for asking, one year much like another. We muddle along.

And the children? You know, you should get away from here, this is really no place for you. You must go west, mix with people.

Hm, and how?

I should tell you, Doctor, I've often seen you here, but I was busy, well, I could have told you what you needed, but you don't want it.

Goodness, whyever not?

No, no, don't be miffed. You don't want it. I can tell just by looking at you. It's not the practice or anything like that.

Now you really do have my attention.

Be my guest. (*Sits at my table, keeps his hat on – that's usual here.*) A doctor told me, colleague of yours, it's other things entirely. Yes. Look here, have you ever heard of it, sexual humiliation by a woman? (*I'm flabbergasted, shocked, for heaven's sake what's going on.*) Well, it's all linked. Lots of people don't want, really don't want, what they ought to, even if they could. You'd never think it. Doctor told me, straight off the bat. It's not impotence, the opposite. First you say: what a wimp, no guts, then out it comes: he just doesn't want to. Humiliates himself. For pleasure, playing games. Funny, eh? Such goings on.

For Heaven's sake. (*It's the Freud brotherhood, this is what they peddle.*)

So, what do you think?

First I'll finish my coffee. There. Now tell me, what sort of pleasure is that supposed to bring with it?

(*He whispers in my ear, pushes his hat back, grins.*) Sadism! Against himself!

(*I'd expected this, burst out laughing, can't stop. The café falls apart.*) Amazing, what you encounter in the Münzstrasse.

(*He beams.*) So, what say you, my little doctor? (*He says 'little doctor', soon we'll be dividing up our assets.*)

I'll just light a cigarette. You too? Well then, as I said, that's really something! Hang on a moment, I must have another laugh, a few bits in there still. There, it must all be out now, this time it reached all the way to the Reichstag.

So what about what I said, my little doctor?

Excellent. But it's just that I can't do any business with it.

(The fellow frowns.) That's what they all say.

Take a look out the window, past the maitre d'. See the people, lots of grey ordinary people, walking past, doing something. That's us working people, proletariat. Take a look at them, and then at me.

Done. I'll take the difference in Prussian bonds, please!

Pay attention, now it's the Bible: This is my heart, and this is my blood, something of the sort. In the New Testament. These people here and this street, that's the blood. And the heart's sitting here. These people, that's the air, and I'm the lungs. And then: there's the army, and here a soldier sits.

(He sniffs, gives me a suspicious look, scratches his chin.) I don't understand.

If you wanted to know my life, I mean my whole life, earlier, you'd understand soon enough. With no sadism at all. How it all hangs together, what they call life. When you look back, there's a clear logic to it, a meaning. You were talking of Freud, his humiliation guff, or Adler. According to them the whole world is made of defects. First there's a hole, and then something develops around it. But as for me, in principle there's nothing to be done with it!

Defects – I have some, like any respectable person. And anyway, it's written: this is my home, and I get along fine here, I get along wonderfully. *(Though sometimes I'd like to be among green, see a tree for once, or a little lake.)* I'm a toad and I croak happily around the district. Without any sadism. Or masochism. Those I deliver only in novels. I'm a working man and a proletarian. And anyway, if you were to take me to Kurfürstendamm I'd croak around there just the same. There's no way I'll be intimidated. I was created by the dear Lord God and he fashioned me from a great lump of clay. Some other gentlemen, I name no names, he put together in error, they slipped away from him on Shabbes, or at dessert –

(The fellow sniffs, and makes himself scarce.)

THE FAMILY CATASTROPHE

II. Arrival in Berlin

Could I ask you, Doctor, instead of this dialogue – which of course may well be awfully interesting – to tell us rather something about yourself?

Well, I came to Berlin forty years ago, having already been born.

I came to Berlin in a condition not so different from my birth, ten years earlier, in Stettin. It was to some extent an after-birth. But no one noticed anything. (Really, in Stettin I was only pre-born.) So we travelled from Stettin to Berlin. On the train my mother chatted with people who knew the city. Our district, Blumenstrasse, is very badly made (they said), lots of factories and smoke, the language is very lively and flows like a river. I never dared say anything, or rather, ask anything. I suffered birth pangs. I was afraid, ever more afraid. It affected my stomach. The pangs grew worse. And as we drew nearer the buildings of Berlin, I was at the end of my tether. I stood at the window, it was dark, late evening, I couldn't hold it in. There was the child, it ran down my trousers, I felt better, I stood in a puddle. I sat down relieved. –

Later we travelled through the great strange city, and there a second miracle happened. At a brightly-lit station we got onto a train. Off it went, through the night, sped along for a few minutes, and stopped. And – we were back at the same station. I thought I must be mistaken. But the game repeated itself twice, three times. We moved, the same station came, then we got off and were soon home. Had we travelled in a circle? But why, what for, and in the end we had arrived. Only as a mature man did I see through the riddle. It became clear and clearer: we had taken the Stadtbahn. At night the stations of Berlin all look the same, especially if you come from Stettin. We had gone from Friedrichstrasse to Jannowitzbrücke. But it was an unforgettable experience; even today it exercises a calming effect on me.

There were six of us making this magical journey: my mother, forty-two years old, and us five siblings, a bunch of Stettin sprats, four boys and a girl, I the second youngest. We had shaken from us the dust of Stettin (the water too, in my case). For something had happened to us. We had been expelled from a little Paradise.

III. Bracing for a coming catastrophe

In Stettin on the Oder there once lived my father, Max Döblin, and he was a merchant by trade. But that's not really a trade: he owned a ready-to-wear clothing business that failed. Whereupon he opened a tailoring shop that did well. This man was married, and over the course of years achieved, not money so much, but five children. One being me. He was blessed with many inclinations and gifts, and you might well say that what his gifts brought in, his inclinations took away. So that this man's nature acquired a remarkable equilibrium. One day the equilibrium was upset in a most violent manner; how and why I'll report in a moment. Anyway, in his agitation this man decided to travel to Mainz. Anyone who knows Stettin will be astonished by this. For when someone in Stettin becomes unbalanced, he does not travel to Mainz. Maybe to Gotzlow or Podejuch or, if the case is serious, to the local loony bin. But Mainz is unusual. And there was a snag, which no one noticed, not even I, though I was already over nine at the time. The snag was: when my father set off for Mainz, he never arrived. The destination of the train was a clue. It was heading for Hamburg.

And when the train stopped in Hamburg, the motion in my father continued on. Even Hamburg wasn't the destination. Not Mainz, not Hamburg, it should and must lie farther off. It was America. Between Hamburg and America lies water. Twenty-nine ocean-crossing fliers have already drowned in that water. My father wanted to and had to go across, the urge in him was so strong. He took ship. Although my father's equilibrium had been upset, he had enough sense not to fly – maybe because at that time there were no aeroplanes. Anyway: he went by ship, like Columbus before him, and so arrived. I don't know if the Statue of Liberty was already there in New York harbour in 1888. For sure my father erected one in his thoughts. So far had the Stettiner to travel to regain his equilibrium. Such a strange fate. He said he wanted to go to Mainz, but already the ticket was wrong, the train went another way, water came, and there he was in America. Nor did he travel alone. He took along a mechanic, a doctor, to restore his balance, a body-doctor, body-mechanic. That it was a young girl is irrelevant. Women are suited to many professions, become lawyers, officials, ministers, why not mechanics. Indeed, the good sense of our America-traveller is also evidenced by his taking along a girl and not a man. For who knows better how to restore balance, in all perturbations of the horizontal and vertical state, than a young innocent girl. The girl who crossed the mighty ocean with him, his chosen

girl, was called Henriette, surnamed – let us say – Hecht [= Pike]. A fish name, note, such as the watery region brings with it. But – a puzzling play of Nature, a paradox – she was entirely meat. Clearly Pikes had changed their nature in the course of generations, and so she stood there all charming before the man who was my father, and he found contentment in her.⁵

My father had two eyes, a left and a right. With the right eye he looked constantly upon his family. But the left was to a considerable degree independent. While the right eye was always dimmed with cares, thickly clouded and prone to showers of rain, the left laughed and was happy, and the high pressure zone was a long way off. So that the strange difference between the two eyes should not be noticed, he wore golden eye-glasses. These masked it all, and so he became a serious man – which he was indeed – a man of many facets.

My mother was a simple woman. And because her husband often removed the glasses at home, she knew he had a wandering eye. And like any woman, she was curious to know where it wandered to. The puzzling play of Nature, in itself, interested her not at all. Pure science was no concern of hers. Just as later she had no organ with which to fathom the wondrous events related above, consisting of her husband setting off for Mainz but the train that entered the station was heading for Hamburg on the Elbe – blind violence of technical forces – and hardly had the train arrived when the husband was seized by impetuosity and had to go to St Pauli down by the harbour, was stowed away on a ship and would and must cross the ocean even though it's so deep and later many drowned in it. None of this interested my mother. Until the end she contented herself with: Husband gone off with another woman. A dreadfully simple formulation. My father later suffered greatly under it. Or let's say: suffered a little. Or let's say: not at all. For he had the foresight not to come back.⁶ So my mother was tremendously interested in Stettin, where my father's eye did its wandering. And the more she sought to expose the secrets of his left eye, the darker the shadows over his right eye. But this didn't shock her. It was a matter not of heroics, rather of temperament and unreflectiveness, which easily modulate into heroism, to their detriment.

With his wandering left eye my father noticed many people in Stettin: inhabitants of both sexes, taxpayers of both sexes. But he wasn't interested in whether or how much tax they paid, rather whether they were male or female. He made a naïve simple classification. He was a kind of flesh-fancier. Male flesh he discarded at once. Leaving the female. Lots of that in Stettin. I can't form a clearer picture, because at that time I was so small. But I recall how as a very young boy a servant girl often led me by the hand out into the street, there were pushchairs, and our walk took us to a dancing-parlour. There I sat on a bench, and in the hall a lot of grown-ups danced, big men and big women, the women identified by their dresses, the men mostly in uniform, with moustaches, soldiers, enormous men sweating profusely. My father, too, must have discovered such girls in Stettin, and the joy of discovery gave him no peace. Just so do famous scholars go by night into their laboratory, peer into their microscope, or calculate, or adjust their apparatus one more time, begin to distil in the middle of the night, determine the melting point. In the end: isn't discovering a human being, a human type, not equally remarkable and unsettling and exciting, at least for the one who does it? And conversely: is

⁵ Max Döblin sailed on the *Rhetia* on 8 July 1888, reaching New York on 23 July. He sought out a tailoring shop called 'Döblin' (on Broadway since 1867); maybe the owner was a relative. The attempt failed. In September he returned to Hamburg with his paramour Henriette Zander ('pikeperch' or 'walleye').

⁶ Not quite accurate. The family visited Max Döblin in Hamburg for half a year (April-Sept 1889); he had sought since January to be reconciled. In 1895 and 1897 he made two long visits to the family in Berlin.

discovering a new element or a chemical bond intellectually different, is it delightful in a different way, exciting, inflaming in a different way than discovering a new human? Thus is love linked to the joy of discovery. My father must have searched a lot and discovered a lot. He practised his science thoroughly and with persistence, and it would have opened great vistas for him if this science had ever been officially recognised. This was clearly the discipline wherein lay his greatest talents.

And while my mother otherwise took no interest in his many other inclinations – for he composed, wrote poems, drew – she was thrown headlong with him into this one passion. At least here a certain nuptial bond connected her and her husband. When the husband went off on his warpath and his left eye leapt into action, she too became agitated. The storyteller must alas avow that she was not so well armed on the warpath as her husband. He carried roses, while she brandished an umbrella. He was loaded up with tenderness and higher manly gifts, she on the other hand with anger. He went like a stag alone in search of water, while she carried projectiles to disturb his drinking. That was the difference between the married couple. She thought of her children, the family and that he was her wedded spouse, while he: How lovely to walk arm in arm in the sunshine – ha, it wasn't his wife's arm. It wasn't even always the same arm.

The man lived in deepest turmoil. He had discovered Nature's breadth and the manifold variety of Stettin's females. He varied the sources of his enlivening. Only late on did he accustom himself to one, and that was the worst thing of all, for it so happened that the source was not his wife. Actually it would be true to say that the opposite would have been a coincidence. For there are notoriously many millions of women in the world; why should a man love precisely the one he's married to? It would be a very remarkable conjuncture! That's how it was with my father. The wife, the strong woman with the umbrella, drew near. Armed with anger, and a decided aversion to finding here anything to "understand". She bore herself with legitimacy, pathos, claims. The tragedy commenced. Thundering Jupiter revealed his presence. Thus do people stroll among greenery and a cloud gathers, and it begins to pour. You think of strolling through greenery, and already you've forgotten the umbrella.

When back then in Stettin the thunderstorm got going in our house and showed no sign of stopping, the husband, it seems, thought of savages in Africa. They have nothing on, but there's a roof of thatch over them. When a husband thinks of another arm, it's bad enough; but when he thinks of another roof, then it's dangerous, and the consequences can hardly be averted. Under the constant storms my father began to dream, mainly of Mainz, but the train was headed for Hamburg, then the sea came, and America. What came next was not in his dream. That's the worst thing about dreams, they end too soon. He should have dreamed about what came after America.

IV. The tale is retold

Tell the story again. – Who, me? Why? – *Don't ask. Just tell it to me again, please.* – Hm. Well, if it must be –

One morning in Stettin there was a dreadful uproar at home, crying and screaming, my mother ran one flight up, conversations with her older siblings, strangers came. A letter had arrived from Hamburg, my father, forty-two years old at the time, was on his way to America.

He wrote in his pathetic grandiose style – the man knew how to write to you, the most moving letters – “Mountains of gold shall I present to you.”⁷ This was all preceded by years of quarrelling between husband and wife, affairs with women. Finally it revolved around a young girl, one of his employees, twenty years younger than him, a seamstress called Henriette. My mother smoked her out. Incidents of assault and battery occurred, even, if I remember aright, between the married couple. There was utter turmoil in our Stettin home, mother’s relatives came, business friends of father’s, assets were seized, my mother was still paying off debts years later. Us children of course removed at once from the better schools and sent provisionally to a little private tutor lady. That’s life. *Sauve qui peut*.

While all this was going on over and around us, the day beginning in commotion, grief and tears and ending the same way, while my mother was sounding the alarm to her relatives and begging on our behalf – the man who established this family was traipsing around New York with that girl twenty years younger than he, sitting with her in music halls, keeping a jealous eye on her, and he stayed there for months in New York in love and joy, until the money was gone. Then he returned to Europe and lived with the girl in Hamburg until the day he died.⁸

My mother called him a bigamist, but it wasn’t true. She divorced him only quite late⁹, when she came into an inheritance.¹⁰ In Hamburg he led a modest quite miserable existence, and towards the end relied on assistance.¹¹ Once he had us come to visit him in Hamburg – had there been a quarrel with Henriette, or had he become mindful of his duties? But the word ‘duty’ did not exist in his vocabulary – he swore it was all over with the girl. The oath lasted not even half a year. Then anonymous letters came, and back we were in the east of Berlin. Once he pretended he wanted to work in Berlin, had already found a position, but this or that failed to suit him, he disappeared with no farewells, a telegram came from the Lehrter station, and – he was back in Hamburg, his old haunts.

The man felt comfortable in Hamburg in his poverty and penny-pinching. My eldest brother visited him occasionally, spoke to the companion, they lived together in a poor part of the city, proletarian, clean rooms. At the end the man had a distinguished white beard, wore gold-rimmed glasses and looked like an old grade-school teacher. He was very active in Freemasonry.¹² In the end he fell ill: throat cancer. He died of it. My brother accompanied the body to the rainy cemetery, no one else went, and made sure the grave was left tidy. He, who had suffered more than any from the catastrophe, had a difficult encounter with the woman. She too was ailing, could hardly move. She said she was innocent in everything.

The husband saved himself in a criminal manner from what must have been a difficult situation. He was uncouth enough to dump his whole family onto his wife’s relatives. He thought: they won’t starve, the shirt is nearer than the coat. Overnight he cast us all into poverty, made beggars of us. He was a scoundrel, taken all in all.

⁷ From Terence, ‘Phormio’; no doubt here a vague trivial memory.

⁸ On 22 April 1921, of throat cancer. Alfred’s eldest brother Ludwig was the only attendee at the funeral.

⁹ In spring 1908.

¹⁰ From her well-to-do elder brother Rudolf Freudenheim.

¹¹ Including from eldest son Ludwig.

¹² No evidence for this has so far come to light.

– It's not right, you say, to utter such a stern judgement over a close relation, one's own father, now deceased? I would not be my mother's son and have lived through it all if I were to suppress this tone. I can pronounce a judgement only with words; he pronounced judgement over us in the sternest possible way, with deeds: *You lot are stifling me*; and he withdrew from us all the duties of his heart and his paternal duties under law. I have no impression that he found this difficult. The father pronounced judgement on his family, but it was, considering all the circumstances, not necessary to judge his family so harshly, with such dismissive cruelty. With due respect to personality, you make it too easy on yourself if you believe you can fulfil your personality by destroying your responsibilities. We do not live in a Bedouin state, a father is not all-powerful over his family, he should be content with my response. If the sins of the father are to be visited on the children unto the third and fourth generations, then the children have the right to haul the father before a tribunal and raise a complaint. The man's dead. Before the great purifying filter into which we shall all pass, I'll call a halt and keep silent.

V. A third time!

You must tackle it a third time. You must speak about it one more time. – But about what? This affair? I've told it twice already. So why? – *You'll see, you know it already, just make a start.* – I don't know. – *Start!*

His parents were strict people. – *That's good. Start with the parents.* – They married him off at twenty-five. – *Well well, you know it all, young man! Always so fluent.* – He was weak, pliable. He offered little resistance, let himself be married, for the Freudenheim woman he was a good match, handsome chap with money. Dear God, but these are no excuses. – *We want to see for ourselves. Go on.* – Not much more to go on. They have children, his business fails, he sets up a tailoring workshop. Then – *What then?* – Then his parents died.¹³ *Ah. So. His parents died.* – Yes. – *That must have been an important factor?* – I need to look into it. Let me look into it. So his parents died. They'd married him off. The man's on his own. This gives the wife a certain difficulty. But I've forgotten something. – *Please.* – It's hard for me to talk of it, but I probably should. Well then: husband and wife did not get along. – *Because it was arranged? I mean, because his parents had organised it?* – That too, from his point of view. But that's not the point. They didn't belong together. Not at all. – *Hm, hm.* – Yes. It's probably not nice of me to speak of it. – *I think people should be at ease speaking the truth. It clarifies. Maybe you'll have a better view of other things too.* – The wife, my mother, was hardheaded, she came from a merchant family. He, the Hamburg fellow, was a happy-go-lucky type, a gifted creature. He had many gifts. – *Such as?* – He deployed an entire arsenal of gifts. He played violin, piano, without ever having lessons. We had our first music lessons from him. The piano, I still recall, was for a long time a casing without legs; the top was mostly used during the day for cutting cloth. Dust from the fabric dropped between the keys, it had to be cleared with bellows. The man composed. One of his pieces was even arranged for the organ by the music teacher in our school, the Friedrich-Wilhelm Realgymnasium in Stettin. He sat over books on composition. He sang, and not badly. He wrote occasional poetry, could sketch rapidly. He was clever at designing clothes. Really an amazingly talented chap so many artistic things. This profusion of gifts came I believe from his mother's side, his mother was née Jessel; Leon Jessel, composer of the "Tin Soldier" and other operettas, was a cousin. But nothing my father did prospered.

¹³ Father 1881, mother 1886.

Firstly he was happy-go-lucky and never persisted at anything, then of course at home they never let him learn anything – this made him very fed up – and later his family clung to his legs. That was us, five kids, and the wife. He was also a creature of impulse, with no ambition. In this man, I can still see him before my eyes, was something soft, slack, weak and idle. So he and his gifts went on living. He maundered along, never felt really unhappy. A weakling, all in all. But not an ignoble animal.

– *It's all very good, what you say. You see how necessary it was for you to begin again. So, continue in your own good time.* – These are bad things I speak of. I know them well, though I don't like to recall them. It leads straight to me. – *But please, we have time. I'm not forcing you. Will it be so very hard?* – Oh no, it's all right. So, where was I, my mother, yes. My mother hadn't much respect for him. She called him an 'educated bootboy'. An evil phrase. A bad chapter, this pride in business and money in my mother's family. They were all very lively, active, practical people, earners, a few even gourmets. Anything beyond was unknown! No, not unknown but ridiculous! An excuse for scorn, for irony. Like when Indians or Blacks come to us and children mock them in the street. Dreadful. It was from that side that one of the bombs came that flew over the marriage of my mother with this multi-talented wimpish man.

That's it. I have to say it. I can speak of it because I too have learned to know this scorn, this narrow-mindedness, this bitter overweening hardness. I would never have dared, had no right to dare, to show my scribbles at home. For many years no one at home knew that I wrote. And when in 1906 a little theatrical piece of mine¹⁴ was performed in a matinée together with a play by Paul Scheerbart¹⁵, it was not under my name, the name of my family, but under a pseudonym.¹⁶ But earlier, in 1902, this domestic pressure had already caused something almost serious, in fact only tragic-comic. Because I avoided putting my name to my scribbles, I had sent my first novel (it lies yet in my desk drawer) to Fritz Mauthner (at the time a critic in Berlin, since him there's been no theatre critic of any gravity in Berlin) but under a pseudonym. Mauthner's eyes were giving him trouble, he lived in Grunewald, after writing to me at the Anatomy Institute where I was then working he used my fake address, asked me to visit him and read the MS out loud to him, his eyes were giving him trouble. A truly strange shyness and dread held me back from paying him a visit. Now, I know where the shyness comes from. I already had a bad conscience about my works. I was imbued with it. Unto the second generation. I once ventured to Grunewald to look him up. But I'd arranged it quite cleverly so it was already dark and in the darkness I couldn't find my way to him. From a safe haven I wrote him a letter, in which without giving any reason I asked him to send back the MS. And now the real tragic-comedy begins. Mauthner sent the MS to my fake address, a parcels office. Oranienburger Strasse. And when I turned up there to fetch my MS, they wouldn't give it me. Parcels were to be handed over against proof of identity. But how could I prove it. I showed them Mauthner's postcard. It wasn't enough. I was baffled – and remained baffled. I dared not explain the facts. That bad, horribly bad conscience! The second generation! Oh, it's a torment. To think such things are possible. They'd have opened my MS, I – would have been embarrassed to death. So the MS remained unclaimed at the parcels office. It irked me for months. The handwritten MS

¹⁴ *Lydia und Mäxchen* (written 1905). It had already been performed in December 1905 (in Döblin's absence) in the salon of Herwarth Walden's 'Society for Art'.

¹⁵ Scheerbart's piece was a grotesquery called *Herr Kammerdiener Kneetschke*.

¹⁶ 'Alfred Börne'. But Döblin's cover was already blown. In a letter to Walden of 2.12.1905 Döblin expresses annoyance that several attendees already knew he was the author.

of my first novel (*Jagende Rosse*) was thrown away by the parcels office, or pulped, I had no copy. I made a resolution: from sketches, drafts and my memory I rewrote the whole thing, in bitterness, despondency. In a thoroughly black mood the whole time.

Yes, it went on like that, and nothing changed. When I was already a doctor and a book of mine appeared, my mother asked: "What are you doing that for? Don't you have a profession?" She meant my medical practice. To mollify her I had to tell her I earned a little from it. It wasn't true (now, actually, when she's no longer living, I find that the woman was not so wrong. Really I should have let it be –). To her it was just playing around, my writing, a pastime unworthy of a serious person. That was still a definite character trait in people who came from modest circumstances into the Reich and had to earn a living, and strangely it was utterly different from what I found later in Poland among the Jews that impressed me so deeply: reverence for the book, reverence for the mind. My father had carried around such a spillage of gifts. Ethnologically, he was a victim of migration. All his values were re-evaluated and devalued. That's why, that's why his marriage failed to thrive. Not until my generation has a sense, a joyful sense of our origin and the ancient reverence slowly and painfully re-emerged. I – I survived the great migration.

My mother, I can go on now quite calmly, it was good after all that I said it, my mother had no respect for her husband. Her brothers too had no time for him. So the man, now I see more clearly, the man, who was anyway a skirt-chaser, now began to breathe the air outside the home, the air that home denied him. Gradually the man became a phoney rebel; phoney; he didn't dare escape. As long as his parents were alive he kept his head down. Then he grew defiant, I could say: braver, more decisive. He was often caught out. Quite clearly he neglected his wife. And he was growing older, he came to the dangerous forties, and now he had to encounter Miss H. It laid Fate on him like an experiment. He burst into flame, the man had probably never experienced anything like it, it was clearly a genuine, really strong passionate love. He was ripe for it. There was much in him lying ready for passion to stoke the fire and provide fresh logs. It was a life crisis. His cart starts jolting and lurching. At home the coldness, lack of freedom, quarrels grow worse.

Then – suddenly he just leaves. Finally, finally. – *Why do you say finally?* – It just came to me. – *You look pale. It must affect you deeply. Perhaps we'd better stop.* – No thanks. I can go on. I'm no longer a young lad, to be sent tumbling by an insight. I see it all clearly. I'm glad to let it all out. How the Gods are feared by the human race! They hold dominion in eternal hands, and wield it as they please.¹⁷ – *May we continue?* – Of course. It was my father's life-crisis. He walked out, simply walked out, this man. It does me good to see it like that. Now, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to pause for a while. – *Good, good. We have time.* – [A long pause, eyes closed. Then:] Let's go on. So, my father floated away from Stettin.

Now he can do it. That's how far he's come. He goes quite easily. There's no reason at all to think he'll ever come back. Why would he? Pangs of conscience, should they arise, retreat behind the sense of a new existence, of freedom. Will his wife change? Not the slightest chance. She clings to him, he's her husband, but in their natures they are strangers. There is no contact. With the tender young girl over there, he blooms. He feels good. It's his element, his boundless element. His existence. He'll stay with her. Maybe nothing will become of him for all his gifts. His father wanted to force him to become something false. Result: desertion, the husband

¹⁷ From Goethe's play *Iphegenie auf Tauris*.

cheated of half his life, the family pauperised. They should have let him loose while he was young, or given him some coarse or clever woman, a tight rein or a very loose one. Now he is déclassé. Nevertheless: he's alive, alive, understand, he lives in that class, on another continent, according to his nature.

– *We'll stop here. It's all been said, no doubt. For now.* –

Yes. But how to sum it up? As incontestable as his judgement upon the family is the family's judgement upon him. I cannot touch on this. For the one who takes on other deeds, the deeds of the parents, the judgement will be severe. It does not come to judgement. Only to a bowing of the head. To a complaint perhaps in another direction. In the end we are left with an insight, a lesson, a warning, for now, for those of us who are still alive.

VI. And he had a sister

The man I was speaking of had a sister, who was in many ways his complete opposite. She was of the same stern species as his parents. This woman would have suited him superbly. She was called Henriette (strange, another Henriette), and had a husband, a very soft man, goofily active, lots of good cheer and heart. As far as I could see he didn't enjoy life with her. She was hellishly clever. At home she wore the trousers, sturdy and brisk. When she died of a heart attack, not yet old, it happened quite fast and unexpectedly, the husband married again with hardly a pause. He lived on in bliss. If ever he had dared to abscond! She would have hauled him back from the North Pole, from the Fiji Islands, from the Cape of Best-ever Hope, back to her loving breast.

FAMILY MATTERS

VII. Respect to those who deserve it

I recall my mother as a woman who remained respectable into her old age. She paid great attention to her appearance, even during her last illness had her hair done, kept spick and span. She had a great warmth for her children, and later for her grand-children. Dealing with laundry and underwear was a passion for her. She wasn't very clever, her sister was much cleverer. The level of schooling attained in her family was generally not high. She was born in Samter, in the province of Posen, where her father, whom I recall as a little man with a white cravat, was a small tradesman, village trader in materials. His children spoke German, but also Polish and an already somewhat weakened Yiddish. When my mother wrote to relatives, she preferred to use Yiddish letters [i.e. cursive Hebrew] that looked like Turkish or Arabic; I never saw my father do so. Anyway, he came from Posen as well, the actual town of Posen. My mother grew up in Samter, her brothers left early, around 1865, for Breslau and Berlin, and became prosperous timber merchants, the firm is flourishing to this day.

In exile in Berlin, we children and the housework kept my mother busy from morning till night. For a while she rented out a room. She did the laundry herself, couldn't abide having a maid. She was brave and spry. You can't remain very unhappy for long. She had a curiously sceptical and resigned view of life. Her mottos betray a regrettably close acquaintance with existence: "It hits me like a house falling on my head." And the more soothing phrases: "As you wish" and "It was always so, and will always be so." She could declaim magnificently, and we

still know by heart the wonderful poem she used to recite on homely evenings. You must speak it out loud, with heroic gestures, that's how to drill it into your soul:¹⁸

Geh, Meister, nimm mich auf zum Schüler,	Come, Master, take me as your pupil,
Ist's einem Ernst, so ist es mir;	If anyone's serious, then it's me.
Ich werde nicht nach Wochen kühler,	I won't cool off after a few weeks,
Mich treibt nicht eitle Ruhmbegier;	I'm not driven by thoughts of glory;
Nach andern, o! nach schönern Reizen	To other, oh much lovelier delights
Verlangt's allmächtig meinen Sinn!	My mind has an almighty yearning!
Drum, Meister, will ich Maler werden	That's why, master, I'd be a painter.

That's all I remember. And anyway I'm overtaken by emotion. All I know is it ends in colossal sorrow with the words: "Of the dear girl on her deathbed."

VIII. On the fate of an uprooted family

Eldest son Ludwig was a huge success. He was of true mercantile stock, had his mother's family feeling and his father's musical inclinations. He became the family's provider, a second father. He joined the 'timber uncles' in their business, achieved independence, and left the family only when he married [July 1903]. On him fell the heaviest burden thrown off by the family's absconding founder; he bore it brilliantly.

We younger ones attended parochial schools in Berlin, only I reverted after three years to a Gymnasium. In all of us the father's blood beat strongly. Hugo, the second son, endured only a brief career in business, then had to go into the theatre. The lusty lad quickly fell in love with the daughter of his teacher – Paul Pauli, who played Baumert in the 1893 premier of Hauptmann's 'Weavers' – and in 1901 married the girl, who was called Martha. He became well known on the Berlin stage and in film.¹⁹

Youngest brother Kurt²⁰ harboured a passion for music, you could never drag him from the piano, he became an outstanding pianist. But as there was no prospect of formal training, he stayed in business. In the end he joined his eldest brother's firm.

Sister Meta is dead already. In 1919 she was hit by grenade shrapnel during the unrest in Lichtenberg as she stepped out one morning to fetch milk for her small children. She managed to climb the stairs with the shrapnel inside her – she had no idea what had happened – and then just lay there. On the bed they found blood on her coat. She lasted one more day.²¹

At the time I was not far from her in Lichtenberg, and lived through the Putsch and the cruel, outrageous, shocking things that accompanied the conquest of Lichtenberg by White troops. Around the same time, when in our district the grenades and trench mortars of the

¹⁸ The verse, a bit misquoted, is from the Austrian Johann Seidl (1804-1875): 'The first picture and the last'.

¹⁹ Hugo (1876-1960) secretly attended acting lessons from 1891, then appeared on various Berlin stages (sometimes with Max Reinhardt). From 1930 to 1933 he conducted the first talking-film school in Berlin. He wrote songs, poems, novellas, essays and film scripts.

²⁰ Born 1880, deported to Auschwitz 1940.

²¹ More about Meta below. Döblin's eyewitness account of the March 1919 unrest is in Part One: 'Cannibals'.

liberators were demolishing entire buildings, when many sat in cellars and then, horribly, when many were shot at the little Lichtenberg cemetery in Möllendorf Strasse – you had to see the corpses lying there outside the school, men with caps over their faces, to understand what class hatred and a spirit of vengeance mean – at around the same time, the rest of Berlin was dancing away merrily, there were balls and newspapers. Nothing stirred as this was going on in Lichtenberg, and the many tens of thousands of workers in Berlin all kept silent. That was when I saw how necessary it was that this revolution should be repulsed. I am opposed to incapability. I hate incapability. These people were incapable of taking action. You have to declare a break with wimps, idiots and phrasemongers. That's how it went then, and whoever declared a break, whether coming from the Left or the Right, I was on his side.

It was around this time – I have to keep on about it – that one midday the entire Siegesallee, Bellevue Strasse, Potsdamer Platz were stuffed full of demonstrators marching. Whoever saw these masses of people, trucks carrying machine guns alongside them, thousands of strong men, and this mass, these workers, did nothing but scream Up with and Down with, and another huge mass of workers drew close to them going in the other direction, also singing the Internationale and screaming Down when the others screamed Up – whoever experienced this will know the repugnance I felt for such a miserable “revolution”. As alien and detestable as I found the White troops, I retreated and said firmly: this is good, better than that lot over there. Here a righteous judgement is being carried out. Either they know what a revolution is, and they make revolution, or they deserve a rod for their backs because they are merely playing at it.

I meant to speak of my sister. That dreadful morning when the shooting approached from Warschauer Brücke I was unable to go to her. The heavy artillery fire in the Frankfurter Allee was too strong²². She was quickly carried to a nearby surgical clinic. When signs of internal bleeding showed, they made another incision. In vain. A major vessel had been severed, she died under anaesthetic. My mother was seriously ailing at the time, she lived with her eldest son in Lichtenberg. When I came to their apartment with my sister's husband, my mother heard my brother's painful sobs at the news. The illness had made her face rigid, but her hands and head shook more strongly. She said at once: “She's dead.” And then: “Why her and not me.”

My sister hadn't had a good time at home. She'd grown up with the crazy bourgeois ideal: “Thou shalt, must and wilt get married.” Though we had nothing, we made every effort to avoid placing her in work. No thought was more alien to the family than that the daughter should earn money like everyone else and stand on her own feet. So my sister went here and there and for a long time didn't marry. Eldest brother made huge sacrifices to provide a dowry from his business. The man she married was a dubious character even before the wedding. She was warned, but wanted to get away, wanted her own household. A brief bad marriage. The man had taken her for the money. A year or two later came the divorce. For some years she lived alone with her furniture, then – it couldn't go on forever, once again the only solution was marriage, so she married again, an artisan, a simple tidy man. She went with him to Constantinople, then Antwerp. We visited her there once. She'd taken on two children from the man's first marriage – he was a widower, and because they were poor and had nothing they had

²² Alfred lived at 194 Frankfurter Allee, Meta and her Russian decorator husband Bernhard Goldenberg, at 278.

four more children²³. Earlier, at home, she and her no less passionate and solid mother had often danced lively dances. Later the daughter, this much-tested and experienced woman, was her closest confidant. Her fate was as heavy as my mother's, but she faced it just as bravely and was not broken. In October 1914 Antwerp was attacked and occupied by the Germans. She lived with her children through the siege and the shooting, then after Antwerp fell returned to Germany in a great transport.

Though she had lots of troubles she was always good-humoured and gave advice right and left and was much loved. Her end suited her image well: killed fetching milk for her little children. The children have grown up well, they go to school and look! even the daughters are already independent, stand on their own feet, though still young. They're all doing well. I say this as a quiet thought that she herself can hear.

IX. My mother's life ends

We moved from Blumenstrasse to Landsbergerstrasse near Friedrichshain, then to the quite new Marsilius Strasse opposite the factory, to the fourth floor – I could look out towards Blumenstrasse onto the yard of my parochial school. Then came Grüne Weg ('Green Path'), where we were honoured to receive a visit from the old Hamburg gentleman. The family slowly emerged from the status of beggars, mainly through the toil of my eldest brother. We lived in Wallnertheater Strasse, followed eldest brother when he made himself independent, to gloomy Markus Strasse, and later farther east to Memelstrasse by the Warschauer Brücke. Gradually the family melted away. First to leave the nest was Hugo, the actor; he married very young, and my mother's first grandchild came from him. Then eldest brother married, and there were three of us left with mother. Then came my sister's marriage, and I left to pursue my studies. Until shortly before her end my youngest brother was still with her.

Around 1908 the life of my mother, who was already over sixty, took a happy turn. A bright beam of light fell over her life: she inherited a large amount from one of her brothers. From that moment on she was economically independent and well-to-do. It was in her nature to give to us as much as she was able. Now she went to summer resorts, made little trips, once even to Antwerp to see my sister. But even at that time there were puzzling signs that not all was well. Her right arm trembled, her right hand trembled, and there was a remarkable twitching in the arm, which wouldn't relax even with rubbing, electric shocks and massage.

It was 1910. I brought her to my superior at the time at the Urban Hospital, Albert Fränkel. With a shake of the head he said: Nasty business, better keep an eye on it. Half a year later it was clear: the arm had grown stiffer, she could no longer do her own hair, the tremor in the fingers had a strangely rhythmic character, the pill-rolling between thumb and index finger. It was the early stage of the shaking palsy, paralysis agitans [i.e. Parkinson's disease]. Which then proceeded on its slow heavy dreadful, slow heavy lamentable way. Slowly tension, stiffness and hardness set into the right leg, and passed into the left leg. The head started shaking, the face muscles became notably stiff. She had no idea what was wrong with her. They said: It's your nerves. And she said: Yes, that's no surprise given all that lay behind her, long years of toil, alone with five children, then letting to sub-tenants and doing the laundry herself. I took her to Wiesbaden, she improved, but it was all deception. 1914, end of July, amid the din of war alarms,

²³ Actually only three.

I took her to Öynhausen. The stations were full of soldiers, on the way back many bridges had sentries posted. I travelled with Russians anxious to get home. In Berlin I could hardly squeeze out of the train as heaps of humanity stormed their way into the carriage. But Öynhausen was not good for the old lady, the baths weakened her. I still recall how she visited me later in the Frankfurter Allee, October 1914 on the [2nd] birthday of my eldest, Peter. She brought presents, it was slow going up and down stairs.

At the end of 1914 I joined up.

For two years I didn't see her, my home leaves were taken up with my own ailments. Then I came to Lichtenberg, where she was living with my youngest brother. What a sight. I climbed the stairs. I knew she had a nurse. I rang, no one answered. I rang and knocked. Then a door opened inside, and very slow dragging steps could be heard. The chain was lifted, and there she stands. It's her, "Granny". Her hair is snow-white and sparse. It hasn't been combed today, it hangs about her ears. The woman is so small, so small. She stands stiffly, rounded back bent forward, the illness has pressed her head down onto her chest. She holds her hands like little paws close to her body. A sad sight, so sad, as if pleading from below. There were big bags under her eyes, yellow spots on the eyelids.

She stands there at the door. "It's you, Fritz. Why do you never visit?" A monotonous, gently quivering voice, the old sound is there but broken. I led her slowly back into the parlour, the nurse had gone shopping, I sat her in a chair. I spent that leave with her. Though outwardly she was so changed, pressed by the illness to the ground, she still had her old habits and her nature of a housewife, calculating, and a mother, worrying; everything gone senile. She liked to hear stories, even laughed sometimes. She was immobile as a stick, had to be sat down, fed and washed. But once set on her feet she could take her little steps, though if she fell she couldn't get up by herself. The war ended, we were all there again, visits came from this one, that one. She moved in with my eldest brother, during the bombardment of Lichtenberg she was carried down to the cellar.

I shall say nothing of what happened that final year when she could no longer sit, became bedridden. Anyone familiar with this disease knows: the song has ended. They lie in their helplessness like a stone just where they've been laid, and their flesh succumbs to bedsores. So there she lay during her final year in her room – my brother had moved with her towards the Tiergarten – tended by the nurse, a skeleton with rigid limbs but still with the unmistakably dear suffering features of our mother. That was her thin white skull. Her gaze. She didn't suffer greatly. Those who saw her suffered more. There's morphine, and even stronger stuff. I attended to her along with others. Sometimes we sat her up, she was like a doll made all of one piece, covered horribly in wounds at the hips, the heels, shoulders, the dreaded bedsores. Mostly she was alert, but also very confused, from the creeping wound-fever, painkillers, senile delirium. Until peace came and the soul received a mercy and left the body.

She lies in Weissensee beside her daughter. On her gravestone we had these words inscribed: Love never ceases.

X. Mother and Daughter

Back again in Berlin.²⁴ The same smoky East End was again chosen for our domicile. First the upper part of Landsberger Strasse near to Friedrichshain, later Marsilius Strasse, a newly laid out link between Blumenstrasse and Grosse Frankfurter. In Landsberger Strasse we again lived on the third floor. For the doctor-to-be this scene was unforgettable. Mother was a hot-tempered woman; only at an advanced age did she adopt a certain mildness and let her innate loving motherliness shine forth pure and unblemished. She was an upright, well-proportioned woman with fresh and not unattractive facial features; she was not a little vain, enjoyed looking at herself in the mirror, set great store by hairdos. Her inclination to powder herself, darken her eyebrows with a pencil, was a source of great vexation to her eldest son, also her habit of dressing up younger than was appropriate to her years: she liked to hear occasional acquaintances remark on the pretty young woman – she was in her mid-forties at the time.

She was the daughter of an apparently well-off man from the province of Posen; her eldest brother had been the go-between for her marriage to the not yet independent son of a Stettin merchant; money played an important role. Father at once took the opportunity to bow low before his parents; as long as his much-feared father was alive the marriage must have been a model affair; his escapades only began when the coast was quite clear. Mother was in no way a member of the intelligentsia; there was something about her that was ordinary, humanly good-hearted, amiable, completely benevolent, and she offered it to the whole world, most lovingly and powerfully in interacting with her children, for whom she was the support and the centre of the family.

But now and then something fiery, wild, uncultivated broke out, and almost always only in interactions with her only daughter, the second-eldest child. Quarrels with her were almost the order of the day. Dozens of times the tormented daughter, whose future was totally opaque and hence oppressive, screamed that she would leave home. During one quarrel Mother wanted to hit the girl, who was 17 or 18 at the time. She fled crying and screaming from room to room of the third floor Landsberger apartment, beside herself. Finally she jumped onto the windowsill in the front room, flung open the window, and seemed ready to jump out. Mother stood frozen in the doorway, in horror called out to the eldest son, the daughter shouted threats that she would jump and take her own life if people wouldn't leave her in peace.²⁵ The episode ended with everyone crying, mutual recriminations. Eldest son went around raging: "Grandmother's curse lies on the family." For Grandmother had once cursed her entire family; the stupendous wording often made an appearance, with ritualised gestures. Even Mother when she was angry cursed one or other of her children, mostly the daughter, with no detriment to her love. Nevertheless Mother never managed, or not until very late in life, to relate properly to her daughter; time and time again the girl had to feel and hear how she was a burden to her mother, to the family. But it wasn't her fault she wasn't a boy. And she could not bring herself to the decision, the almost so obvious decision, to stand on her own two feet, which would at once bring her a new status in the family. She was too clearly set on marriage, like all girls of this bourgeois class especially at that time. The leap from marriageable middle class girl to servant was too degrading, and there wasn't much to choose from: shop girl, piece-worker at home etc. She had no learning, had learned nothing; there would at that time have been chances enough

²⁴ September 1889, after half a year in Hamburg for a failed reconciliation with Döblin père.

²⁵ Several female characters in Döblin's fiction leap to their deaths from windows: Empress Eleonore in *Wallenstein*; Marion Divoise in *Mountains Oceans Giants*; Therese in Vol. 3 of *Amazonas*. Was Döblin conscious of this fixation over two decades?

for a person of the better classes with some learning. So she stayed at home for years, until quite late on – she was no beauty, but to her brothers a very caring, very kindly, very dishevelled person – with money from her eldest brother, the later provider of the family, found a husband – it lasted hardly a year. As a young woman she was not domesticated, her husband soon ran away, and finally, when her dowry was almost all gone, she married an artisan, a widower with several children, lived in straitened circumstances, had to turn to relatives all the time for assistance, had several children, grew into a skinny overworked woman, but one who never wearied of her laborious toil, considered herself, astonishingly, well-situated, a good indulgent woman who with great love and sympathy ... [*the text breaks off here*]

XI. Report on a member of the family

We have the honour to present a member of the family, Alfred Döblin, resident in Berlin, the second-youngest son of the family. We provide several pictures of him, as well as a palm print. He was born in Stettin on 10 August 1878 as the son of the above-named Max Döblin and his wife Sophie, née Freudenheim.

Height 160 cm. Weight unclothed 114 pounds. Chest, inflated: 92 cm, deflated: 86 cm. Skull circumference 58.5 cm, length 22 cm, width 16 cm. He has hereditary extreme short-sightedness and astigmatism.

Facial tone mostly pale, visible mucous membranes strongly bloodshot, musculature weakly developed, almost no fatty deposits. Pupil reflexes to bright light and close focusing are normal, knee and Achilles tendon reflexes notably enhanced. Hand pressure on both sides good, no abnormalities of motor strength. No swaying when eyes are closed, no tremor in the hands. Normal skin sensitivity to pricking and touching. Pharyngeal reflex present. Thoracic and abdominal organs show no findings.

Face narrow, hair dark brown in good quantity, mixed with gray, eye colour is gray-blue. Mouth has a prominent overbite, apparently hereditary in the family, like the short-sightedness. The gum is high. Dentition lacking the upper left canine, first upper right molar, wisdom tooth lower left and upper right.

The bone structure is gracile. The subject belongs overall to the slim active type, which Kretschmer²⁶ assigns to the schizoid rank.

The nose is characteristically large, also long, in profile lies in line with the receding forehead which, bending away at the front, is that of a Jew. Ethnologically he is no pure type, there are Nordic acclimatisation influences, evident in the dolichocrany, the eye colour and the colour of the head hair, which in his youth was flaxen and only later darkened. Several of the subject's children exhibit Nordic assimilation more clearly.

His handwriting is analysed by Dr Max Pulver²⁷ of Zurich as follows:

²⁶ Ernst Kretschmer (1888-1964), psychiatrist, founder of 'constitution typology'.

²⁷ Max Pulver (1889-1952): Swiss Expressionist poet and dramatist, later turned to graphology. He wrote a newspaper article on Döblin, timed for an evening of readings in Zurich in 1927.

His temperament: An amalgam of the nervous and the motor: unparalleled range of activities, very delicate, but subtly soulful with comprehensive radiations to the outermost ethereal regions, as well as into the abysses of the collective unconscious.

A zeal for composition is first, then a broad-reaching bracketing of wide groups of regions. Matter does not exist for him, everything is soulful, in an almost gaseous aggregate state. Self-discipline urges towards analysis; bourgeois thoroughness is replaced by inscrutability. Courage and delight in fabulation, fairytales on an analytical basis. The creative wave ever and again blocked by self-control, ever and again set in motion again by immanent levity. Gigantic extent of the fables, as of the impetus to work.

The private Ego: Empathetic in association with physical weakness; modest, hedged in by constraints, need for pressure, everyday activity broken, but not smashed. Here well-meaning, but abrupt. Employs diplomacy out of human thoughtfulness. Made necessarily sensitive by pressure, just as by the enormous dilation of his being. Sarcasm and mockery as defences. Impulses to ambition may put personal modesty at risk.

Among people: The greatest self-assurance, direct, almost naïve. May barge in, exhibits little vanities, but also courage to express his mind. Despite the presence of routine in regard to the public, this makes him to some extent alien to himself. Ego-impulses become mixed in.

His profession: Doctor for children or nervous conditions. Also artist. Great and sensitive receptiveness, unprecedented capacity for analytical penetration, especially in the direction of the Spiritual-Unknown. But also strongly anchored in the physiological; probably more neurologist than psychoanalyst. The words 'medical' and 'literature' reveal characteristic disturbances of writing. Collision of interests probably coloured subjectively in their projection.

Health: Delicate, with a personal economy in energy use; states of weakness of a nervous kind are registered, along with probable metabolic disorders. The very unusual combination of existences allows here no further prognosis.

Reading and palpation of his hands by Frau Marianne Raschig, who had never met him:

The small, not wide, finely articulated hand with feeler-like pointed nervous fingers, of which the little and index fingers are narrow and so delicate and flexible that they appear crooked, speak hypersensitivity, a mental capacity for adaptation which follows inspirations and mental manifestations, which is almost overwhelmed by them and receives them in a kind of mediumistic trance.

The many lines on the inner surface reveal, despite their idiosyncrasy and bizarre shapes, a great harmony and clarity (the doubled, broad bright Mercury line towards the little finger is particularly striking.) The pronounced Venus mount crossed by delicate curved lines reveals a sense for beauty, a strongly marked sensitivity for form.

Particularly noticeable in the interesting hand image is the shape like a divining rod which, formed from the Saturn and Mercury lines, encloses the Apollo mount (below the ring finger). A large crooked cross is visible on this mount, woven of many lines, which – already named the ‘croix mystique’ in old books – hints at mystical undercurrents and metaphysical gifts.

“You expend too much nervous strength. Your nails are noticeably red. Let them grow longer. – Logic is well developed. – You have many internal disturbances and moods, this comes incessantly through you, it is something mediumistic. You are a sort of medium. The safeguards needed by a human medium are present, are developed, but you don’t always use them. – Especially noticeable is how yielding, gentle, how enormously empathetic with others you are, you have a real excess of this. You should think of yourself much more. Egoism is totally absent. – You are very impulsive. Whatever catches your attention you pursue to the end. You are very steadfast and reliable. – You have an enormous sense of duty. Really it is too big. You are constantly on the alert. This is not entirely good. One can be on the alert now and then, but this constantly ... – You are completely without prejudice. You have an outspokenly individual will, an independence, your own being. – The Life line is very good, very long. No doubt you come from a long-lived family? But think of your nerves, your nails, and store the strength more externally. You are inclined to ruminate. – And this is remarkable: you will have good fortune or success, maybe this very year, from abroad. Do you have contracts or deals there? Are they about translations of your books? Well, something is coming from over there.”

She keeps feeling the fingers, joints, twists and turns the hands. –

Following his first impressions of Berlin and his memories of Stettin, the above-named, when asked about his schooldays gave the following account:

In Stettin, the big Parade Square. We live in Wilhelmstrasse near den Linden. We play on the Town Hall steps, we can look down on the railway. Excursions by steamer and on foot to Gotzlow, a school trip, during which the older pupils made a great impression with their deep voices. Kaiser Wilhelm the First visited Stettin, the ceremonial entry, Bismarck was with him, he wore a cuirassier helmet, shiny, colossal, much too big for him. When the Kaiser dies, school is let out, bells toll, speeches are made in class, it’s a serious matter. And then on the way home I don’t know if I’m supposed to cry, at home I find it all calm, no one pays attention to anything. Finally after the family catastrophe I hold my mother’s hand along den Linden, I’m embarrassed, I think everyone’s looking at us. –

The subject advises further that he has visited his birthplace Stettin on the Oder, seat of a regional government etc., on another later occasion. He wanted to become a doctor at a hospital there, presented himself, was given the brush-off. He said with a smile: “The town has once again shown me the cold shoulder.” He believes that his nose (see above) was found objectionable. On this occasion his view of the town seemed totally altered. He discovered a big villa quarter unknown to him. The Parade Square was unusually boring. The precipitous steps at the Town Hall were quite unhazardous, they were an easy climb. The buildings were low. The town was very empty and colourless. The subject declares, word for word: “I ascertained that I was born in this coastal town, but this fact, like the town, I would like to let go at that.”

Please provide some data from your schooldays. –

I was taken out of the Friedrich-Wilhelm Realgymnasium in 1888. At that time, ten years old, I was in the Sexta. Aged 13, in 1891, I was again in the Sexta, in Berlin, in the Gymnasium,

had a free place.²⁸ In between I'd attended parochial school. So the path from first year to first year can be circuitous. I left the Gymnasium not before contending successfully for my Abitur²⁹ and carrying away the certificate.

Conduct and Diligence: His conduct was licit (!!), his diligence adequate.

German: His essays had mostly satisfactory content, albeit not always presented with the necessary consideration and adequate care. The examination essay was adequate. Of the literary works and essays discussed in class he developed a sure grasp, always followed the discussion with lively eagerness and very clear understanding. Adequate.

Latin: He manages satisfactorily to translate not too difficult passages into German. He possesses adequate knowledge of the frequently used metres of Horace. He showed adequate confidence in grammar and the use of grammatical rules. The verdict on his efforts in class matches that of his written examination work: adequate.

Greek: He demonstrated lively interest in this subject. He has a good grasp of the most important metres; he has carefully memorised a number of poetical passages. He is confident in grammar and gained adequate preparation for the translation of schoolroom writers. This testifies to adequate exploratory work. Hence the overall verdict in Greek is unequivocally adequate.

French: His knowledge is sufficient to translate easier writings adequately. Although his examination work, which he prepared taking no care, was inadequate, and the oral examination betrayed great weakness in grammar, the overall verdict on his efforts can still be described as adequate.

History and Geography: He knows the epoch-making events of world history. Through careful diligence he has attained extensive knowledge of the spheres of German and Prussian history. He was able to provide satisfactory accounts of connections between events. His knowledge of history therefore deserves an overall verdict of adequate. Likewise in Geography he possesses adequate knowledge.

Mathematics: With great diligence he has repaired gaps from earlier years. He has enough knowledge of the syllabus to solve not too difficult exercises independently. Since at least recently his class contributions and his examination work satisfy the requirements, the overall verdict is: adequate.

Gymnastics: Adequate. *Singing:* Good.

In the Year of Our Saviour 1900

I was 22 years old when I left the Gymnasium: thus does the above-described subject from the family in question express himself. When I left school for the last time, I spat on the ground. I attach great importance to this being confirmed and recorded. He says no one in the utterly transformed school will remember him. There will of course be different teachers, even the syllabus has completely changed. But if any should think of him as they pass the great school

²⁸ Sexta: first year of secondary school (=Year 5 of schooling). So Döblin was 2 years older than his classmates. The sequence continues Quinta, Quarta, Untertertia, Obertertia, Untersekunda, Obersekunda, Unterprima, Oberprima.

²⁹ Abitur: the highest school leaving qualification.

building or even climb the steps, he urges them to look down at the foot of the steps, the lowest sequence of stones, to the right. That's where he spat his goodbye on the ground.

Here the subject falls silent. He was urged several times to provide more details, to unburden himself. But he has a black look and gives an impression of stubbornness. All we can do, since the subject maintains an obstinate silence and there is here clearly a matter important to his verdict, is to enact a specific ploy. We leave the respondent locked in the examination room. But before doing so, unremarked by the subject, we place a pile of white paper and a pencil on a side table. We place cigarettes and matches on the windowsill. When we return in the evening, we find the subject asleep on the sofa. The light is on. He has evidently been smoking heavily. On the floor by the table lie papers covered in dense script. They are numbered. The first sheet bears the title 'Ghost Sonata'.

SCHOOLDAYS

XII. Ghost Sonata³⁰

This is the X Gymnasium³¹ in Berlin. Taking their places at desks alongside one another are the teachers – Professors and Doctors. Almost all are dead. They have come to hear what a former pupil, who was in their company for ten years, has to say about their school. They sit quietly on the benches, are not a whit scared of the man who summoned them. They won't defend themselves. They always knew he'd never amount to much. The Summoner moves towards the rostrum. He is unsure of himself. He wants to sit at a desk, as usual. The teachers nudge one another, a few smile ironically. Then the Summoner pulls himself together, stops for a moment at the front row as if pondering, in fact he's overcoming an inhibition. Now he stands on the podium, blackboard behind him. There's a long silence, during which many things sort themselves out within the Summoner. An uncomfortably long pause before he opens his mouth. The teachers below regard him as they would a guilty pupil.

The Summoner begins to name the teachers one by one. He speaks softly, doesn't look up from the desktop. He's wearing big glasses with enormously thick rimless lenses, his eyes are behind them. Now and then he removes the glasses; the teachers take fright and look away. He has big grey-blue eyes, deep-set, that gaze into a void. His face is suddenly unfamiliar, metaphysically alien, and yet remarkably penetrating, a map in which you can't find your way. The teachers are relieved when he picks the glasses up from the desk. He speaks.

– I've invited you here, gentlemen, my teachers who all know me. And I thank you for accepting the invitation. I thank especially those who are no longer with us the so-called Living. I knew in advance you would come. I knew that professional curiosity would help you through the rigours of your long journey. I thought to myself, gentlemen – my teachers – that one should not speak unilaterally into the world. I want to speak out, but you must be present when I do so. I do not speak in order to unburden my heart. My conversation is to be a settling of accounts with you.

³⁰ Allusion to Strindberg's 1908 play about unmasking and punishing the wicked, and summoning the dead.

³¹ The Köllnische Gymnasium.

I spent ten years in the school where you taught. From the Sexta up to Abitur. It was a long time. I leave open the question of whether it was a good time. It was not a good time. A difficult time. If I – permit me to speak frankly, you'll have your turn – if I may be quite frank, for me it was a decidedly difficult time. –

Now the Summoner falls silent, drums on the desktop, continues in a low voice.

– You will – this will make no impression on you. In fact it's my belief that already at the start I make a feeble impression on you, a sentimental one. I recall your history lessons, Professor Kerka.³² You were a strict but good man. You lectured on Prussian history – that Frederick the Great was made great by his father's harshness.³³ Nietzsche said something similar: "What a man becomes, he becomes despite everything."³⁴ There's something in that. But I find (here the Summoner hesitates, and swallows and chews) that this was something ... by which ... you set rather great store.

Professor Schattmann (*generally known as Thickhead, a name he liked to apply to others; hesitantly*): May I ask: did you make something of yourself? What are you?

S[ummoner]: I'm a doctor, Professor. Apart from that, I write.

Schattmann: So you did in fact go to university.

S: Yes, I did.

Schattmann: Well then, I've no idea what you mean by 'difficult' and 'not difficult'. Surely you won't start whining about us. So what do you want. Some find it easy, others not. That's always the case. (*He sits, he has penetrating eyes. He is a good, honourable man.*)

S: That, actually, talking about it, knocking it about between us, is why I invited you here. It's the question of how difficult it should be made for someone, and how to decide the dose. Life isn't easy, the school shouldn't overprotect, as many parents do. My home wasn't bad. It was small, crowded, we were good to one another. Especially my mother, she was a caring, truly loving mother. I say only the best of her, of all of them. But at bottom, in the end you grow up by yourself. The school, too, should disregard this. This too the child should experience at school, later life will be no different. But, in one respect surely the school differs from later life, even I know this now: the disregarding occurs in outside life by chance, in school it has to be applied deliberately. In outside life I have the option to withdraw from the general disregard and go in search of something, someone or ones who do not disregard me. But what can I do among all of you. Life is not yet there for me – school could surely fill the role! Please don't misunderstand me, gentlemen, professors, I don't mean to insult anyone, but I think: in a certain respect the teacher should be at the service of the pupil. In a quite general and crude sense, not pedagogic: the school should help the pupil.

Schattmann (*not looking up*): But damn it all, you made something of yourself.

S (*very softly*): I'm ... not ... sure.

³² Pseudonym. Actual name was Zellmer. All the other teacher names are pseudonyms.

³³ The artistic Crown Prince clashed with his militaristic father, eventually making an escape attempt in 1730, for which he was brutally punished.

³⁴ Döblin's rendering of Pindar's aphorism, quoted frequently by Nietzsche: "Become that which you are."

Schattmann: What's that supposed to mean?

S (*keeps silent*).

Schattmann: Doctor, I think you said?

Bräuel³⁵ (*beside him, nods vigorously.*)

S (*remains silent a long while, then makes a move, clearly an abrupt turning back from something, speaks in an altered fresh tone that at first sounds convincing*): So, when I first started at the school, all went well with me. My first teacher in the Sexta was you, Professor Haffner. You had a serious eye problem, they'd had to remove one eye. I was first in your class, remained first up to the Quarta. I have fond memories of you, Professor. I suffered a little tale of woe under your care. You know nothing of it. It's perhaps not without interest to hear something private from a pupil.

You know that each classroom had a cupboard for storing all kinds of materials. As the first in class I was key monitor. I wore it on a ribbon around my neck. One day – the key was gone. I'd lost it. The ribbon had somehow come undone. Well, it would have been easy enough to repair the damage. I could report it, I could say something at home. I said nothing. The cupboard was, by good fortune, unlocked. I left it unlocked and made no report. I was in constant fear of something going missing, and I'd be guilty, and on top of that the fact of the lost key would be revealed. It was a tormenting strain, month after month. At home every penny was sacred, I had no way to come by money, the key apparently cost 1.5 Mark. I thought of saving, but months later had still put together only 30 pfennig. At night I dreamt of the key. I often imagined the scene where I would reveal the loss, and many times I made a start: I'd clutch at my throat, where's the key, the ribbon's come undone, I had it just now. And the apartment would be searched, and a rock would have rolled from my heart. A dozen times I walked home with the firm intention: today I'll tell them. I held back until promotion to the next class approached.

Then I had to say it, and nothing bad at all resulted. My mother's only concern was whether it would harm me at school. She went at once to the school, it was afternoon, you were there, Professor. She told me afterwards, you were there and said Yes, it's true, the cupboard's unlocked. So the janitor was called, the lock was replaced, and – problem solved. It's strange how even as a child, I was thirteen at the time, life can be made difficult by thinking, through embarrassment, timidity. There were many oppressive moments that year. I know the fault lay with me. For you perhaps this is of no great interest. It's only a private experience.

Bräuel (*the Mathematician, very eager*): No, no, it's of great interest to us. It confirms what we thought of you. There were many occasions when you should have been more open. Even later you always lacked frankness.

S (*not smiling*): I know. I have seldom been open. But would it have been any help to me in your case, Professor? Openness always requires two parties.

Bräuel: No. Never. For openness, one is enough.

S: You're right. That would be me.

Bräuel: For sure.

³⁵ i.e. Maths teacher Dr Meder, largely responsible for Döblin's first failed attempt at the Abitur.

S (*stares hard at him*): I – could not speak out. I could not. And – why did you not make the first move, why did you not loosen my tongue?

Bräuel: Well now, this is better. We're meant to have some part in it. But it's not our job to cure character defects.

S (*twitches, his shoulders droop, he stands slack*): Thank you. (*After a pause*): So I came to the Quarta. From then on I went downhill. First I was a middling student, then just average, then I wavered between average and poor. I went to school, it was my duty. That's how I remained to the end, up to the terrors of the Abitur.

Bräuel (*broad figure, folds his hands, turns smugly to his neighbours left and right*): We're happy to confirm this. All of us, I think. You were a sad figure.

Buttler (*Old Butt [= flounder], excellent man, Classical philologist*): My dear colleague, we should not venture there.

S: No, Professor Buttler, I would ask most cordially that you let Professor Bräuel speak, he was just getting wind in his sails. I was a sad figure. This was your opinion too, when some years ago you bumped into my friend Kurt the attorney, on the bridge at Halensee.³⁶ We were both long out of school. You recognised him at once. He told you he was an attorney. How surprised you were! You said: "Well I never, something became of you after all. And you have a practice? So you're up to that!" Once there was the following incident between him and you, he tells it to this day: He had to come to the blackboard to make a mathematical calculation. He'd prepared well, for he knew how readily you'd land one on a boy. But there he stands up front, this time you couldn't let loose on him, you sat and watched. The exercise was done correctly but the boy was nervous, couldn't write well with chalk. So you could at least criticise his writing. "Poor handwriting is a sign of deficient love of truth." So he was allowed to return to his seat, the matter was all square. At Halensee you also asked about me in a friendly way. You couldn't grasp we were actually alive, were capable of existence.

Bräuel (*leans calmly back*): I believe you developed better out there than at school.

S: At school I had no understanding of Mathematics, and that holds even today.

Bräuel (*glances lazily about, gives the Summoner a friendly nod*): Out there you come across not so many clear minds. This is not unknown to us. In school we pay attention to logic and precision.

Buttler: But please, Mister Summoner, Doctor, please do continue! We really are very interested in your personal impressions and experiences. It's like on the stage: it's nice for once to watch the play from backstage. Let's talk about it. The story of the key in the Sexta was already most instructive. Oh, one must be careful with childish souls! But I always say: where's the time, where's the time! Correcting exercises, conferences, and one has one's own interests. And then the lesson plan, the syllabus – a pain.

S: You're very kind, Professor. You're as good as ever. Just now my little boat was – about to capsize. Private experiences and impressions. When I listen to our mathematical colleague, something occurs to me. An anxiety dream. I have those, like many people. So, I'm dreaming, Professor Buttler, I must be dreaming, I'm as old as I really am, thirty, forty, forty-five, and then

³⁶ Kurt Neimann (1877-1944, died in Theresienstadt): fellow pupil of Döblin's up to 1899. Lawyer with musical talent.

for some reason, I don't know why, I must come here, to the school, and sit with the boys in class. I must sit beside them on the narrow bench. I know I've actually completed the Abitur, even completed university, I'm a doctor. But – I sit there, unhappy, I can't understand what this is, they hand me old books, from time to time I stand up so I can say I've already done the exam, and I've already been to university! But I have to sit down again, it's no use.

Bräuel: Not hard to explain. You're not yet finished. You have more to learn. There's something you must put right.

S (*eyes lighting up*): Wonderful, Professor! That you know this.

Other teachers (*a confusion of voices*): Nonsense! Demonology!

Bräuel (*turning to them*): The murderer returning to the scene of his crime. In my home town they tell other tales as well.

Other teachers (*there's a rustling, a buzz of talk*): Demonology. No doubt you know best, dear colleague.

S: I dream about school as others dream about an accident! During the war many were traumatised by shocks, grenade explosions, falling bombs. In their dreams this situation kept recurring, made them anxious. Why? They weren't murderers. In dreams the person seeks to nail the situation that startled him. It's a reaction of the soul. It's traumatised because it was unable at the time to defend itself, because it was ambushed, surprised too violently, too suddenly. Now it conjures the situation up as a dream, tackles it anew, and gradually gains strength from it. The shock heals, a balance is restored between inner strength and external jolt. Just as a boxer learns to harden his stomach muscles against a dangerous blow. That – that's why I dream about school. You think I should mug up on lessons? No, I have to overcome the whole school, this accident, the grenade explosion. It has been overcome. The dream does not recur. But it goes further. The result does not satisfy me. On my own behalf, and on behalf of others. I must now nail you, really and directly, gentlemen. We are on the same level. Your faces should be turned towards me. Now the question comes of the originator, the culprit, the one responsible for this grenade explosion!

Schattmann: Sir, Doctor, you know me, and you said you have no bad memories of me. Now gather your wits and think a single thought all the way through, a significant one. You speak with emotion, in a passion. Is this the place. Are we men? Express yourself as you wish, or don't express yourself, you can praise, you can rage, you can blame, you can go to your mother. Regrettably, I have no interest in your dreams. You learned something from us. You mastered the syllabus. To do so you had to undertake all kinds of tasks, and you did so. We are not a kindergarten. You stand on your own two feet. Now put an end to this business. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, damn it.

PE teacher: He was always a weakling, a slacker.

History teacher: Be objective, that's Prussianism, Doctor.

S (*will not be interrupted*): But it so happens I have come to know the boundaries of this objectivity. The point is: how is one brought to objectivity, and whose objectivity? Whether I want this objectivity, or not? Whether it is alien to me, or comfortable. You say: achieve, achieve. I ask, I have always asked, even at school, without clearly knowing it: achieve for whom, what are these achievements for?

Schattmann (*hard*): That's not for you to ask. It's beyond your competence, and was beyond your competence as a pupil. Those who are older and wiser have thought it out for you. Your task was to achieve, and develop yourself according to the requirements. What you think as you do so doesn't matter.

S (*savagely*): Wrong! Achieve, even if I go to the dogs in the process! No one needs to think for me, or you thought against me, or you thought wrongly. I never entered into your calculations. I want to unmask your wisdom. You wanted to make me, this "I", into your thing, hide and hair. A thing. That's it. Bearer of your objectivity. But that was barbarism, not education. I was handed to you for an education, not sold.

Schattmann: Unclear statements. Piffle. Really, you need to go back to school.

S: Your whole system never listened to us. It was proud that it never listened. And so you never noticed what was happening. You never wanted to hear the word "I". I too don't give a damn for the "I". But there was one "I" that spoke to you. Just one. The State! What called itself "the State". And not just "I" but at once demanding "We" in the royal plural. We, that was the Hohenzollerns, the Hohenzollern State, to which I was to surrender my "I". Given there was such an enormous "I" there that swallowed everything, swallowed the school, swallowed the pupils and wanted to make everything one single cause – I don't say "no", I merely ask, and I have a natural right to ask, this I stress to you, gentlemen: who was this "I", what did this "I" want? I can look it in the face. I can size it up. And as concerns me: what did this "I" want with me? Tell me, Professor Schattmann, you who never posed this question!

Schattmann (*angrily*): Yes, sir. I did this. I am a civil servant. You seem not to know the State. I served it.

S: But I have never served it. Not I! Even today I serve no state. None can persuade me to it. Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche were already there under my school bench. They were my "I"! Already in the third year I was thinking and writing.³⁷ You volunteered for service to the state; nobody asked me or the other pupils. We were kids, pupils, commodities. You never even considered it needful to ask. We were mere nothings. – It's bitter for me to have to speak so. It's hard for me to speak expressly against you, Professor Schattmann. I'd like to bite off my tongue for having to do this.

Schattmann: You're ranting, sir. You're more our pupil than you want to admit. But I'd like to interrupt this unilaterally excited discussion for a moment to ask: what's the story here. Information has been brought to me: in the school, the school building, the entrance stairs, you spat on the floor. Intentionally. What the devil was that about? (**S** (*lowers his eyes*)).

Headmaster: I'd like to request clarification. This matter has only now come to my attention, and in the absence of satisfactory information I would prefer to abstain from any further comment.

S: I will say that I did this. I would only ask that you dispense with an explanation. I foresee that the moment will soon arrive. Then you'll understand.

Schattmann (*harshly, shouting*): There's nothing to understand!

³⁷ That would be 1893-94. The archive contains only fragments before Döblin's first published story (1896).

S (*just as loud*): We are no longer at school, Professor. You will show patience until I come to speak of it. I shall answer when it suits me. Why are you grumbling? You have no power to slip away. You're dead. You are no longer my teachers, my superiors. At last I have outlived you. The world rolls on over you. Here you are, you will not move!

We shall speak more about "I" and objectivity. And what sort of objectivity did you practise? Professor Bräuel, did you ever reflect on your Mathematics instruction? There sits an "I", a poor uninterested "I", and you start up with greater or lesser scorn, over-estimating yourself, over-estimating your subject – oh, you were all of you Popes – you start up, hammering away at the "I", theorem after theorem, proof after proof, formula after formula. What were you drilling into this "I" unknown to you, uninteresting to you and yet alive: so many foreign bodies? To me they were foreign bodies. And for every foreign body a new aversion. You weren't a bad man, but your understanding of the human was exactly as much as a mathematician, as a pensionable civil servant is duty-bound to understand. A ridiculous thing overall, Mathematics at school. For most of no value, a diverting thought-game, a torment, because lacking any conception, any purpose, any connection with a life. This kind of abstraction should be forbidden, or shunted off to the Academies. Only this kind of Mathematics, actually, the Mathematics of today. Earlier it was a tremendous subject, the secrets of number, a religion.

And how does a school day progress, an objective school day, in general? Now I have this lesson, and after the break it's another, all the same to me, and so the hours slip away, and at home there's homework deep into the evening – but one lesson is History, there's talk of Thermopylae and the Wars of Liberation³⁸ and we read about Tell and the wicked Gessler. "Yes, there's a limit to the despot's power" and "It is from Heaven we draw down our rights,"³⁹ mendacious words to arouse our enthusiasm. (*The Summoner controls himself, the corners of his mouth twitch.*) I don't give a fig for Wars of Liberation, for talk of foreign domination. What does that have to do with me. A soldier in red trousers goes down the street, has a bayonet, well now, that's aggravating. But foreign domination at home! Serfdom is no better when practised by a fellow countryman. Frenchmen in the school! There, I've said it. That's what you were. That's why I had just as little enthusiasm for your History lessons as for the other subjects.

The Unspeakable⁴⁰ (*stands. The Summoner does not name him*): That's quite true. You were a rebel. A recusant. The school failed with you.

S (*trembles when he sees the Unspeakable*): Now I'd really like to see that there are such things as exorcism, spells, sorcery. I once had a patient who told me that in his hand he had special rays, short rays, as soon as he says the spell, everything shatters to pieces. To think you still live. Though you are long dead, to think you are here still.

The Unspeakable: I am one of your teachers. I know you hate me. It's a perfect delight to see a bad pupil again. He's trying an actor's flounce, a leading role. It's a failure.

S: When I issued the invitations I wasn't thinking of him. I'd never have completed the incantation. That's a life-shortener. I won't look at him.

³⁸ 1813-14, against Napoleon.

³⁹ Approximate quotes from Schiller's play *William Tell*.

⁴⁰ Gustav Weldig, Döblin's form master in the 7th year of Gymnasium. Döblin's classmate Moritz Goldstein called him "the only one of our teachers to whom I would ascribe a thoroughly bad, malicious character."

The Unspeakable: You must have thought we'd let you speak out with a "Thanks very much."

S (*turns decisively to the window*): Professor Konrad, I see you, I'm glad to see you again. We had you for German in the upper classes. We read some Goethe, but Schiller above all, you know, the long philosophical poems. It's curious, Schiller seems to have written those poems expressly for school. I never heard later of anyone ever reading them. The Classics above all, gentlemen, the great storehouse, it's bad, sinks away from the people or fails to stir the people and at last remains like a rock – lies there in school. Marvellous invention, German education. I wouldn't like to be a Classic. You used to read the poems out to us, Professor. You stood in front of the podium, one arm stretched behind you, your clothes were too loose. You were rather tall, jauntily slender. You always held your head bent back. You spoke of the True, the Good, the Beautiful. When you spoke it was authentic, not just sounding words. It was moving to watch you. When you recited a poem, Professor, believe me, this I retained, this attitude is imprinted in me. When I think of Schiller, and Idealism around 1800, I think of Professor Konrad, and then – Schiller is true. Schiller can rejoice, Professor. He was well served by you. If you see him up there, don't be afraid to talk to him, tell him what you've been hearing here. (*S. falls silent suddenly, gazes at the podium. He has noticed a sheen run over Professor Konrad as if he's streaming with blood.*)

S (*continues*): Later on one occasion, in the Prima, we sang together in a big choir, outside near the Kroll opera house. The rehearsals were in Steglitzer Strasse. It was Berlioz' *Damnation of Faust*. It gave me enormous pleasure to see you there. It did me colossal good to have you sing along, two rows to the right of me, you the teacher, I the pupil. All at once I was ten times more ready to believe everything you said, and do the work you set. Once, to my even greater joy, I was present when you apologised to the conductor for having missed the previous rehearsal. You acted just like anyone else did and was obliged to do, of course with the refinement that you bore within you. I observed, quickly left the hall with the crowd. I was happy. I was still happy next day, and my benevolence extended to the whole school. (*General calm, a pause. The Summoner looks up again*): And what a pleasure your Greek was, Professor Buttler. I'm not sure, I think you died soon after I left school. Once you fell down on the podium, you were a little old man, spoke so drolly from the corner of your mouth, like a pipe-smoker. Ah, such things we still know, others are forgotten. You had a good feeling for everyone. Sometimes you tried to be strict but never succeeded, your warmth always showed through. Your lesson was always a kind of a break for us, we misbehaved, did work for other subjects, read books we'd brought along. Such fun when we had to recite what we'd learned by heart from Homer or Sophocles. We presented ourselves, the reciting started, with a prompter of course, you stood aside, then it couldn't go on, you said reluctantly, "All right, that's enough". Some of us said the same lines three or four times, and earned your praise.

Buttler (*smiling*): I know. (*His neighbours stare.*) Now my sins are revealed.

S: The Professor doesn't feel ashamed.

Buttler: No, not at all. I've grown accustomed to it, in Heaven.

S: Yes, we sometimes wondered if you hadn't noticed something. When we threw spitballs or stuck little notes to the back of your gown, you scolded but never made a big deal of it. You knew us. In April and May many never came from break to your class, sometimes half the class went missing. You would ask: "Excuse me, but where are the others?" Unanimous response:

“Spring Festival, Professor.” Then you’d send someone down to fetch them, they came very slowly and with beaming innocent faces told of the wonderful air, the beautiful weather. And then they sat down quietly. You see, Professor, this could never have been mentioned at a staff conference, you’d have had no way to defend it. But I assure you in the face of that learned conference: those were beneficial and pedagogically wonderful moments. Even when once you went down in person to fetch the truants back, and – stayed down there yourself. And then you said: “But we’d better make a start”, and they came meekly up the stairs.

Buttler: I too loved May, you see, even in the little school yard.

S: Grey on grey the other lessons painted themselves, with you we burst into colour, warmth, fun, the world, and with that we too could bloom. You told us about yourself, and what sort of man your teacher Boeckh⁴¹ had been. We drank it down like milk.

Mocking voice: Andante con moto.

Another: What do you think of this elegy? First the sugar, the whip comes later.

Another: He spends all his time on the premise, afraid to come to the consequent.

Squawking voice: What’s all this drivel? Where were we with objectivity? Don’t plead feelings as an excuse.

S: You’ve already heard the consequent. Bureaucrats, civil servants in the school tried to recruit me, make me their stooge. I declined. I rejected their idol-worship.

Schattmann: How amusing.

S: For me it was idol-worship. You were its agents, paid functionaries, nothing more, I saw through it. Not I alone. There were others in the school. They didn’t make it as obvious as I did. Often I kept my head down, engaged in mimicry, but you saw through me. I was and remained “opposition”. Without doing a thing I attracted from left and right your dislike, even your repugnance and hatred. “Nasty piece of work, bad element,” the PE teacher often called me. You gentlemen had no need to guard your tongues: God had given to you a mouth and a bad mood; to us, ears and the motto: keep quiet! It seems I had something within me that aggravated you. You noticed that I and others too had more than ears. Contravening the divine order. It transmitted itself from one class to the next. Like a wanted poster.

Mocking voice: You should have been expelled.

S: They’d have had to expel more than you would have liked. You had already retracted my fee-free status in the Tertia or Sekunda, I wasn’t worthy, I was a bad pupil. You practised your benevolence on me in other ways. On my Middle School Certificate⁴² you assigned a general conduct grade that made the certificate almost worthless. And then once I was sitting in the Sekunda,⁴³ almost 20 years old – one is no longer a child then, and I was still weighing down a school bench, endlessly, twice I had to repeat a class, Mathematics wouldn’t let me through, - there in the Sekunda I was reading Schopenhauer, had the book under my bench. Suddenly there was an inspection. They found *The World as Will and Representation*, the Inspector said

⁴¹ August Boeckh (1785-1867): philologist, founder of classical studies; professor in Berlin from 1811.

⁴² Known as the ‘Einjährigenzeugnis’ as it qualified for a reduced one-year military service.

⁴³ Lower Sekunda: Easter 1896, Upper: Easter 1897.

sternly and with contempt: "You would do better to occupy yourself with other matters." But I didn't. I was already writing all sorts of things that I concede you don't learn in Mathematics.

Bräuel (*smiles condescendingly*).

S: You think that was nothing? It was another thinking power of which clearly you still have no conception. Around the same time I was sitting there once, whispering, clearly in the wrong, with my neighbour. Then you, Professor Rudner, stood up on your podium, came calmly down the aisle, to me: "You said something?" and gave me a loud smack in the face. And I – the rage is still in me – I did not hit back. Those were the methods of objectivity. And finally, to wrap this up, you'll be content now, gentlemen – I come to the spitting event. (*S. chews again, bites his lips, but he is not pale. He gazes blackly into the room from lowered brows. An unease seizes the teachers, they press back from the benches but, remarkably, stream towards the front.*)

Schattmann: Out with it. Speak, damn it. Tell us what happened.

S: My blood is cold. You can learn from me. It was the Abitur. Naturally I took the orals as well, there was nothing special about it, I wasn't a good pupil. The School Counsellor⁴⁴ came, the "Royal Commissar". I know his name still. We were all in formal dress. We wait in a classroom. But the exam doesn't begin and doesn't begin. The pre-conference with the Counsellor lasts a very long time. Then we're let in. And at once I was called up. The teachers were sitting at a table. In the middle seat was the School Counsellor. He was no better and no worse than the others sitting there. They'd told him about me. Probably he'd have let my achievements pass, they wouldn't have put him in a rage. He waved a familiar flag over me. It was shameful, unprecedented what I had to listen to. I was shouted at like a rogue, like the stupidest boy. Assailed. On account of my conduct. That I hadn't deserved to be admitted to the exam. The expression "moral immaturity" occurred a few times. This fellow, the School Counsellor, who'd never met me before, dared to say this. He knew, this lad knew, he must stay silent. I kept asking myself as I stood there: but what was it I'd done? But once again I was being assailed, and quite openly, by the alienation, the dislike that I already knew. He had to unleash his rage on me, had to give me a moral box on the ears, because he'd heard I was not of his State-concessioned kind. I had no need to master myself. I trembled physically. I was afraid of failing, of having to stay here longer. Then – I passed. When the School Counsellor read out the results it was with a hope and a stern warning to me to pull myself together out there and take to heart what the school had taught me. No, I did not take it to heart. I have never done so. I went down the stairs, and spat on the ground. There you have my answer. Even today I take a detour to avoid the school. Even today it disgusts me, this Bastille.

The Unspeakable: Thank God they weren't all like you.

S: Who said that?

The Unspeakable: You know who. Stop playing games. You're a writer, that makes you a hypocrite, but on us it has no effect.

S: Come up here. Gather round.

The Unspeakable: See him emerge from his little shell when he hears my voice. Here his bombast has no effect. Blusterer. Agitator. Let me through at him. He must look me in the eye.

⁴⁴ One Herr Vogel, the "Royal Provincial Counsellor for Schools", according to the certificate.

S (*steps down from the podium*): The time of trembling is over. No more standing in silence. Of us two, one is living, the other dead.

The Unspeakable: You're the one who's dead.

Others (*laughing*): That's right!

S (*roaring*): Silence in the ranks! All of you. Shades, mere ghosts, air, I can blow you away. Scraps of paper, fly's legs, dirt. If I hadn't summoned you, conjured you up, where would you be. You know why you keep silent when I ask: where do you all dwell? You dwell nowhere. You are present only in me, and in the many, many others whom you taught – no, drilled and tormented. Out of all of these I have summoned you here. God knows you haven't changed, you still have all your limbs. And you, Unspeakable, you were my teacher, you tiger-soul, you monster. You others, don't stand in line with that thing. Though you are shades like him, don't keep company with him. I don't call him by name, his poison must not be kept intact by naming him. The system ruins its functionaries. The system engenders evildoers, or favours them. Just as in the military it favoured slave-drivers and soldier suicides. There is the evildoer.

The Unspeakable: Yes, it's me. And there's the rebel.

S: Yes I was. But you won't wash it clean, Professor.

The Unspeakable: No need to keep on about it, I know it all already.

S: No doubt you found me tasty, for breakfast or on those mornings when the gall was flowing.

The Unspeakable: Yes, you served that purpose too.

S: You want to brand me a rebel. But I have never been one. I am not a born insurgent. It's just that I've always lived in a world that is not the same as yours. I have and had my sense of duty, my rigour, my objectivity. It coexists with yours. I knew why my apparent slackness and apathy, directed only at you, annoyed you so. Behind Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche you sniffed something bad, dangerous. You said "rebellion" and "moral immaturity", but that was your "No" to my world.

Bräuel: Is that supposed to be a defence? It's a basis for the accusation.

S: Nothing is a basis for that! Not for this one whose name I shall not speak. Your devilry, sir, in the Sekunda I have almost entirely forgotten. From that time I have only the image, the statue, the podium and the man on it with the stabbing eyes. Finally I made it out, escaped your clutches. Then once you came after me.

The Unspeakable: As a substitute teacher, in the Prima.⁴⁵

S: See how you remember.

The Unspeakable: Yes, I remember. It's fun going after a rascal, an insurgent.

S: You know me, gentlemen, and consider me an enemy of this person. But recently, for the first time, I spoke with someone else who was at school with me, a calm man in a respectable position. We discussed our schooldays. And look here: he came out without any prompting from me with the name of this unspeakable fellow! He said: If I ask myself whether there are evil

⁴⁵ The 1899 yearbook notes that Weldig (the Unspeakable) took classes on behalf of headmaster Dr Meusel.

people, evil by nature, cruel, I have to think of this fellow. Can never forget him. – In the Prima, when the Headmaster was ill, it went like this. He whose name I shall not speak knows it, but I'll tell you just the same. He came into the classroom, settled himself on the podium, and at first all went well. I had the misfortune to be sitting directly in front of him, in the first row. During the lesson I sat quietly, but my hands were active, I fiddled with my pencil. I wasn't nervous otherwise, the sight of him meant nothing to me, for who was he? I'd put him behind me – the substitute. But he knew better. You can make use of a substitution, even. Suddenly he'd had enough of my hands. I was 22 years old, what was his problem with my hands. So I kept them still. But as the lesson progressed they began fiddling again, picked up the pen, put it down. Then suddenly he said: "I already told you once, you should keep your hands still. Go and sit in the back row." I: "Maybe my hands are a little twitchy. I'm not doing it on purpose. And therefore I shall not go and sit in the back row." He: "You will gather your things and move to the back row." I: "This is my place. The Headmaster assigned it to me." (*The Summoner is not chewing and grinding now. He stands beside the podium. He is quite beside himself, his face is twisted in rage, his arm is raised.*)

S: He stood up and said: "You must obey. I am directing you to that place."

The Unspeakable: That's what happened. You tried openly to kick against the pricks. But you couldn't put it past me.

S: I did not gather my things. I remained standing. A remarkable sense of freedom was suddenly in me. I had no clear consciousness of what was happening or should be happening. But at such moments one does things that are very true, very pregnant, symbolic. Then – the bell rang for break. He picked up his books, went to the door, said: "Tomorrow you will sit in the place I have assigned you." I made no reply. My schoolmates spoke of it during the break. I maintained I would not take the seat of punishment. How could the man come to this – assigning me to the punishment seat because of unruly fingers, I'm in the senior class, 22 years old. They all agreed with me.

The Unspeakable: That I believe. Readily believe. You knew how to stir them up.

S: Next day – I succumbed. He stood in the doorway, didn't enter the classroom, called my name: So, you're still not seated in your place. – This is my place. – You must gather your things and sit at the back. – I shall complain to the Headmaster. – Yes, you can. Now you will sit in your place. – I remained silent for a moment. Twenty things at once passed through my mind. I was quite calm. I shan't ruin my Abitur. It was just like at the Abitur itself. But not a day longer in this Bastille. I shall not stay a moment longer than necessary. I folded. For the moment. My time will come. I picked up my briefcase. And sat at the back. As I stood at the back with my briefcase, before sitting down, you heard something else from me. I don't think you ever heard anything so clearly in all your time at the school. You'll recall what it was. I said: From the earlier class I know you took a dislike to me, and that, that alone, is the reason for this punishment seat. I sat there for just the one lesson, the Headmaster returned, I resumed my own seat. The headmaster at once informed himself of the situation, heard the general tone of disapproval, made some notes, and that was that. But it seems this incident brought upon me the "moral immaturity" at the Abitur.

The Unspeakable: I hope so.

S (*struggles with himself, sets one foot down from the podium*): That's enough. Gentlemen, my teachers: just listen to it. You cannot endorse this.

(*The shades throng about him, are very close. All that can be heard is isolated fragments: You didn't fit in with school discipline. There's a gasping, slurping among the shades. Step by step they approach. The Summoner recognises them.*)

S: If you want me as your enemy, then I am. Attention! Careful! High voltage!

(*The Summoner has leapt from the podium to the front row of benches. He holds his bare hands out against the shades. They snuffle at him. They are stretched thin. He rages, lashes out, at which they hiss more greedily and flow ever closer to him. Finally the Summoner stands in a thin loose cloud of mist, from which comes a rustling. He himself is smoking, smouldering. Three snake-bodies come lapping out of the smoke, snap around. Suddenly the smoke parts, red hot. The Summoner on the podium stands amid flames, laughing. He holds his glasses and – laughs and laughs!*)

S (*laughing*): The beaks! My beaks! I'm quarrelling with them! I'm having a conversation with them. Let goods and kindred go!⁴⁶ Eternal peace to the departed! (*The shades, the mists gather by the two windows. Glass shatters under the heat. At once the teachers are outside.*)

S: Out! Pack of rascals, out! Motheaten bunch. Look here, a teacher's podium, the high court of judgement, my classroom. This is where I learned. Who here is still alive? Who or what? (*The benches smoulder, blaze, the teacher's desk first of all.*) Who is still alive? There was a king in Thule, he fell down from his stool.⁴⁷ Godspeed to the virtuous. Farewell, gentlemen, I too shall disappear, wish you all bon appétit. (*He goes through the burning door. Outside is pitch-black night, utterly silent. He goes down the steps through the hiss of burning; down in the entrance hall he burns a piece out of the floor.*) Where once spittle lay does not need always to be spittle. Even spittle is mortal. That was in our days of joy, and now is a time of bliss. We are not for letters tied with blue ribbon and locks of hair. Away with harm, into the dustbin. Now when I spit it's from pharyngitis. Receive now my blessing one and all, revered pillars, revered staircase, revered teachers senior and junior, rest in peace. We write 1928, we have a new Parliament and still no money, these are our troubles, our only troubles. Farewell, wink wink, Chaos has you, Chaos shall always have you, it's very nice in Chaos. And now the letter is addressed, stamped, sealed and posted. But better get going. They could have me for material damage. Quick, must pass my One-year...

XIII. Adding water to lye⁴⁸

The Investigation Commission visited and spoke with the above-named / described on two subsequent occasions. Once on the morning after his unexpected incarceration. There we found him taciturn, sullen. Of course we did not bring the conversation around to the previous day's topics. But we were not uninterested to note that, staring at the table, head in his hands, he failed to ask even once what had become of his papers. Hence we avoided bothering him or provoking him to raise hostile questions.

⁴⁶ From Luther's hymn 'A Mighty Fortress is our God'.

⁴⁷ Parody of a poem by Goethe later incorporated in *Faust* (2759-82).

⁴⁸ Something one should never do, because of the violent exothermic reaction.

Exactly one week later we convened again to continue the observation. We invited him to visit one of us, Dr P. the zoologist, who wrote to him that he had an unusually fine French cognac which he would like to sample in his company. He turned up, expansive again, and the conversation took many strange and weird turns, as sometimes happened with him. He began with the burlesque assertion that it was actually he who was investigating the Investigation Commission! There were four of us at Dr P.'s party. He had no prior acquaintance with us, had submitted to all our measurements and questions, never even asked why, what for, and now suddenly evinced a somewhat unwelcome interest in us. Our member R. suggested he was pulling our legs, perhaps hoping thereby to render unsafe the entirety of the above evidence. To us others he seemed good-humoured and in his own way benevolent towards us, even affectionate. We make no further report on this somewhat awkward part of the conversation / interview. He then began to whistle, and came straight out with it: "You stole my papers." R. at once returned them to him. Of course we had made copies. "Tell me, what did you actually want with them?" Whereupon Dr P. claimed (truthfully) to be a zoologist, and then (cheekily): he's interested in domestication phenomena, such as those the subject, for example, exhibited at school, and is at present experimenting how birds of passage, migratory birds, behave in artificially lowered temperatures and fields of magnetic force of different strengths. Anyone else might naturally have taken this response the wrong way. But *he* was delighted, interested in the methodology, and he wanted to know what Dr P. had learned from reading his papers.

But then he interrupted himself and launched at once into the topic of Slow Motion. The subject asked us one after the other about Slow Motion. Our guest then lectured us: Slow Motion is a very clever, philosophical and instructive thing, but is, on the other hand, a deception. And all reports, even his, are a kind of Slow Motion device. They pull together facts at random or stretch them out and extend them and by doing so there emerges not just a temporally shortened or lengthened image, but a false one. He argued: "Take the ocean. Go to the North Sea, how it storms, hurls waves. Take a dozen barrels down, fill them with water, and drag them back to dry land. Now you have some sea water. Now the shortening goes further. Bring the barrels to a chemical laboratory and start to vaporise the liquid masses or confine them in a vacuum chamber. You'll end up with a little bowlful of yellow-brown sludge. So that – is the sea. Add a few gallons of distilled water, and it will be chemically identical to the water you started with. But is the little bowl with the yellow gravy the sea? A myriad things are missing. The wind, the waves, the storm over them, foam, colours, seaweed, snails, fish in the water, the seagulls and sailing boats – I cannot dispense with these." And that was why we should have left his papers undisturbed; there was not that much to the report. When we expressed doubts, he refused to concede. Although the report was true, he said, it gave a totally false impression. It was false from A to Z – though it was true. What was missing was the ten years, which meant ten times spring, ten times summer, autumn, winter, and then ten times three hundred walks to school and back, ten years of growing up, ten years of domestic life. In other words, it was a laboratory extract, and if you were to pour those barrels of water on it, it still would not be the sea. What was written there was a boiled-down caustic solution.

Our Dr P. commented incautiously that it was an uncommonly astringent solution. Such an incautious remark – we tried at once to signal to our colleague. But our guest had already shrunk back. "You think so?" he asked, chewing his left index finger. He at once sank visibly into the same train of thought as his report. The anger his report breathes was made flesh in his fiercely twitching facial muscles. He pushed his cognac glass aside, sipped slowly from his glass of

Fachinger mineral water. But Dr P. could not be brought to his senses. It was precisely this remarkable gesture that interested him, and again he fired away. This colleague of ours is a dangerous companion on such expeditions, he has in his blood too much of butterfly-pinning, we cannot use him in tricky matters. He would not let go: Your schooldays are already twenty-five years in the past, you work, have a practice, there's been the War, you have a family, God knows what experiences you've had. Has there as yet been no abreaction?

The subject: No pretty words! Abreaction. I initiate a reaction with the substance, then there's an abreaction. If I have poison in my stomach, they put a tube down and wash it out. A cute notion. Just right for the better class of girls' school. But it could be that acid burns leave scars. Can they be washed out? By "abreact" do you mean "forget"? Or stop making a big thing of it?

– No, certainly not. I was referring only your agitation. You are still, or seem still to be so caught up in it. Everything you say or write about it envelopes us in such a gloomy suffering feeling. We don't really know what you're plunging into. Maybe it's not school at all you actually mean, that you're actually talking about.

– What is it then, actually?

– I don't know. But I was intrigued by your story from the Sexta, the business with the key. Isn't it a little bit peculiar, don't you think so yourself? Being so tongue-tied? What actually are you keeping silent about?

At this point the subject's face is quite relaxed. He puts down the glass of water in his hand, and lifts his arm in a formal gesture, smiling a very strange smile: I am most grateful to you, sir, for what you have said. Now matters are on the right track. I have the poet's gift – of keeping silent! Born with it. You will seldom hear me utter the word "poet", but now you force me to say it. Before the singing there is always a silence. In me the silence lasted a long time, a dreadfully long time. Everything I said was askew, and wrong. Twisted. It was not "I".

But at school I gradually became "I". It is not given to people of my type to be friendly and nice in the normal way. We become so later, by detours. I was unable to speak because I could not accept superficial actions and feeble speech. I already knew another kind, with a different syntax and grammar. And how I later grew into this object, no, grew from its soil. The names that others gave to things I rejected, I was already on other natural, familiar terms with things. Just you try to prattle on in that situation! I learned to do so later, and do you know how? When I began to realise that this easy prattle and these interests bore a closer and more extensive relation to the great matter in which I found myself so deeply and blindly rooted and which came from me as silence. And so I learned human speech through the back door, as it were. And now you know why I kept silent, and what it was, this silence. But: whoever sings must take his chances with the blows that silence and false speaking bring his way, Mister Zoologist. Anyway, I always knew this. In some respects the school experience was general experience, in others it was personal to me. I had to pay, pay doubled.

The subject takes a sip from his glass. For entire long years I never thought of these things, and when at last I did speak of them, with vehemence, you thought – even if I contradicted you – here with this fellow we have a complex, this is an aspect of his analysis. Well then. Fine. Whatever. That's how it stands with me, and because, I suppose, I can do nothing against your theory, I would ask your kind favour in allowing me to make an observation. This would also be

in the interest of similar types you will encounter, and will perhaps help to clarify your concept of Art. My reminiscences angered me as one who had been mistreated. This I can get over quite well. Conscious remembering of an event with unquenchable anger: that's a natural thing, a healthy thing and also useful. But I must present you with a more exact concept of the "power of silence" of which I spoke and which actually provoked the mistreatment and also overcame it. I remember from my very early childhood that I would often not go out to play but was content to sit around at home. At nine and ten years old I preferred to read rather than play on roundabouts, and was never sulky about it, and no one rebuffed me. Pay attention to that last point! It was more comfortable to my way of being and totally fine with me. Without any tangible thought I was already as a small child occupied with myself, entertained by something that worked away calmly and benevolently in a kind of half-dark. You have the ready-made template: memories of the mother's breast, the maternal uterus, splashing about in delight and amniotic fluid. Blessed, oh blessed to be an embryo.⁴⁹ You should have everything that brings you enjoyment. All I want is my own joy. How, for example, does it happen that one holds fast to old blessed memories while another still plays on roundabouts? It must be something to do with the individual. It occurs to me, and I have made observations, that people are born different and grow up different. Even in the same milieu. One grows up bigger, another smaller, you can measure it directly. One takes more after the father, the other more after the mother, and the third maybe more after the grandfather. I've even heard that there's a theory of heredity. This all sounds embarrassingly banal, but even learned men shouldn't be afraid of it.

Now, there are two ways to hold an umbrella in the rain: the correct way, by the handle, and the wrong way, by the ferrule. If you hold it the wrong way, by the ferrule, you will stay dry for a while, until it overflows. Therefore it is recommended to hold the umbrella by the handle, as any superior umbrella establishment will be sure to tell you at the time of purchase. So much for theory. Now I – hold the umbrella at once by the handle. And I can say from my own observations, anyway without repulsing the mother's breast: there is the fact of a natural disposition. And the lived experience of such a disposition. That disposition being something like an eye, a finger, or the spleen, something compact, solid, that has a function. Such a thing fills one with pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, repletion. In a funny way it reveals its existence through such feelings a long while before its "accomplishments". In some circumstances you are like a Raphael even in the absence of arms, of pictures. Such a feeling, such repletion I already had very strongly, very early – it was like an air bubble inside me. And so I had no real inclination to play roundabouts. Maybe I wouldn't have had the ability, but that never upset or disappointed me. All it did really was legitimise me. I never really wanted to, and because I didn't want to, the roundabout of course never turned. Good, so you will hold this thought: here was a disposition, a power. Not an inferiority, how ridiculous, and not the overcoming of an inferiority, more a pride, but not even that. Anyway, let's leave it there. –

The interlude was over. And there was no disturbance later when our disturber of the peace, Dr P., who comes from Baden, interjected that where he came from in southern Germany, the teachers had more to fear from the pupils than the other way around. The subject at once objected: Let no one come at him with southern Germany and set southern Germany against his northern Germany. He has no high regard for southern stolidity and so-called freedom. He was a Prussian. And he laughed: Here he is defending his school against southern Germany! All

⁴⁹ Parodic quote from the 1837 opera 'Tsar and Carpenter' ('Blessed oh blessed to be still a child.')

sorts of water is missing from his dehydrated report. Thus, apart from the four times ten seasons, for example, there are friendships, comradeships with one or another, in the upper classes enthusiasm for Wagner⁵⁰ and for Hugo Wolf,⁵¹ and then finding our way back to Haydn and Mozart. And then, acquaintance with Dostoevsky, his Raskalnikov. In the Tertia, encounters with Heinrich von Kleist, *The Prince of Homburg*, and especially the fragment *Guiskard*,⁵² the *Penthesilea*.⁵³ Long months immersed in reading Schopenhauer, Hölderlin's poems year after year in my breast pocket. In the Prima or even earlier, the encounter with Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, which I read breathless and trembling. I wasn't so keen on *Zarathustra*, it struck me as overblown, artificial prophecy, and an impure genre as well, a mixture of art and philosophy, pseudo-art anyway, apart from a couple of genuine bits. It's philosophical Wagnerism. –

CODA

XIV. The Life of Jack the Belly-ripper

So when Jack the Bellyripper had done the deed in the attic room that he rented for a shilling, and when at the conclusion of matters with his victim he found himself in possession of three shillings and a satin girdle, he pulled out from under the bed a sack he had positioned there ready, stuffed the victim into it – her name being Angela Kalb – and carried it by fits and starts down the stairs. On the way he encountered neighbours with wax tapers who said: Evening, Jack, where are you off to so late. He replied: I still have lots to do. Which filled them with horror, for they knew who he was and that in the sack he had another girl, or bits of her. But even though they knew it and no good rumours flew concerning his reputation and/or no good reputation attached to rumours that flew about him, they dared not enquire who it was this time and what exactly it was of her he was hauling down. For they thought: Sweep your own doorstep, and, Who laughs last laughs longest. And so they greet Jack the Belly-ripper and wish him good night, hope all goes well for him and his children and his children's children. All they asked was that he close the street door firmly behind him, the neighbourhood being so unsafe and you never know what will happen. He promised, and hastened on, for he was frightened himself, though it's true nothing had ever happened to him, not even one of his victims, deposited quarter of an hour later under a willow, regaining consciousness. After each one of his countless deeds it gave him renewed satisfaction to ascertain this. Even married couples, whom he occasionally dealt with together and during the disposal of whom he for some unknown reason especially feared a return to life, remained lifeless and speechless under the willow and caused him no trouble. Jack was still a young man with a hearty laugh. God, how he could laugh.

But one time, when after the done deed he was in a nearby tavern eating goulash with gherkins preceded by oxtail soup all for sixty pfennigs, his sack with its contents was stolen away

⁵⁰ Döblin later distanced himself from Wagner. He refers elsewhere to the “fascination of the Wagnerian artist with the grandiosity of the new image of the world, which is the image of a battlefield.”

⁵¹ Composer and critic (1860-1903) on the threshold of the modern.

⁵² The fragment of Kleist's tragedy *Robert Guiskard, Duke of Normandy* written 1802-03, was first performed in Berlin in 1901.

⁵³ See Part One ‘Cannibals’ for more on *Penthesilea*.

from where he had placed it beside his chair. It was very cold at the time, and he needed to boost his strength for the unpleasant path to the willow. So he let loose a hellish row over the customers, that workshy bunch of thieves, the host took exception, an English bobby came in brandishing his truncheon and levelled all sorts of accusations against them. But the sack, as Jack had expected, turned up the very next day in the tavern with a cheeky note that outraged him: *Don't bring your dirty women to a respectable tavern, you. Do it at home, you bastard. K. R.* Then when he shook the sack out under the willow tree, Jack saw other big bones alongside the bits of victim; the villain had added beef and horse bones. All I shall say is, this was a life-changing moment for Jack the Belly-ripper. We know no one had ever found him out, and the person who was declared to be him and was thereby made totally unfit for employment was not him. He was insulted by the tricks they now played. He was teased left and right about his hobbies. He could be sure that when he had dealt in all stealth with a girlfriend, that same evening he would find a funeral wreath under the willow, or a lantern, and once even a fence around the tree with a sign: "Closed because of Overfill". He never caught anyone, but everywhere they were grinning. Even his neighbours treated him rudely. Where could he turn to. He was at the point of slitting his own gullet in vexation. But all he did was move to another district, where he set up a business in wrapping paper for confectionery, and cake-doilies. And so he became respectable in the usual sense, but he had no joy of it, none, never. He only had to revisit his old district on a Sunday to see the disdain they all had for him on account of his inclinations. People are so fickle in their favours. He experienced this in its full severity. He got married in order to overcome it. He promised his wife willingly, quite lovingly, to give up the old monkey business. He really wanted to, for he could no longer eat with knife and fork but only with a spoon, his nerves were so shot. But he never really swallowed the insults. He had, as they say, caught one right on the noggin from a rake-handle.

To cut a long story short: the woman took the man on at a hundred and twenty pounds – he had grown thin on soupy leavings. Half a year later he was over a hundred and fifty pounds. She brought him up to a hundred and ninety, not only because she cut up all his food for him, but because he became ever more lethargic. She took over his doily and wrapping paper business, and within a few years had her own little confectioner's shop with a regular clientele of lovebirds. She sat Jack at the till. He had kept his sworn promise to his wife, and for this she was grateful to him her whole life long. He sometimes worried, when he found himself growing ever fatter at the till, that she would one day do away with him in favour of a thinner replacement. For the shop was small, the space cramped, and new shops were hard to find in London, or very expensive, and where was the money to come from. Thin customers who entered the shop he regarded with gloomy suspicion, asking himself every time: "My successor?" But she said, when she guessed his thoughts: How would I drag you away afterwards? Jack, you're so thoughtless, me being up to light work only, what with my hernia. This made sense to Jack, and he was mollified.

Loyally and to the best of her ability she helped him to bear his ancient troubles. She embraced him often, when the lovebirds were occupied in the back: You should have got to know me before, Jack. You could have made merry with that whole humpbacked crew. He sighed: Not so fast, Miss Cilly, then I'd have chopped you up as well, and what would be, would have been.

– A disappointed, aggrieved man our good Jack remained till the end. And he never went out to vote. He loved to offer advice from his perch at the till to young ladies of the clientele,

gave them very pessimistic advice about their relationship situation, and was always proved right. At least this brought him a ha'p'orth of the recognition he needed so badly for his inner life. But he never messed with any of the girls, though several were curious to know how loving would work out with such a girth. He remained true to Cilly. For he was used to her, and she knew all about his diet. –

– I beg your pardon for letting the story run on so long. I really only wanted to tell you about a sack I filled, with lots of old dusty things inside, school from 1890 to 1900 and so on. And then Jack popped up, and the story ran away with me. Many apologies, please, I'll start again and pull myself together. So:

I filled a sack, and have shown what it contains. I carry several such sacks on my back. Should I unpack them all one after the other, to sell rags, old boots, old clothes, bottles, paper? Chimney sweep! Sweeping today! Shutters closed! It is better to close the shutters. If I open one sack, many men come out, known and unknown, living and dead. If I open another, young girls come out. Lots of conversations come out, ones I started and ones that others started, also lots that I never started and were never started with me. One sack contains achievements, another deeds left undone. One sack is full of superfluities and refuse. Empty it all out? Why? What for? I shall do so when it will amuse me to dream and play with you in my own fashion.

Now – I lie down on a hillside green as spring, all the clobber around me, I breathe and am alive. There's an island, in the South Seas I believe. At a precisely calculable hour on the evening of a particular day, a kind of worm appears in enormous masses. The natives know the hour. The worm is edible. A whole flotilla sets out to catch the creatures. Where the creatures come from, and how to understand the punctuality, the sensitivity of their emergence, no one knows for sure. That's how life seems to me. My thoughts are like this. Whether they're edible I have no idea. But they must emerge calmly at their exact hour out of the sea, emerge ever anew, thoughts and plots. You won't find any detective in me, not least because I'm clever enough to know that one cannot see farther than five metres. And the truest things one knows without moving; so I can go on lying here peacefully on the hillside on my back. I grow – even as a human being, even with a mind, with my will – no differently than a tree. I'd love to have a full crop of apples hanging off me. Birds should nest in me. In winter I shall stand in snow, cockchafer grubs among my roots.

And all this even though I'm no different from you and you and you, you being an office worker, you a security guard in a department store, you an actor (I can't call anyone a "worker", they'll think I'm a bourgeois), I a little doctor in Berlin East who suffers from insomnia and never receives any presents. – And now farewell, kiddies, farewell everyone. I'll head off quietly in my socks. Say hello to your washerwoman for me. And don't snap at me if I've sometimes made you cross. I meant no harm. Everything passes. Look, I too am passing from the scene. –

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ALFRED DÖBLIN SPEAKS ABOUT HIS LIFE

Text for broadcast on Radio Berlin, 21 April 1930 [SLW 181-184]

[...] So all my scribbling has always been an unending striving to stay on the heels of insights. Over the years I've written several books. No book is complete. Even though I'm a member of the Academy of Arts, I dispute whether my books have anything to do with art in today's sense.

I don't denigrate art, all I assert is that I've always had an aversion, a distaste for the arts; my intellectual activity serves other things. It's a constant process of reflection. An uninterrupted and serious conversation about truth, engaging with and working through what I see and experience and my stance towards it, affirming or rejecting. You can think in different ways. We use the word "think" only for logical and abstract activity; in my view, one can also think in sounds: musically – in stone: sculpturally – in buildings: architectonically; but also in products of the imagination. These are different modes, in part stages of thought, and each stage has its truth, and just as contact with abstract truth, with some perception, gladdens and nurtures, just so does contact with the truth and order of music and literature.

I won't go into detail of how I had to struggle when at first I had no practice of my own, for half the day was assistant doctor, stood in for colleagues, on duty day and night at the emergency room, economically an endless tacking with a pretty strong wind constantly whistling about my ears. That's part of existence, no one gets anything handed to him on a plate, and we're not here to live as rentiers.

To say something of the character of my labours: my thinking, my toil of an intellectual kind, belongs explicitly or implicitly to Berlin. It's from here that it has acquired and still acquires its decisive influences, its direction. I grew up in this great stern sober Berlin, this stone ocean is the mother-ground of all my thoughts. It's the most perfidious thing in Germany to have people talk down on Berlin, its depravity, its squalor, and whatever. Berlin has its pleasure quarters, a good part of them for visitors. But if you're going to talk about a house, you don't just look at a side-room or inspect a rubbish bin. I only know that this town – where people dwell in the worst tenement slums in the world – know almost nothing but work, work, work, that here only work has a good conscience and never any pleasure, and anyone who doesn't know this does not know Berlin and has nothing to say about our city. These tenement slums and factories have for decades provided material for my vision and my thoughts, and if ever I spoke of China or India or Greenland I was always speaking of Berlin, this great strong sober Berlin that only a real man can love, this Berlin with its own fabulously expressive vernacular, of which, ridiculously, its own educated citizens are ashamed. And if you ask me what themes I chose and extracted from this stony ground, it is these:

I saw how here the individual disappears, how here are only active and suffering masses: the great collective, a mass of people in a revolutionary movement to shrug off its distress, that was the theme of my first book, from before the War. The War came, I was in Lorraine at an army fever hospital,⁵⁴ I pondered and wrote another book about the iron forces of war and how can it be possible to arrive at non-violence and true order. Back in Berlin amid the old walls I saw the social struggles and described what technology and industry do to people and how they changed from being tools for people to tyrants over humanity. Then in the book before last I chose an Indian milieu, the theme was already very active, the book declared that we need to clean up, to break through all the old clutter. In my most recent book I was openly back in Berlin, it had been a long journey, I'm back home, but the journey is not yet ended.

Earlier I quoted the saying: a child's education should end before birth. Because a life consists in living its birth-dowry, its inheritance, through to the end, but also doing what it has to do in order to let its future unfold of its own accord. You have to gain clarity about yourself and the

⁵⁴ From January 1915 to August 1917 Döblin was posted to the general army hospital at Saargemünd, only a part of which dealt with fever cases. He was subsequently posted to the fever hospital in Haguenau.

things around you, and this is the task of every individual that no one can take away. And so I am not afraid to reject allegiance to all today's slogans and programmes, and do not run with any crowd. It's always been enough for me to stand on my own two legs. A serious person is never spared a little loneliness. I have to say this in an era that abuses very good words about the collective, about the masses that form society. They say collective, and it's a mob that's been rounded up by drumbeats and soon disintegrates. Gatherings of people are necessary for all kinds of purposes and activities, but autonomy is no less necessary.

I have nothing more to say just now about my life, it doesn't contain much external action, but thinking and shaping, especially ongoing thinking, is certainly a kind of action. And thus I conclude this report of my life with the self-evident remark that I may have been alive for a long time, but only begin to exist from this moment on.

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ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE

from *Unser Dasein* (1933), 300-305

A few months after the Nazi takeover, Unser Dasein (Our Existence) was published. This compendium of Döblin's reflections on urbanised humanity and Nature met a predictable fate. All his works were banned/burned, except for Wallenstein, presumably under the mistaken impression that it glorified war.

He, a shop employee. Mid-thirties, calm, serious, travels a great deal. She pretty, chubby, feels a little unloved. Husband keeps a close eye on the wife, but isn't inclined to little adventures on the side. When he's back in Berlin for a while, he notices his wife is eager for company, and especially wants him to take her to his rowing club. There she and the husband soon make great friends with an older man. With surprising swiftness the wife invites this man to visit them, all three are on familiar terms. At Easter the husband takes another trip. Afterwards the wife is changed, upset, tearful. Anonymous letters arrive, strange telephone calls to the husband, asking questions. Finally, after an outbreak of weeping, the wife explains. She'd already known this man for a long time, they were just good friends. Then at Easter she was unsettled by the absence of husband and love. The man became insistent. Afterwards she was horribly ashamed. Had already talked about it with a friend, who must have passed it on. And she (the wife) couldn't keep it to herself. The man is furious at first, comes at the wife with coarse expressions. Then he goes hunting for the man, who avoids him for two days, and then strolling with a trusted friend calmly swallows the husband's insults. In the end the husband forgives the wife. Both are now hostile to the wretched older man. But the husband finds it hard to recover from the episode. He becomes withdrawn, gloomy, torments the wife, clearly keeps a closer eye on her than before. At first she feigns 'sickness' at this perilous time. The business of her infidelity ends in a stronger marriage, where the wife has the upper hand.

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A very low-key tale. Again the hard-working, serious husband. He has no mind for pleasures, other than chess and cigarettes. When he's away from home for days at a time, for years he's demanded to know hour by hour exactly what his wife is doing. Calls her often. He's good to her, loves her, he's caring, watches over her. Debates about "the husband" and "the wife", about "marriage", theatrical pieces of that kind, are unappealing. She, very sweet, educated, has in the

course of the marriage found everything closed off to her. They have a very small circle of acquaintances. Almost all actions and thoughts in this small childless marriage are stereotypical, sacrosanct. She reads a lot, has grown sardonic, always dresses elegantly. The wife values her wardrobe to an extraordinary degree, but doesn't stand out. Has withdrawn entirely into books and elegant dresses. Talking to her is a pleasure. She pays great attention to her body, powders herself, wears lipstick, and sits there with her brown shining eyes very refined and unapproachable, almost hostile, shy. – She's the husband's "sacrificial offering". She still enjoys life, through surrogates and behind the curtain.

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Two fighters. He robust and she robust. No children. He an independent craftsman, late thirties, she mid-thirties. After a brief calm overture the marriage has hardened. He is brusque, often coarse; for she is his wife. From the start she's stood her ground, despises the husband, in the end he disgusts her. For weeks she spurns all conversation with him. He's slow-paced, likes the wife, drinks a lot, is jealous. She's embittered, never looks at anyone else. At last their marriage is hard as iron. The woman has repeatedly gone away, out of the house; he has made her economically subservient. She always wants to leave, but it's hard to find a place, and she doesn't want him to have the furniture. That's how they live, exchange blows, make peace.

*

A couple married for love. During the War he discovered he had a talent for acting. From that moment the marriage "in principle" no longer suited him; it was, so to speak, no longer of the right class for him. He set himself up with love affairs. He secured a small engagement at a small theatre. At the start of the marriage the wife had him in her pocket. Now, emancipated, he declares beaming: he feels free, feels really a man, masterful. In fact someone else has him in her pocket. She soon joins their household. The wife lives in one room, the husband and the emblem of his freedom in the other. The wife struggles for living space. She, who still loves the husband, urges him to marry the other woman. But he declares he feels totally independent, as far as he's concerned he sets not the slightest store by marriage, at best he'll marry only if the emblem insists on it. When at last the wife is able to move out, she is broken. Even before this she had to support herself, as the husband's money was confiscated by the other woman.

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Civil servant aged twenty-two, young intelligent face, very reflective mournful gaze, brown hair combed flat, in speech suave and courteous. He comes from an old family of civil servants in Westphalia. He married two years ago. For love. The girl, same age as him, had no money; his parents didn't entirely approve of the business, but they were so much in love. She too came from a good home, "regular people, at least", as he put it. Their marriage was at first untroubled. Then the wife fell ill with fever, and just at that time an official letter arrived: the wife was summoned to appear in court charged with a serious count of burglary. The husband was in utter shock, thought it must be a mistake, said nothing to the feverish girl about the summons, went himself to keep the appointment. There he learned it was a matter dating from before their engagement. She was accused of complicity in the theft, involving burglary, of a large quantity of linen. She was said to have kept watch on the street while the three men were "at work", and to have rented a room in a boarding house in the west to which the goods could be brought. The case was heard in the absence of the wife, and a severe penalty imposed. He discussed the case with his wife. She said she'd just been pushed forward by the men, whom she'd got to know

at a café. It was another woman, lover of one of the men, she didn't want to expose her, she was away now over hill and dale. She wept dreadful tears about the wicked men, he consoled her, she was still ill. A while later another letter arrived from the court. This time about the theft of a gold ring. He at once handed the summons to his wife. She declared in outrage: she'd had a girl friend to whom she'd confessed something bad. When the girl was unwell they'd gone into a jeweller's, the friend wanted to buy something for herself, but actually she'd tucked things away left right and centre and out of mischief had stuck a gold ring in her (the wife's) pocket. As soon as she found it she took it back the very next day, and was arrested, and they'd actually detained her for a while. – Now a new court date is hanging over them in the burglary case. The young man loves his wife. He's broken, doesn't know what should happen. He's sent his wife off to her relatives in the country; he complains: "She's well clear of the disaster." It would be terrible to think of the girl being convicted and his parents learning of the case. He paces anxiously back and forth, in a whirl of doubts, yearning, shame.

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Qualified technician, big serious man, rather passive, big horn-rimmed glasses, flat face. He got to know a young girl, went with her, he liked her, but it never came to anything. He had to go to war. Meanwhile she married. When she'd been married two years he came back, looked her up. Now they became very close. The husband noticed their relationship, ascertained she'd been unfaithful, the marriage was dissolved. When the man returned from an installation job, he wanted to marry her. But now she runs off again – back to the husband! The technician had to be admitted to a sanatorium for nervous conditions. Meanwhile she lived with the divorced husband. The technician has already – so he says – completely cut off contact with her; but here she comes, again and again! She even visited him in the sanatorium! He loves her, is inconsolable. If only she would leave him alone, if only he could be free of her.

*

A young girl is frightened. Has no idea what to do. There's a choirmaster, almost fifty years old, a well-preserved jolly man, going bald. Her sister got to know him, in her family. The choirmaster is going to be divorced by his wife on grounds of infidelity with this sister. Now he can't marry his lover because she's a sinner. One day the man asked the young girl if she wouldn't like to marry him; there were too many difficulties with the sister. She said: "Why not." He's such a nice, funny man. They often come along together, they deny themselves nothing, the banns are called. Only now does the first sinful sister find out! Appears again at the choirmaster's house, furious. After a few weeks the choirmaster deserts the young girl. He can't marry the one, isn't allowed to marry the other. Dangles contented between them!

*

Jaunty young lady, boisterous, laughs, has a sly expression, often a false teasing tone. From a petit bourgeois background, she's been living loose in the city. Got to know a strong young boatman, lived with him. But he wouldn't marry her. His brother came to visit, a porter at a department store in another town, a very serious, calm chap, not like the other, and when he makes a second visit he proposes to her. She accepts, her boatman-lover approves. A few months later she runs away from her husband and small-town life, knocks about in Berlin, goes back. She does this several times. The husband threatens divorce. But she doesn't want that. When the boatman appears, she loves him. The porter in turn "understands" her better.

No such thing as “Nature”

Love leads away from society. You can't turn love into something moral. In love many people, women especially, feel a release from shame. This is a distancing from the pressures of a particular society and morality. – Moreover, there's no such thing as “Nature”. It's just a different state of society.

^^^

A YEAR IN HOLLYWOOD

Letters 1940-41 [DBr. 242-263]

For a year (8 October 1940 to 7 October 1941) Döblin was under contract to MGM studios as a writer. (His ID card labelled him Motion Picture Employee No. 42874.) He arrived in California after gruelling months fleeing with wife and teenage son Stephan from the war in France, in desperate uncertainty about exit permits, entry visas and funds for onward travel,, as related in Schicksalreise (Destiny's Journey).

He spoke of the five years in California (1940-45) as his third exile, the first being his time in France (via Zurich) in 1933-40, the second his escape via Spain and Portugal. With dozens of Germany's writers, musicians, scholars, and film and theatre people gathering in southern California, some film studios provided paid jobs, partly out of charity, partly on the off-chance that useful script ideas would emerge.

.1. To Elvira & Arthur Rosin⁵⁵,

Beverly Hills, address via Mrs Frank⁵⁶ 10.10.40

Dear Rosins, here we are in torrid California, having traversed the wastelands, deserts and mountainous regions you know so well. As planned we visited the Grand Canyon, and spent a day studying it closely. (I seldom join tour groups, I find them a torment, but the Canyon is of course quite extraordinary.) In Los Angeles, welcomed by Mrs Frank, Dieterle⁵⁷ and A. G.⁵⁸, a bunch of very nice concerned people. We stayed first in a hotel, then in a 2 or 3 room apartment to give us time to search. The search is still in progress, and is the opposite of a pleasure. For Los Angeles is a region, not a city. Along the coast, and here and there, a few centres have been created with houses and little buildings, and between them 'in-between spaces'.

⁵⁵ The Rosins— connoisseurs of art and literature – were old friends from the 1920s. He was a banker. They emigrated in 1934 to Rome, then in 1936 to New York. A great support to AD during his stay in the USA.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth (Liesl) Frank (1903-79): key figure on the Emergency Rescue Committee that helped several exiles arrive (and survive) in the USA. Née Pallenberg; daughter of operetta star Fritzi Massari; married the writer Bruno Frank; they conducted lively salons in Munich, and after fleeing in 1933, in Sanary-sur-Mer, where several exiled writers gathered pre-war. In USA 1937-1945.

⁵⁷ Charlotte Dieterle (1896-1968): actress and scriptwriter. Active on the Emergency Rescue Committee.

⁵⁸ Alexander Granach (1890-1945): actor on stage and screen; appeared in Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1921) and other films. Exiled from 1933, he performed in Yiddish theatre in Poland and USSR, emigrated to the USA in 1938. In Hollywood he appeared with Greta Garbo in *Ninotchka*, in Fritz Lang's *Hangmen also Die*, and on Broadway in *A Bell for Adano*. His German accent often had him typecast in Nazi villain roles.

As far as I can tell Los Angeles consists essentially of in-between spaces. In some gaps you find oil wells, in others wooded hills with lots of villas, sometimes all you see are just dumping-grounds. Wherever you want to go you have to pass through these places. It's always as far as from Berlin to Prenzlau or Frankfurt an der Oder.

The species 'pedestrian' has therefore died out, or been exterminated. People come into the world as a driver. The city (I'm not joking) is empty of people; all you see are villas, little houses (without the slightest aesthetic charm – oh, what was New York!) and cars big and small, parked and moving. People are found in drug stores, little houses and shops. The women prefer to wear beach pants.

In short, why keep quiet about it, Los Angeles is the opposite of a place I'd seek out as somewhere to live; for I simply love strolling among crowds of people, to observe them and get my money's worth. But it's not for fun I'm in this region they proclaim a paradise.

I saw the Pacific as well, the ocean, the other one. Well, it occurred to me, I've come far in my life; I thought I would stay cocooned in the Brandenburg marchland, and now I have to, or am allowed to, get to grips with the various oceans. I'm curious about the Red Sea, which blooms before me: could I make a pilgrimage through it dry-shod, like our forefathers?

Yesterday evening around ten the ground here seemed to sense my scepticism; there was an earthquake, my bed shook, the house made cracking noises. I didn't allow this rude behaviour to change my mind; it soon stopped.

I've already made a start at Metro Goldw[yn] May[er], together with Herr Kurt Götz⁵⁹ (Lessing-th[eater] Berlin) and Wilhelm Thiele⁶⁰ (the 'Filling Station'). The aim is to cook up a 'funny' bit of nonsense. I'll write more about this writer-factory next time. Several dozen of us sit, each in his office, where he broods; you are seized with terror when you walk such corridors and listen: so many writers in there, on a weekly wage.

Once we have an apartment, Etienne⁶¹ will go to school. Already we speak fluent German and French, and await English with patience.

Adieu for today, I am devoted to you both. – Your DDöblin

.2. To the Rosins,

Hollywood 27/10/1940

⁵⁹ Kurt Götz (1888-1960): Swiss/German actor/writer. Went to Hollywood in 1939 to study film-making, and was stranded by the war. Rejected a five-year contract from MGM following his success with the Garbo vehicle *The Woman with Two Faces*, on the grounds he'd seen enough of how it was done. He and his wife bought a chicken farm, becoming famous for their double-yoked eggs. In 1946 he returned to Switzerland and directed several well-received 'screwball comedies'. Often compared to G B Shaw (a distant relation) and Oscar Wilde.

⁶⁰ Wilhelm Thiele (1890-1975): Austrian-American film director and scriptwriter. Pioneer of the German talkie /musical film with the 1930 *Die Drei von der Tankstelle* ['The Three from the Filling Station']. In Hollywood, directed *The Jungle Princess* (Dorothy Lamour, Ray Milland, Akim Tamiroff), and two Tarzan films.

⁶¹ Etienne: AD's youngest son Stefan (born 1926), who accompanied his parents on the escape from Europe.

Dear Rosins, my wife has written on the new Royal machine. I, being conservative, write with a pen, as in May. The hot season here is over, we've entered the rainy season, and should really, like good Indians, betake ourselves to our winter huts higher up. But we let it rain on us. Every day it rains for 24 hours, and if there were 25 hours in the day it would rain for 25, and no doubt it will now and then. You can imagine how healthy the climate is. Polgar⁶² has arrived here and had to take to his bed on the first day with lumbago; Bruno Frank⁶³ had to go to a spa for his rheumatism, and as soon as he came back the pains started up again.

The city, I mean Hollywood, I get to know better only in the immediate neighbourhood near our house, which is not far from Hollywood Boulevard. On that street you occasionally come across people, all of them of course continually avoiding cars. (The other streets of Los Angeles, as I wrote before, are empty and only there for driving through; there are also filling stations, and building plots for sale.) In Hollywood there are some very elegant businesses, all with narrow fronts and a great depth. And it's astonishing: on the streets you meet so few people, but in the shops there are some, they try on shoes, they sit in the drugstores and eat. Although everyone has shoes they are always buying more. In the bookshops you seldom see anyone; I've only ever seen employees busying themselves with the accounts; clearly they're tallying the still unsold stock and the size of the profits that are not coming in, so they can share the latter out among themselves. The ladies, as a matter of principle, even when it's raining, wear long trousers under the raincoat, decorated with flowers etc. The trousers are often of silk, sometimes of artificial silk, and sometimes I think the ladies themselves are made of artificial silk. But they brighten up the street.

There's no way to tell where Hollywood ends, but it's always starting up again. 15 mins to left or right the desert begins, and you just now took the elevator in a skyscraper.

Georg Fröschel⁶⁴ was telling me yesterday (in Berlin he was an editor with Ullstein, now he too is a *writer* at MGM) that two weeks ago a friend of his drove on a Sunday excursion out of the city, after an hour and a half he (and his wife) suffered a breakdown, they were stuck in burning sand, they walked and walked, it was truly a desert, they were half dead with sunstroke when they were found six hours later.

Yesterday the *yewish-german club* put on a welcome evening for me in a church, Granach and Leo Reuß⁶⁵ read from my books, L Jeßner⁶⁶ gave a welcome speech, finally I said a few words.

⁶² Alfred Polgar (1873-1955): Austrian writer, critic and translator, key figure in the Vienna Modern. He translated Ferenc Molnar's Hungarian play *Liliom*, the precursor of *Carousel*, and staged its first successful production in Vienna in 1913. He landed in Hollywood after a gruelling journey similar to AD's.

⁶³ Bruno Frank (1887-1945): popular author, now forgotten, husband of Liesl Frank. In California 1937-45.

⁶⁴ Georg Fröschel (1891-1979): Austrian writer, scriptwriter, Oscar winner. Invited by Louis B Mayer to recommend three German-Jewish refugee writers, he secured one year contracts at \$100 a week for Walter Mehring, Döblin, and Alfred Polgar. He headed the team scripting *Mrs Miniver*; Döblin's Dunkirk scene made it up to the final cut. But since Döblin had already left MGM, he was not one of the four awarded the Oscar in 1942 for best screenplay (Fröschel, James Hilton, Arthur Wimperis, Claudine West).

⁶⁵ Leo Reuß (1891-1946, in USA known as Lionel Royce): actor, had supporting roles in dozens of films. In mid-1930s Austria he could obtain theatre work only by pretending to be an unschooled Tyrolean peasant, in which guise he was a great success before being unmasked.

⁶⁶ Leopold Jeßner (1878-1945): innovative theatre and film producer in 1920s Germany. To USA in 1937, where he became a script editor for MGM.

Organ music before and after. Strange. Even the Rabbi was there, a Hamburger with a long beard and little twinkling eyes. And suddenly a cousin from Berlin greeted me, whom I'd never seen in 40 years in Berlin! That's who he said he was, anyway, and he should know.

How goes it with you, dear Rosins? New York's so far away, it's dreadful, we're outside the world here. New York was the second emigration, Los Angeles is the third. I'd love to hear from you soon, I'm doing all kinds of work, about which more next time!

Cordially, Your DDöblin.

.3. To Arthur Rosin, November 1940

[greeting missing] In 4 weeks or so the depiction of my experiences in France ('Robinson in France'⁶⁷) will be ready, a little book; probably the last. You know I have the MS of the big second volume of the '1918' book lying around; I set great store by it, the development of the themes remains valid, I think, in these times. All that's lacking, as ever, is a publisher. As for Hollywood, at the moment I'm 'working' from home and only seldom drive out to MGM. I'm supposed to give my *Producer* outlines of some of my books; I've just finished *Mountains Oceans Giants*; what do you say, dear Herr Rosin, what material for a film would that be – the de-icing of Greenland and the Cretaceous upon us!⁶⁸ The *Producer* (who speaks French) was very interested in my oral sketches. I'll make an outline of *The Blue Jaguar*⁶⁹ next.

That's all. I'm learning English, slowly but surely; I already read the newspaper whenever possible. I'll tell you more about Hollywood next time; there are any number of famous people here whom I never knew in Berlin.

Cordial greetings to your dear wife! – In friendship, your DDöblin

.4. To the Rosins, 4/12/1940.

1842 Cherokee Avenue, Hollywood CA.

Dear Rosins, first, an explanation for the yellow paper. It's royal 'MGM' paper and lies in an enormous packet in the drawer of my desk here. 'Here' means in an *office* building at MGM in Culver City, where I now spend my days – or if I'm honest, my idleness. Like the others. I hoped we could go on as before, working from home, for I felt more comfortable there. But suddenly the overlords assigned Polgar and me to an existing team that's been working for six weeks to turn the book *Mrs Miniver*, by Struther, into a film (more precisely, into *box office*), and I was given an *office*. So here we are, a team of six, plus the *Producer*. I've read the book, it's a *best seller* just now, and actually an interesting and occasionally lovely work, not a novel but a series of sketches that appeared in *The Times*, London conditions, London family idyll before the war and its transformation by the war. *Mrs Miniver* is a fine fictional invention, I thought we should make something of her, a kind of female Chaplin, but no.

⁶⁷ 'Robinson': i.e. *Schicksalsreise* (Destiny's Journey).

⁶⁸ *Mountains...* The cinematic special effects of the time might have struggled!

⁶⁹ *The Blue...*: second volume of Döblin's South American epic trilogy *Amazonas*.

Of the six, two are actual English writers.⁷⁰ Georg Fröschel is the link between the German and the English speaking team members (he was formerly an editor with Ullstein, a Viennese). I have to turn up around 10 and sit around until 5 or even 6 in my *office* (make an *acte de présence*). So – I write for myself, learn English. When someone has an idea he makes an animated phone call, has a lively discussion until nothing is left of the idea, and calls that ‘working’. (It’s a puzzle where the millions are earned; I’ll have to investigate.)

Dear Herr Rosin, I wrote at once to the agent you named to me; an answer is awaited. From Klaus we have at last a more satisfactory letter, he is in Marseilles living in a furnished room, has acquired an electric cooker, is looking for a job, so far without success. Etienne, our Little Flag, now Master Stefan (pronounced ‘Steven’) has calmed down, and is growing enormously. My wife often has a difficult time with the boys, especially because of Wolfgang⁷¹, her favourite; but she too is much calmer.

Dear Rosins, just a little report on our morale! – Your old DDöblin

PS: We have just received your friendly letter, with answers to my wife’s queries. I knew that would be the case, but a mother never gives up! By the way, did you receive my little Confucius book⁷² that I asked to be sent to you? The agent Harold Ober whom you named to me, dear Herr Rosin (40 E 49th Street) replied asking me for details: ‘*Have you anything to offer now which we could see?*’ etc. I thought he might enquire about me to you or Schermann. Anyway, I’ll write to him myself about my ideas. I’m still working on my ‘Robinson in France’. Facts and thoughts: I really don’t know what they’ll make of it here, but I keep writing.

It’s December, lovely weather, just starting to cool down and become a bit damper; apparently the rainy season is not far off. Wendriner was here on a ‘*lecture*’ tour. He’s a tourist in the history of German literature.

.5. To Hermann Kesten⁷³

Hollywood 11/12/1940

Dear Kesten, well, what’s new in the world? I’ve just read in the *Aufbau*⁷⁴ that I’m working on a *musical*. But that’s been overtaken: I’m now the occupant, together with Polgar, of an *office* (i.e. each of us has his *office*), and every day from 10 we have to be on duty (exactly like L Frank,

⁷⁰ Two... writers: actually three were both English and writers: Arthur Wimperis, James Hilton, Claudine West.

⁷¹ Klaus (Claude), the 3rd son, served two years in the French army, demobilised in July 1940. Wolfgang, the 2nd son, was a gifted mathematician; he died during the German invasion. (Military service of the two sons was a condition of AD’s acquiring French citizenship.) News of his death was not confirmed until 1945.

⁷² Confucius: Döblin compiled and introduced a selection of *The Living Thoughts of Confucius* (Cassell 1942).

⁷³ Hermann Kesten (1900-1996): leading figure in the 1920s ‘New Objectivity’ literary movement. Close friend of Döblin, like him fled Germany in 1933, in 1940 arrived in the USA and was very active in the Emergency Rescue Committee.

⁷⁴ *Aufbau*: German-Jewish monthly published in New York from 1934 to 2004. An important source of information and contact for the many German speaking refugees.

Heinr[ich] Mann⁷⁵ etc). The work day ends officially at 5, but I leave at 4. We do nothing. Absolutely nothing. Supposedly we're working on something together, but so far that's just a rumour. We deal with our correspondence, make telephone calls, read the newspapers, write our own stuff – whatever one can do under house arrest. Why so? It's the way things are. Some are quite content with it. Some. Are you content? How are things with you and your wife? What are you writing? I hear it's very cold over there, here it's slowly starting to rain. Maybe a Deluge will develop, and engulf the film industry and its writers. Let's hear from you before long!

Cordial greetings to you both, from your DDöblin

.6. To Hermann Kesten,

Hollywood 7/1/1941

Dear Herr Kesten, many thanks for your letter and for forwarding the telegram from Landshoff⁷⁶. I am so glad that at last Landshoff – and I hope Landauer⁷⁷ too – will escape, and you'll be able to welcome him over there in New York in a few weeks. Interesting, his plans for publishing. There is really a dreadful vacuum to fill. And even if someone or other quickly brings out his work in English, it's after all still a translation, and the vacuum persists. It won't be easy to bring this so necessary activity, so greatly desired by us all, under one roof. Or does Landshoff envisage a mainly English-language publishing house, with translations of German authors? Maybe, as an experiment, in parallel with the German original? That would be a lame solution, and probably wouldn't succeed. Anyway it's great that someone who has already taken so much trouble over the crisis of emigrant literature will soon be at it again. It's essential to round up all the writers under one firm; the *whole* must not be lost sight of.

I'm toiling away on my own stuff, my main task at MGM is to draw the weekly paycheck. Write as soon as you can to tell me what our acquaintances are doing, Schwarzschild⁷⁸ in particular? Brecht⁷⁹ wrote to say he has a Mexican visa, maybe things are looking up. Cordial greetings, to your wife as well. - DDöblin

.7. To the Rosins

⁷⁵ Heinrich Mann (1871-1950): older brother of Thomas. Like Döblin was in exile from 1933 in France, in 1940 made his arduous way to USA where he lived until his death. In 1940-41 had a one-year contract with Warner Bros; thereafter depended on friends and relatives.
[<https://archives.usc.edu/repositories/3/resources/207>]

⁷⁶ Fritz Landshoff (1901-1988): his Querido Verlag in Amsterdam published virtually all the well-known émigré German writers. Escaped to USA via England and Mexico, set up a publishing house in New York.

⁷⁷ Walter Landauer (1902-44): colleague of Kesten and Landshoff in the Kiepenheuer Verlag. Died in-Belsen.

⁷⁸ Leopold Schwarzschild (1891-1950): editor, sociologist. Founded emigré journal *Das neue Tage-Buch* in 1934. With Döblin and others formed the Free Press and Literature League in 1937, in reaction to Moscow show trials and to oppose totalitarian tendencies Left and Right. In USA 1940-49, arriving on same ship as Döblin.

⁷⁹ Bert Brecht had been friends with AD since the early 1920s. In the USA 1941-47 he was unable to find work or stage productions, under FBI monitoring and questioning by HUAC about his supposed Communist leanings.

Hollywood 9/1/1941

Dear Rosins, my wife left me little space for writing, I'll write with more soon. Here we have entered a slightly cooler period, it's the not quite fully developed rainy season. From the papers we slowly gather generally more pleasant things: the African wedge that signals the end of Mussolini, and America's attitude, a good start to the year. I am determined this year – in contrast to last – to experience outstanding things of a political nature! I think you'll join in!

MGM still makes only very tentative use of me. It's tolerable; I can keep myself busy.

Kesten reports a telegram from Landshoff in London: he'll soon set up his stall in New York. Shame that we're so far apart on this continent!

Devoted to you both, your DDöblin

.8. To Peter Döblin⁸⁰

Hollywood 4/2/1941

Dear Petrus, so you have our new address again (from 7 Feb on): 901 Genesee Street (Hollywood Calif.) Our telephone number is not yet fixed. It's Mamma's birthday on 13 February, don't forget! The day before yesterday we received news (via Princeton) from the Red Cross regarding Wolf: he's not on the lists they have at present, but those lists are not complete. Anyway, the letter wasn't particularly encouraging for Mama, for it's a long time from early June to December; but of course anything is possible. I'll write more next time, because I'm going to make independent enquiries without your mother's knowledge, and I'll let you know the result. But I'll write again about this, and you must not tell your mother.

Otherwise all is going well, very hot here, on 4 February! (From Klaus still the problem with the money that never arrives, at the moment not less than 110 dollars are on their way to him and he receives nothing! At least he has Syngalowski⁸¹ etc.)

All the best, cordially, Your D.

.9. To the Rosins

901 Genesee Ave, Hollywood (Calif.), March 1941

Dear Rosins, please excuse the dreadful yellow paper, but it's what MGM places in our *office*. (I find it's the paper that puts you off paper.) I must now tell you a little of how it goes here. First: we had a telegram from Klaus in Marseilles yesterday: he 's secured *Passport* and *Visa de sortie*! Now for passage and transit; he relies for these on Herr Schwartz⁸² of the 'Joint' in Lisbon. So we hope to see the youngster reaching Lisbon at least. This was a great joy, especially for my wife, as you can understand.

⁸⁰ AD's eldest son Peter was working as a printer in New Jersey.

⁸¹ Aaron Syngalowski (1890-1956), leading figure in the Jewish ORT movement ('Society for Handicrafts and Agricultural Work'), active in many countries, including France until 1942.

⁸² Dr Joseph Schwartz, Lisbon representative of the Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish-American charity. He engaged in illegal rescue and support activities in occupied Europe.

We were away from Hollywood for 8 days on the Mexican border (Nogales in Arizona, 20 hours drive, a real trial). There we obtained our 'immigration'. It was, or is, horribly expensive (c. 200 dollars and more for each person), of course not for the official but for lawyers etc. (Please don't speak of this; we're grateful that it just went well.) We still owe you 75 – what must you think of us? We had hoped to set aside half of the 100 dollars [i.e. weekly wage], but instead we only receive 70 (around 20 tax deduction, 10 to the agent) and it's astonishing how little remains in the bank however little we buy.

Another topic: Landshoff was in Nogales as well, for the same purpose, we met together here, he's travelling back today. My 'France' book is with Bermann⁸³; they want to bring it out in German, Landshoff says; as for English, I'll sort that out myself. Yes, it's a shame nothing came of the translation of *Land without Death* with Lippincott; I thank you most cordially, Herr Rosin, for all your efforts! For the moment I have only my contract as a means of support; after that, God will help too.

For all of us the next weeks will be tense with the coming German offensives. I am certain that England will hold fast. This year will bring the beginning of Hitler's downfall, and next year America's help will be fully there! We'll see the fellow laid out on the ground.

You sent such kind words regarding Wolf. Yes, it's hard to still hold out hope; but I've just heard at the studio that the son of a Baroness von Havatny, who works with us, is in the same situation, i.e. missing – and she learned through reliable personal contacts that he is alive and in Metz; he cannot give any sign of life! So, one possibility.

And how are you both? I would so much like to see you and talk with you! Frau Rosin was in Cuba? How do you feel, are you in good health?

With all best wishes, your Alfred Döblin

.10. To the Rosins

Hollywood, 30/4/1941

Dear Rosins, we've just come into the hot season; it's deadly; I estimate about 30–32 C. How time flies! We've been here half a year already! The youngster is growing enormously and we – grow not at all. When I look back on this half year, I've done all kinds of work; but I can't say yet whether anything will come of it. The 'stories' that one writes for the film probably go mostly unread; there's a huge over-production of these, *au fond* hopeless for *outsider* like us. And my 'Robinson in France' – dear God: Bermann and Landshoff write me encouraging letters, but they have no publishing firm of their own, and two American firms who looked at it (Little Brown in Boston, and Harcourt Brace in New York) don't want it; they already have something from France. So, our eyes are all on the political developments; it's good that everyone is with Roosevelt, and Hitler's triumph stands on feet of clay. Aside from that everything else is trivial, I think.

Shame that we are so far away! Eternal summer freshness here, that isn't even fresh!

Cordially yours as ever, DDöblin

⁸³ Gottfried Bermann Fischer (1897-1995): publisher, set up an exile firm in Sweden, moved to USA in June 1940 and continued publishing.

.11. To the Rosins

901 Genesee Ave, Hollywood (Calif.), 11/7/1941

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES

Dear Rosins, this is the first letter I have written on a machine, and in truth it's more than a letter, it's *un travail*. Here in my *Office* (which for the most part sits directly broiling under the sun) they've placed an enormous Remington, I look at it with amazement, and now begin to play with it, and it's to be a letter to you – if I can manage it.

As you see I'm still with MGM, I have to be diligent, always be writing new '*storys*', they flow to the inventory of the firm, are translated and wait for a *Producer* to pick them up. What I've learned: the *story* is the first thing, delivery is the second, and much harder. You have to understand how to 'sell' an idea. Sell means: suggest to one of the twenty producers of the firm that it has appeal. Very difficult for the son of my father. Along with that I belong to a *team*, which is turning James Hilton's '*Random Harvest*' into a film. Claudine West and Fröschel are on it too. It's a *bestseller*, a deeply untrue book, but exciting and sentimental; a man first loses his memory through *shell-shock* in the war, and back home in England leads a life as someone else under another name, and through another accident regains his memory, but meanwhile has no memory of the intervening period during which he was happily married! And what does God, i.e. James Hilton, do? He has the wife turn up as secretary to the hero, who of course fails to recognise her, fails so far to recognise her that he – marries her for the second time, and then separates from her because (in his subconscious) he really loves another, namely – the woman from the intervening period! The point that it's the same woman, now and in the intervening period, only becomes clear to him and to the reader on the very last page, with the very last word. But it's not too late, as long as it will and must be a *bestseller*. And I'm to keep an eye on the psychiatry, oh lord.

Otherwise: Peter has just been with us, we were so happy with such a good son, he's still hunting for a better paid job. Our Klaus is still in Marseille; now, when the travel funds are there, the earlier visas and affidavits are no longer valid, and he and my wife here must go through the whole dreadful grind again. I'm now deeply sceptical, even Washington's agreement has to be secured again.

Strangely sunken life I lead here, have to lead. Streets without people, garden idylls, office; well, even this won't last forever. My contract will soon be up, and then everything will change. And it's all the war, and we can surely expect it to end. The war progresses slowly, but in its second phase now, a balance is forming, the third phase, i.e. the overpowering of Hitler, will be shorter than the first, and a rapid collapse is even possible. Anyway, we are just at the beginning of the second phase.

And how goes it with you, dear Frau Rosin and dear Herr Rosin? Such a shame, this long distance between us! What's happening in my American home town, New York? Are you well? And your children, young Keins, Frau Guttman, the young Rosin in Virginia? For sure they're all developing like our Little Flag. Let me now close this letter. From the bottom of my heart, all the best. I squeeze your hands. Your. [signed] Alfred Döblin

.12. To Hermann Kesten

Hollywood, 24/7/1941

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES

Dear Kesten, this is a typed letter, I'm practising, the machine sits in my office room, and so I type and you will excuse the mistakes. You've taken yourself off to the countryside and don't feel happy there? You don't give details, so I don't know what you're doing there on the land, in the New York heat? Land is almost always a horror, to be borne only by nerves of iron. Neurologists always send their patients there, to freshen them up. And you work hard and have no money – well, anyone can have no money, you don't need to work extra for that, I think. For no money I wouldn't work very hard.

Dear Kesten, are you at least working at something proper and to your taste? Now I think of myself: I have to sit here in the *office* and exercise predation on my brain and invent *Storys*, may God have mercy. And the contract is not indefinite, and one has to deliver something. Stupid baloney, and I can't make it stupid enough. The gods here are a certain Reisch⁸⁴ and Fröschel is a bigwig too, and Franz Schultz⁸⁵. (I hear nothing of Lustig⁸⁶) All of us blunder around and can't compete with the gods. Otherwise I do no work. I did write my Robinson in France book, it's probably still with Bermann, but who's going to print it these days – even though it turned into a purely personal book. I don't believe one can serve both Mr Louis B Mayer and one's own work at the same time. *Voilà* slavery. It's not prostitution, for I am not present at this sort of fraudulent wordsmithery.

'Little hope', you write. Only Feuchtwanger⁸⁷ here declares hopes. He's an ultra-optimist. Confusing. When I told him recently that I reject all dictatorships, those on the left no less than those on the right, he opined that I needn't worry, in a Left-Germany he and Heinrich Mann will decide what can be published and what not. So there's a hope for you, dear Kesten.

Sometimes I see Marcuse⁸⁸ here, he runs a popular Philosophy course Mondays, he's closing it down. When we recently celebrated H Mann's 70th birthday at Salka Viertel's⁸⁹, it was like the old days: Th. Mann rustled a piece of paper and congratulated from it; his brother then rustled a piece of paper and expressed printed thanks from it, we sat at dessert, around 20 men and

⁸⁴ Walter Reisch (1903-83): Austrian screenwriter and director. Under contract to MGM from 1937, he wrote scripts for all the major stars.

⁸⁵ Franz Schultz (1897-1971): screenwriter from Prague, where he mixed with Kafka, Werfel etc. In Hollywood from mid-1930s. American citizen from 1940; changed his name to Francis George Spencer.

⁸⁶ Jan Lustig (1902-79): Austrian screenwriter, arrived in Hollywood in 1940 and secured a contract with MGM. Scripted several successful films.

⁸⁷ Lion Feuchtwanger (1884-1958): famous author (*Jew Suss*), criticised for self-censorship on Moscow show trials. In exile first at Sanary-sur-mer, fled to USA in 1940. Had a good income from royalties and film rights.

⁸⁸ Ludwig Marcuse (1894-1971): writer, philosopher. In USA from 1939, taught at USC in Los Angeles.

⁸⁹ Salka Viertel (1889-1978) = Salomea Steuermann, Austrian actress and screenwriter, mentor to Greta Garbo. Helped set up the 'European Film Fund' that enabled several refugees to come to the USA.

women, and eavesdropped on each other about German literature. Also there were Feuchtw[anger], Werfel⁹⁰, Mehring, the Reinhardts⁹¹, a few film people.

It looks like a very long war. I can't predict, will Stalin make another treaty with Hitler, nothing is impossible.

Tell me more about your work. I'd like to be in New York. F Lion⁹² is in Nice, his friends the Jakobi were here recently.

Heartiest greetings to you and your wife! – Your [signed] Alfred Döblin

.13. To Peter Döblin

Hollywood 14/9/1941

Dear Petrus, we received your letter and are glad that you are working hard on the 'Madonna'. You asked about my contract. It hasn't been renewed. And practically speaking I, along with a number of other *writer*, am out. But the result is not yet so final. People are making *démarches* on our behalf. Whether anything will come of it, *qui sait*? In any case we have the wherewithal to survive for the next few months. In any case we've given notice on the house and want to lower the monthly rent from 60 to 40 dollars. If the annual contract is no longer valid (and annual contracts are very rare) I might be able to, and hope to, secure one of the weekly contracts for special tasks. That's what I hope. But there's no reason to worry just yet.

As for Klaus, we had news from Washington that all has been resolved positively at that end, hence a *recommendation*. So a gleam of light. We haven't heard from Klaus in quite a while.

Petrus, see to it that the MS of my France book comes back to me in due course. No hurry.

We are all well, my novel is being transcribed, (the volume has 800 pages). I haven't of course started on anything new. It's hot summer weather. I've read the very interesting Churchill speeches, and am starting on the other book.

Dear Peter, all the best, and let's hear from you soon! – Your Pappa!

.14. To the Rosins

17/9/1941 LOEW'S INCORPORATED STUDIOS

Dear Rosins, I've been meaning to write to you for a week or so, and keep putting it off. It's a letter I wanted to write after a rather confused and quite agitated letter from Peter. But now I'll do it.

Peter writes that he spoke with you about his religious matters, which I know about, which even after discussions here in Hollywood have become stronger in him, - and in so doing he experienced a very bad reaction from you. You, dear Frau Rosin, spoke apparently – I don't know whether in relation to me, or to Peter – of "betrayal". After a very tense and not very long debate,

⁹⁰ Franz Werfel (1890-1945): best-selling author from Prague; in 1929 married Mahler's widow. In exile at Sanary-sur-mer, to USA in 1940 together with Heinrich and Golo Mann.

⁹¹ Gottfried Reinhardt (1913-94): Austrian film producer/director. With MGM from 1932, worked on many successful films.

⁹² Ferdinand Lion (1883-1968): Swiss journalist, edited exile journal *Mass und Wert*. Spent war in France.

writes Peter, he felt he was actually being “thrown out”. What the rights and wrongs of it are – my old Peter being the reporter – I cannot exactly know. But let me in any case say a few things on the matter.

I am terribly sorry that Peter even broached the subject. It is wrong, it is unjust, and I have informed him of this in all clarity and with no possibility of misunderstanding, and he has told me he understands. Religion is a private matter; his relationship to certain things he would do best to keep to himself, even more so when revealing it to others, as in this case, leads to annoyance or misunderstandings.

I myself, it's true, have been occupied, through Kierkegaard, more strongly over 2–3 years with Christian mysticism and philosophy. You may have seen something of this in my book *Citizens and Soldiers 1918* (the Becker and Tauler characters); it comes more to the fore in the unpublished 2nd volume. It's nothing more than my (basically the general) endless conversation between “Ego” and “Nature”. Insofar as this has been my constant line of thought, dear Frau Rosin, I'm sure you'll not speak of “betrayal”.

Were I to appear in public behaving and speaking somehow or other like a Christian, especially now, that would be a “betrayal”, namely of that which I also am, of Jewishness. Am I doing that? Have I done that? Not as far as I know. This story of Peter saddens me, it's annoying, even dangerous, it torments me. I have always had the same attitude towards Jewishness, nothing has changed there: we are a people that finds itself being utterly dissolved and absorbed. The Jewish religion is a national religion. And as little as we – you as well as I – feel ourselves still to be Jewish people, so little is the old Jewish religion suited to us, suitable for us. In fact, dear Rosins, we have never had occasion to talk to each other about religion as such. It never seemed to me that you were Jewishly “pious”, in any event we never had cause to discuss it. – Why, I now ask myself in all seriousness, why are you two, to whom I am honestly so cordially devoted in friendship and who I personally love – and how many people does one have, especially now, with whom one can have such a relationship – why suddenly are you angry with me about a – fundamentally absolutely unchanged – line of thought?

If, which is not the case, I were today or tomorrow to become Catholic or Protestant, why should I not do so – as long as it remains “in my bosom”. We now know that Bergson, publicly a Jew, was for years a Catholic, but he kept it to himself as a private matter and knew that revealing it at that time would be to stab his own people in the back. My connection to the Jewish people in recent years even became politically active – and I have appeared in public 1000 X as a Jew even though already in 1912 in Berlin, i.e. before the First War, I left the Jewish community and religion – you can find this printed in the “Jew[ish] Lexikon” etc. However – I did not hide away in a corner; because a battle was raging I was and remained a Jew. And so now – even if my reflections of a philosophical kind should urge me to become a Buddhist. – (Here in Hollywood many American Jews are followers of “Christian Science”).

Dear Rosins, what I've written is incomplete and maybe not clearly expressed. Actually I now believe that everything Peter wrote was misunderstood or exaggerated.

Allow me to add that otherwise we are living peacefully (probably my last weeks with MGM; they probably won't renew our contracts; Heinrich Mann is already dismissed).

I hope to hear good things from you soon! With the most cordial greetings, your D Döblin

.15. To the Rosins

901 North Genesee Ave, Hollywood (Calif.), 10/10/1941

Dear Rosins, I must ask forgiveness for delaying so long my reply to such an attentive and delightful missive from you both. The reason is the simplest in the world: more exactly, two reasons. First, I've been working madly on a *story* I wanted to hand in, secondly a certain depression following my termination with MGM. My contract expired last week. It was simply not renewed. 'We are not issuing any more annual contracts.' That was all. Several gentlemen, including *producers*, spoke up for me, *sans effet*.

Ergo I am on the outside and 'at home'. I cannot say I am languishing in boredom, but I have a sense of being *en chômage* [unemployed]. (and in fact in two weeks I shall start to draw unemployment support for the first time in my life – about 15 dollars a week, for 20 weeks.) This situation, which we expected (though I hoped to avert it by working hard) apart from the inward unease has all kinds of outward consequences. For example, looking for a place to live. Naturally we can't keep the little house at 60 dollars a month; we must reduce to 40, maybe even less, 2 rooms. We have enough for a few months and must be absolutely certain to raise the amount we give Klaus.

You can imagine that for me, here in a strange land where I count for nothing, where I have no spiritual credit and my earlier productions really have no chance, everything is difficult. For my wife too, who feels constant strain on account of the boys, (We had news from France: extensive enquiries were made about Wolf, including among his regimental comrades, his name appears on no lists, his regiment suffered '*sensibles pertes*' [substantial losses] during the retreat.)

Now I'm working through my big book about 1918, more than 500 pages have been transcribed. Bermann, who was here recently, (old Madame Fischer,⁹³ 70 years old, has a manic-depressive condition, she lives here with her second daughter and their *baby*) took some of it away with him to look it over. I plan to enquire with Little Brown in Boston, who translate a lot. The book will be 800 pages printed.

Allow me to write another time, dear Frau Rosin, on religious and theoretical matters. My head is elsewhere at present. My greetings, with all cordiality! – Your DDöblin

.16. To Peter Döblin [Oct 1941]

Bonjour, dear Peter, nothing new here, except I'm now at home and so to speak "working", i.e. dictating the second volume of my "1918" book which already has 600 typewritten pages and needs another 250 or so. Nobody will translate it, but I want to put the work, which still needs a month, behind me. We'll see what comes next. I've no clear idea what to do. For medicine I'm hindered by the language, and especially because I have no registration here. Sometimes I think of something "psychologic", that's allowed, psychotherapy or the like, but I'm not clear if I can or even should.

Petrus, Mama has already written to you about the religion stuff and Rosins. So you'll finally let it drop. Of course you don't want to insult anyone. One should watch one's every attitude and

⁹³ Samuel Fischer's wife. Bermann was their son in law.

not be importunate. If people don't want to listen, just leave it, and this you should *absolutely* keep to yourself! It's *not a matter for conversation!* And now here's Bermann with it!

All the best, dear Petrus, your D

.17. To Elvira and Arthur Rosin, 5/11/1941

Dear Rosins, first, our new address: 1347 North Citrus Ave, Hollywood (Calif.)

Now we have, not a little house, but a "flat", au fond one of the board-walled little houses so common here, three apartments under one roof. We have a larger and a smaller room; the larger sub-divided by a curtain, then kitchen and bathroom, all tiny, and unfurnished. But instead of 60 it costs us only 35 Dollars a month.

The sour citron name is quite suited to the place, for what a bother it is to furnish it. Frau Dieterle and Frank, from the committees, congratulated us on choosing an unfurnished residence, and promised to support us (for finally, even if you're somewhat short for a few months, you can't do without furniture). But then they and others telephoned around the neighbourhood in order to find some old piece in a garage; the result was an old camp bed, lent to us for four weeks. The landlord at the flat gave us a couch from his garage, we only need one more – and tables and chairs. You may imagine the bitterness and embarrassment in the situation. My wife feels it more strongly than I, and it's a fundamentally different situation than last year in Toulouse. Today is Wednesday, we move in tomorrow and still have only the two pieces, but I think we can shop cheaply today for essentials in the second-hand stores, of which there are heaps here; we only need a few woollen blankets, some chairs, tables, and a stove. For it's war and exile, and we are determined to drain the cup to the dregs...

One ray of light is the unemployment support, to which I will become entitled in two weeks, after being dismissed by MGM. It will last for 20 weeks. Heinrich Mann (we are often together, and I have a good understanding of him, an excellent man, serious, kind, and personally not at all 'revolutionary') is still in his apartment, he went to the *employment office* for the first time, had to wait for hours, very impatient and downcast; he is over 70 years old.

Dear Herr Rosin, could you make enquiries for me about the "Guggenheim Foundation"? Frau Frank said submissions for this year had to be in by 15 October, and they had made a strong pitch for Ludwig Marcuse here. Could you pass on the address of the Foundation and the conditions, or do you perhaps already have some connection with someone on the committee? I would be hugely grateful if you could manage this – or any other step – for me.

The thick 2nd volume of my *November 1918* is now finished, not a bad book, but as of today's date I have still not found a single agent in America –

How goes it with you? Good health! I squeeze your hands most cordially, both of you!

Alfred Döblin

^^^

The references to religion in the above letters concealed the fact that both Alfred and Erna had been taking instruction from Catholic priests, but held back from formally converting until Alfred's stint at the (Jewish-owned) studio was concluded. They were

baptised on 30 November 1941 at the Blessed Sacrament Church on Sunset Boulevard, and took Communion some months later.

This momentous step (which coloured the critical reception of all his later writings) was kept secret from friends and acquaintances, since Jewish and left-leaning elements would surely be outraged (and anti-semitism among Catholics also presented risks: Döblin was advised by a priest not to visit his son's school). But indiscretions by Peter led some to suspect.

Not until his 65th birthday celebration on 10 August 1943 did Döblin allude in public, albeit obscurely, to his conversion. (Attendees included Thomas Mann and Bert Brecht.)

Postscript: "Embarrassing Incident", by Bertolt Brecht.⁹⁴

When one of my highest gods had his 10,000th birthday
I came with my friends and my pupils to celebrate him,
And they danced and sang before him and read out prepared words.
The mood was lively. The feast approached its end.
Now the celebrated God stepped onto the stage
That belonged to the artists
And declared in a loud voice
In front of my sweat-drenched friends and pupils
That he had just experienced a revelation and from now on
Had become religious and with unseemly haste
And in a challenging manner placed a motheaten priest's hat on his head,
Dropped indecently to his knees and shamelessly intoned an insolent hymn,
Thereby injuring the irreligious sensibilities
Of his audience, among whom were
Young people.
For three days
I have not dared to meet the eyes
Of my friends and pupils, I am so
Embarrassed.

^^^

DEPARTURE AND RETURN

Badische Zeitung Feb 1946 [SLW 265- 275]

When I took my leave ...

That morning at nine I heard on the radio: the Reichstag has been burned; the fire has been put out; one of the criminals was caught at the scene; this was a Communist attentat. An outrageous act directed against the German people, and so on. I turned the radio off. Words failed me. I'd

⁹⁴ Tr. C D Godwin. Earlier Brecht said: "I've learned more from Döblin than from anyone about the essence of the Epic. His epics, and even his theories about the Epic, have strongly influenced my playwriting. His influence is detectable in English, American and Scandinavian dramas, which in turn have been influenced by mine."

had lots of dealings with radio and its current overlords; this was the limit. Apparently the Reichstag really had been set on fire – by Communists? They really dare to push such a blatant swindle? One has to ask Cui bono: who benefits from this act of arson? The answer was obvious.

I wasn't worried for myself, although deeply unsettled and disgusted – until someone phoned and asked what I planned to do. I was startled: why? Well, the arrests; I should be careful. I thought: nonsense! But the phone wouldn't stop ringing. Then they came to the apartment, always the same message: I'd better disappear, at least for a while; I'm in danger, there are lists. It still made no sense to me. The internal transformation from a state based on laws to a state of dictator and freebooters wasn't immediately apparent to me. By evening I understood. My wife agreed. It would just be an excursion, let the storm pass, three or four months and then we'd all be done with the Nazis. We had visitors, tears flowed. I laughed and was calm. With a small suitcase in my hand I slipped away, alone. Downstairs a surprise awaited: a Nazi, a civilian overcoat over his uniform, was standing by my doctor's nameplate, he fixed me with a glare – and followed me to the Underground. He waited to see what train I would board, followed me into the compartment. At the Triangle I got off, he too. He followed behind me. Then there was a crowd, an arriving train was emptying, I ran down some stairs and reached my destination later from another platform heading in some other direction: Potsdamerplatz, Möckernbrücke. I was heading for the Anhalter Station. The train for Stuttgart would leave around ten. I found a sleeping-car place. (I carried the ticket around in my briefcase all through the twelve years of emigration.)

As we set off I stood at the corridor window. It was dark. I'd often travelled this route. The lightscape of the city – I love it dearly. How I always felt returning to Berlin and saw the lights: I breathed a sigh, I felt comforted, I was back home. Well, now I'm off on a journey, I'd better sleep. Strange situation, doesn't really belong to me. A few hours in Stuttgart; life goes on calmly, Nazis bellowing for meetings – burlesque, why am I actually running away? Stupid affair, I'll be ashamed of myself later. Überlingen – overnight stay. Ferry across the lake to Kreuzlingen. Now over the border, by car, all goes smoothly. In Kreuzlingen I called on a sanatorium doctor with whom my wife and I had stayed the year before (what a lively happy time). Now here I was in the comical and seemingly ridiculous role of refugee. But who was running away? Why? All looked so peaceful, normal, totally normal! Until a few days later I was called out from the sanatorium; someone was asking for me. This was on (I have a not very strong numerology superstition) the 3.3.33.

Outside were my entire family, one son excepted.⁹⁵ Oh, now it was quite another picture. My wife, very agitated, told of frightening events in Berlin, of dreadful harrassments she had overheard in the train. The entire family was menaced, they couldn't stay. Well, here she was. I was shocked, that 3.3.33. It made me thoughtful. But I got over it, had to deal with other matters, e.g. finding temporary accommodation, walks, chats, plans. Was I really outside now, or simply waiting? I didn't know. I wasn't too bothered. My wife saw the actual situation, she knew she had taken leave of domesticity, that the children had been torn away from everything, the mountain of cares, the clouds of uncertainty – she wept a great deal; – on the other hand (what could I do against myself?) I was elated. Yes, elated. How so? In those months I had with me lines from Schiller's poem *The Diver*: "It was his salvation, it dragged him to the surface."

⁹⁵ Wolfgang remained in Berlin to complete his Abitur.

What was my salvation? Oh, in Germany everything, not just politically but also intellectually, had become intolerable. It was as if the political confusion, the stagnation had seized hold of the intellect and crippled it. I fought against it from my platform. Finally, at the end of 1932, an image settled on me that would not let go: an ancient mouldering god, close to complete disintegration, leaves his abode in heaven, and in order to renew himself and atone for his ancient sins flies down to Earth, to humanity, he once the god and ruler, now a human like anyone else. It was a foreboding and anticipation of exile. Yes, exile: the cutting loose, the isolation, the exit from the blind alley, this downfall and sinking seemed to be my 'salvation'. It sang within me: "It dragged him to the surface". I had no defence against it. I was in a uniquely elevated mood (which also took hold of the book, on which I toiled the whole year.)

Thus did I step into exile. That's how I "took my leave".

When I returned ...

And when I returned, I – did not come back. There's a fine American novel called *You Can't Go Home Again*. Why can't you? You are no longer the one who went away, and you can no longer find the house you abandoned. You don't know this as you're leaving, you suspect it as you make your way back, and you experience it as you draw near, as you step into the house. Then you know all; but – but – it's not all.

A huge ocean steamer that had been converted into a troop transport carried us – our family now melted down to three – at the beginning of October 1945 from America back to Europe, from the New World to the Old. There were six of us when we left Nazi Germany in 1933. One son was now an American citizen, and stayed there; one had been unable to follow us and was now in Nice, newly married; and one had been unable to follow us and we thought of him all the time and had no idea where he might be and why he never wrote: since 21 June 1940 he had been in a soldier's grave in the Vosges. Fallen to the enemy, the Nazis, our Wolfgang, a gifted mathematician, the apple of his mother's eye.⁹⁶

When we left Europe in October 1940, the last we saw of Europe was the lights of Lisbon. We had left by night, now we arrived at night. The mighty black ship docked at the artificial pier at Le Havre (the old pier was destroyed). And this is what I saw of Europe, looking out from the deck:

Below in the darkness a lorry with a strong searchlight was driving along. It cast a dazzling light on the lower part of our ship. A wide gangway was laid at the open door of a loading bay. And now, in the cone of light from the lorry, a number of people crept up it, all dressed the same. From above they looked like gnomes. They disappeared into the bowels of the ship, came back out dragging cases and boxes, clattered with these down the gangplank always two side by side, deposited their load and turned back for more. It was quite mechanical, like a theatrical

⁹⁶ Günther Anders provides a poignant reminiscence: "As I lay ill with angina in high summer, he came tripping cheerfully down the blistering Los Angeles streets (of course as one of that tiny negative elite of non-car-owners) to paint my tonsils. And when we were both residing in Herbert Marcuse's vacant Santa Monica house, he behaved towards his wife, fearfully changed by the loss of her son, like a young bridegroom towards a freshly blooming beloved: he would tiptoe (he who once had mountains, oceans and giants at his fingertips) into the kitchen to prepare for her in secret a little "breakfast in bed", which was a memorable achievement not only of his eyes (although practically blind, he never broke an egg) but also of his heart. Honour to his memory!" [Introduction to *Mensch ohne Welt* (C H Beck 1993) p. xxx.]

production; no sound could be heard. They were – Germans, prisoners of war. My first sight of them again. I watched fascinated.

As we disembarked they were standing all in a clump. They regarded us wanderers from across the ocean, silent, expressionless. The passengers passed them by as if they were nothing. This was the first dreadful depressing encounter. The sinister impression (the defeated, the punished, the war) never left me throughout our stay in Paris. I saw poor suffering Paris, unable to ward off the evening dark, and was glad when the night hid its pain. Then I set off towards the north, towards Germany. I travelled alone, alone again, as when I made my untroubled way out in 1933.

What I was thinking, what was I feeling, as I travelled through the night and approached the border? I was often awake, checking myself. But no genuine emotion made itself felt. All sorts of feelings, but nothing from earlier. I am no longer the one who went away. Ah, how blithely and easily I flew from my home back then. It was like liberation from a choking atmosphere. Fate had flung it at me. I rejoiced: “It was my salvation, it dragged me to the surface.” In *The Babylonian Exile*, the dethroned god laughs, accepts with delight the alteration intended to punish him, and goes on his way unbroken, all good cheer and vitality.

That god was myself. I made my way slowly, sometimes gradually, sometimes backwards.

Had I not read an article by a literary stay-at-home warrior about the “sofas and stuffed armchairs” of the emigrants?⁹⁷ It’s been printed everywhere, and may appear in ever more places, cluelessness knows no boundaries. To flee from country to country, lose everything that you have learned, that has nurtured you, flee yet again and live for years as a beggar, when you still have all your faculties but must live in exile – that was my stuffed armchairs and sofas, as for many others too. You wrote and toiled away as never before, within four walls, and were condemned not just to total muteness, deprived of adult autonomy, but even more: degraded, lower than an illiterate citizen of the host country, who could at least communicate with his neighbours. Some profited from emigration, for sure, they made some sort of success in foreign lands that were not on the right scale for them. How many were they? Most were glad to make it past the first of the month, or the fifteenth. Businessmen, painters, musicians had it easier (at a lower level), unencumbered women now and then found an advantage. But we who had committed ourselves hair and hide to language – what of us? Of those who neither would nor could abandon their language, because they knew that language is not just speaking but thinking, feeling, and much besides. Abandon it? That would be worse than flaying one’s own skin, disembowelling oneself, committing suicide. So you stayed as you were – and what you were, as you vegetated, ate, drank and laughed, was a living corpse.

Now, geographically, I’m coming back. At the station square in Strasbourg I see ruins, like those inland: ruins, the symbol of our age. And there’s the Rhine. What wells up in me? Once I rhapsodised about it, it was a name full of meaning. I search for that meaning. War and strategic frontiers come to mind, only bitterness. There like a fallen elephant the broken railway bridge lies in the water. I think of Niagara Falls, the last scenic spot I saw back there in great, distant, vanished America, those masses of water tumbling like nothing on Earth. Silent, alone in the compartment, I cross the river.

⁹⁷ In his article ‘Inner Emigration’ in the *Münchener Zeitung*, 18 August 1945, Frank Thiess likened the emigrants to an audience gazing at the German tragedy from their loge boxes and orchestra seats.

And this is Germany. I reach for a newspaper: when am I returning to that country I left on 3.3.33? (I have a thing about numbers.) In shock I let the page fall, look again at the number: the Ninth of November. The day of revolution in 1918. Date of a collapse, a botched revolution – around this same hour I was on the way from France to Germany, and the date has never left me: I spent the last years of exile writing my four-volume *November 1918*. Will everything proceed again as lamentably as back then? Should and must there not be this time a renewal, a real one? The bell has tolled for 9 November, I'm returning to the land where I had lived my life and which I left, fled from its suffocating air, with a sense: it is my salvation. And out there is the land I left, and I seem to be looking back on my past. The land has endured what I was able to pull away from. Now it becomes clear: a Moloch grew here, people could sense it, it splayed its arrogant limbs, raved, laid waste. And there you see what it left behind. They should have cudgelled it to death.

There are the fields, so neat, a tidy land. People here work hard, they always did. They have mowed the meadows, smoothed the tracks. The German forest, so feted in song! The trees stand bare, some still with brown autumn leaves. (Take a good look, you Californians: you dreamed of these beeches and chestnuts beneath the wonderful palms beside the ocean. What do you think? There they are.)

It becomes clearer: piles of rubble, holes, bomb and grenade craters. Remnants of buildings. Then more fruit trees, bare, with supports. A timber yard, intact, the houses beside it destroyed. Little children stand in the fields and wave at the train. The sky clouds over. We pass clusters of burned and broken wagons, bent and twisted sheds. Over there, that dark line of hills, it's the Black Forest, we're travelling well clear of it, past the foothills. Tidy heaps there, blue-white piles of tubers and beets. This place is called Achern. Over there, untouched, are factories with lots of chimneys, none are smoking. It all makes a gloomy, dead impression. Something has happened here, but now it's over. Neat little houses with red shingle roofs. Steam from the locomotive gathers in white balls outside my window; they fray into shreds and vanish. We pass a place called Ottersweier: I can read on a tin shield "Kaiser's Chest Caramels", happy times when you could take something for a cough. Now big buildings, the first groups of people, a troop of French soldiers, a tricolour flutters. I read Steinbach-Baden, Sinzheim, Baden-Oos. The station is dreadfully battered, lots of passengers change here: Baden-Baden. I've reached my goal.

Goal. What is my goal? I stroll with my suitcase down a German street. (Anxiety dreams during exile: I'm magically transported to this place, I see Nazis, they come up to me, interrogate me.)

A shock: someone at my side speaks German! That someone in the street speaks German! I don't see streets and people as I once used to, a cloud hangs over everything that has happened and what I carry with me: the dull pain of twelve years. Flight after flight. Sometimes it frightens me, sometimes I have to look away and am bitter.

Then I see their misery, and see that they have not yet experienced what they experienced. It's hard. I'd like to help.

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WRITING MEANS SITTING IN JUDGEMENT ON ONESELF⁹⁸

Der Sonntag im Bild, December 1949 [SLW 329-332]

Once again I'm in a strange situation. I sat over there in America for the longest time in lovely, hot, and for me somewhat too quiet Hollywood, wrote piece after piece and buried what I'd written and thus brought into the world to lie silent and abandoned in my desk drawer, just like others around me did. And then when the war ended and we were able to return to Europe, it became possible slowly to unlock the cage – what did it shelter, dogs, cats and birds, or maybe nasty snakes? – and let its living contents out into the open, for they wanted to and ought to show themselves, and then this or that person who approached me directed his gaze not at my animals that I'd so carefully tended and transported across with me, but at the owner of this menagerie, i.e. me myself, and asked: "Who are you, tell us about yourself." In short, I was urged to look upon myself, direct my gaze not to the world but to me and my life and express myself autobiographically. "For you must have seen and experienced so much. So tell us something about it." Yes, a strange situation. I thought: I've written so much, pay attention to that, what am I to you. Am I a prima donna, to have everyone troubling themselves with my private life? I'll relate a little episode, a parable:

A journalist once came to an astronomer and let himself be shown all the wonders of the starry firmament, and when the astronomer had finished he asked the visitor, who seemed to have been listening with interest: "So, Mr X, you've been struck dumb. It's overwhelming, isn't it?" The visitor replied: "I beg your pardon, professor, it sure is. You make it all very clear. But no offence, there's ink on your index finger."

Not to beat about the bush: I dislike autobiographies. I don't hold with so-called autobiography. There are colourful ones that report on an entire epoch, like Goethe's *Truth and Poetry*,⁹⁹ or Kügelgen's book.¹⁰⁰ There are also books in which the author really does take an intense hard look at himself, like Rousseau in the *Confessions*, and there really are documents, concealed and open, works of a genuine self-analysis like some of Dostoevsky and even the *Confessions* of St Augustine. But in even the best examples of this kind everything is mixed up together, revelations and concealments and suppressions. I've noticed this for a long time, and that's why I say: If you're going to write, why not write honestly and in full.

How much better and how much more clearly and acutely than anywhere else did Dostoevsky for example speak of himself and depict himself in his *Brothers Karamazov*, and in the characters in his novel *The Idiot*. One recalls the saying: By their fruits shall ye know them. The apple and the pear already show what tree they came from. And secondly: a true autobiography is not possible. You can report events and incidents in your own life and even attach observations to these, but it goes no deeper. And how should you do it, how should you arrive at yourself? We dive into this abyss and emerge with only some image or other. For you can't be simultaneously the one looking in the mirror, and the mirror.

Because I never had anything to do with the novel, but only with the epic, I had no liking for today's psychology. The unhappiest thing, it seems to me, is always the inclination (see

⁹⁸ Adapted from "A Verse" by Ibsen: "Living means battling dark powers in oneself, writing means sitting in judgement on one's own ego."

⁹⁹ Actual title: *From my life: poetry and truth*.

¹⁰⁰ Wilhem von Kügelgen's (1801-1867) reminiscences of his youth were very popular in the late 19th C.

Strindberg¹⁰¹ et al.) to throw oneself at oneself and seemingly to psychologise oneself. What an unhappy inclination! Instead of using the eyes to gaze, as is proper, out upon the world, instead of hearing what there is to hear and taking part in what happens outside, and having a critical and sensible grasp of oneself – instead to bore into your soul and not let yourself breathe. For me, all that's needed to loosen my tongue is finding something, feeling something, and then my inside leapt into action and was able to present to itself what it is.

And so I threw myself, 30 or 40 years ago when the psychology wave was at its peak, not upon me but upon the far distant story of a Chinese Boxer rebellion in my novel *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun*.¹⁰² Or I strayed some centuries back and there encountered a silent, pious and helpless Emperor Ferdinand and his monstrous field-marshal Wallenstein. Whoever has eyes to see, looks there. And that seems to me, and still seems so today, the proper way to speak of oneself.

But recently when I wrote a book like *Destiny's Journey* it didn't happen just so I could produce a book about my later years, but in order to be clearer, more direct, more open and decisive than in earlier works. It happened so I could pull free of writing and act according to the dictum: writing means sitting in judgement upon oneself.

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¹⁰¹ In his plays and writings Strindberg explores deep psychological insights apparently uninfluenced by Freud.

¹⁰² Not strictly correct. The uprising depicted in *Wang Lun* (late 18th C.) involved the White Lotus. The Boxers emerged around 1900.

