

Season 2 Episode 1 -

KK: Welcome all you adventurous readers to the epic worlds of Alfred Döblin, where we explore the life and works of this fascinating but little known early 20th century writer. Brought to you by the website Beyond-Alexanderplatz.com. Welcome to Season Two of our podcasts and this is the first episode.

CG: I'm Chris Godwin and I'm here with Katie Kavanagh.

KK: Hello, everybody. It's so lovely to be back. Oh my goodness, how exciting.

CG: Yeah, it's been a year since –

KK: A whole year, I can't believe it, since our Episode 10 of the first series.

CG: Yep.

KK: So the first episode should go out on 15th of April. So yes you're just right, about a year's gap.

CG: But we haven't been totally idle since then. I've translated two rather large bits of work, and they've been posted up on the website.

KK: So Chris, remind us of the name of the website.

CG: Beyond hyphen Alexanderplatz.com.

KK: Brilliant. It's a treasure trove of PDFs and extra information.

CG: I don't think there's anywhere else in the English speaking world that has brought together so much information, not just about Döblin, but about several of his forgotten contemporaries. Because there was such a breach in German literature in 1933 that a lot of stuff just sort of vanished out of the public view. And there's a load of interesting writers who are slowly being brought back to life and sometimes being published in English. But my website is, as you said, a treasure trove of a lot of stuff that still waits to be discovered by a wider public.

KK: Excellent. Now, I know we're here primarily to talk about Döblin, but just very quickly, because we're on the subject, do you want to tell us, any of the names of his contemporaries that you've translated that are on your website?

CG: In fact, one of them I'm translating a bit more of at the moment is Robert Müller, who in the same year that *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun* was published, published the only other long form quasi-Expressionist novel in German prose, which was called *Tropics: the Myth of Travel*. This is a most extraordinary book. It starts off like a Boy's Own adventure with these three bold European explorers going into the jungle to look for lost Conquistador gold.

KK: Okay.

CG: And then it turns into an amazing sort of quasi-philosophical or anthropological excursions into all kinds of things about evolution, imperialism, Viennese manners. In the middle of the book, they're stuck in this native village where the Indians treat them with a fair bit of disdain. And the Indians have their own very kind of solid culture. And they, well, they're barbarians coming in from outside. And then it ends up as a an unsolved murder mystery.

KK: Oh, very dark.

CG: But it's a magnificent work of of language and of ideas. But the author committed suicide in 1924, still very young, and his works were never republished for about 60 or 70 years.

KK: Gosh.

CG: And they started reappearing in the 1980s in Germany. And when I came across it I was fascinated. I translated it and tried to interest some publishers. But nobody knows who this man is, so we're not going to bother, you know.

KK: Oh, well.

CG: That's just one of Döblin's contemporaries,.

KK: That's just one. And there are half a dozen others on your website?

CG: Yes, half a dozen.

KK: Okay. Let's get back to why we're here, then. Alfred Döblin. And we should probably have a recap, a very quick reminder of highlights of Season One.

CG: Yes, I was going to ask you, Katie, what has stuck in your memory after this one year's gap?

KK: Ah, I do know the very first episode, and it's a bit of a cliché to say it, but the very first episode was when I heard your reading at the end. And obviously Chris is grandpa to my children. And so it was really lovely to hear the expressive nature of your characterization in that piece. I can't even remember what it was now! Oh, but just to hear your voice, I thought, wow, that's so lovely.

CG: Well, I would say I had I had a lot of practice while my sons were growing up. I mean, your husband had years and years of bedtime stories!

KK: It was really lovely. And then another favourite was definitely Manas. In fact William jopined in that one, the double murder/suicide.

CG: Yeah, that was quite exciting.

KK: Very dramatic. And I would say it's been it's been really interesting learning about Döblin. And I certainly know a lot more about him now, obviously having done this.

CG: Right. Well, you remember, we identified three big strands, didn't we? Can you remember what the three big strands were of what we would be examining in this series?

KK: Please refresh my memory!

CG: Okay. Well, we were talking about Döblin the family man, Döblin the activist, and Döblin the writer.

KK: Yes. And I think these are three very good lenses for bringing together interesting material, because people who look at stuff on the website, they're mainly interested in having something to read.

CG: I think it's always quite useful to know something about the background of a writer who you find intriguing and interesting and fascinating.

KK: Very true. It enriches the reading so much if you know something of the writer himself. Definitely. I think when we were talking about his schooling, his early childhood, that was really interesting. That struck a chord with me, obviously, as a teacher. I found that very interesting. But tell us what today's episode is about.

CG: Right. Well, today we're really zooming in. We're using the close focus lens now, and we'll be covering three days in 1933.

KK: Okay.

CG: We won't be moving at quite the same pace throughout Season Two! But these three days, really between the Reichstag fire and Döblin crossing a park on Lake Constance, on the border from Germany into Switzerland and starting his 12 years of exile.

KK: Chris, explain, what was the Reichstag fire?

CG: Right. Well, this was a pivotal event in February of 1933. In elections in January of that year, the Nazis had become the largest party in the Reichstag, but didn't have a majority. And lo and behold, some nasty communists come along and burned down the Reichstag, the federal parliament building, and give the Nazis a perfect excuse to arrest and ban all the communists they can find. And then when the next election is held, which was just the next week in March, they of course achieved an absolute majority, and they brought in emergency decrees and suspended the rule of law, suspended civil rights and so on, and, and turned a country of laws into a dictatorship. And, you know, it's so shockingly fast that this all happened. But, news of the Reichstag fire was being spread as people woke up on the morning of 28th February. The radio is blaring about this dastardly act, and the communist perpetrators have been caught at the scene, and the government is going to do this and that. And Döblin's phone didn't stop ringing.

KK: Why all these phone calls?

CG: They're all saying you've got to be careful. You've got to leave. You've got to go into hiding. But why? But why? You know, he's a doctor, he's a German citizen. He's performed his duties all his life and he served in the First World War, you know. Why on earth would he feel in any danger? But his publisher phoned up and said, look, you've got to leave. The French ambassador to Berlin, who was a great admirer of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and had gone out of his way to make Döblin's acquaintance, he phoned up and said, look, you've got to leave. And so Döblin discussed with his wife Erna what they should do. And she said, well, you'd better go off for a while, probably only for a few weeks or a couple of months and then these awful people will have been seen off, you know.

KK: So when did Durbin realize that he was actually in danger?

CG: Well, it's when he was receiving all these phone calls from, you know, very influential people, very close to him, all telling him the same story. And visitors were coming to the apartment and telling him the same thing. And so he realized perhaps he'd better be cautious. And it needn't be for very long, because how can such chaos be tolerated by the law-abiding Germans? So he said, well, okay, I'll disappear for just a short while, go down to Switzerland for a short visit.

KK: So do you have an excerpt in his own words about that morning?

CG: Yes. He said, *"I heard on the radio: the Reichstag has been burned; 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 had lots of dealings with radio and its current overlords; this*

was the limit.” He had already been censored by the radio – in the late 20s he had been very active doing radio programmes. But in the last year or two, he'd basically been brushed aside by the current management.

KK: I see.

CG: So he goes on: “*They really dare to push such a blatant swindle? One has to ask Cui bono: who benefits? The answer was obvious.*” He says he didn’t really feel worried for himself. But he was disgusted. But as I say, he had all these phone calls and visits, and couldn’t couldn’t get his head around the idea that a big and powerful nation should change overnight from a country of laws to a state of dictators and freebooters. But by that evening he understood. He’d been convinced that this really was serious.

KK: And what about Erna? How was Erna taking it.

CG: Well, she agreed it would be a good idea for him to leave for a while, but she was still not fully convinced that this was going to be some permanent and drastic change. So she was still saying, well, be cautious, go off for a few weeks.

KK: So it was just Alfred that left.

CG: He packed a little suitcase and set off for the train station. But remember, they’re now living in this swanky apartment in the west of Berlin, because of all the money he’d made with *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. So he says: “*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 – the Anhalter Station – later from another platform heading in some other direction. 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.)*”

KK: Gosh, that’s really quite frightening, isn’t it, to know you’re being followed?

CG: Oh, it’s cloak and dagger stuff. And you can surmise what might have happened if this chap had grabbed him by the arm and said, come with me.

KK: Yes. Oh, goodness. Horrible. So how old was Döblin at that time? Remind me.

CG: He was he was in his mid 50s that year. Yeah. So, not a young man still, but very capable.

KK: And as an enthusiastic Berliner, it must have been very difficult for him to leave.

CG: I guess at the time, he probably wasn’t really thinking a long time ahead. He was just thinking of getting out, no idea about 12 years of exile. But he says that every time when he came back to Berlin at night, he really loved seeing the arc of light over the city as the train approached.

KK: Yes.

CG: And so he looked out again at these lights and just said, okay, well, I’m off on a journey now. You know, we don’t know really what’s going to happen, but I’d better just go to sleep.

KK: So he headed for Stuttgart. And what happened once he got there?

CG: Well, he knew he needed to travel down to the Swiss border, to Lake Constance, then a bit further on to a little town which has a ferry that goes around the lake, called Uberlingen. And so he spends the night in a hotel in Uberlingen, and manages to get in contact with a Swiss psychiatric colleague whom he and Erna had stayed with the previous year.

KK: Sort of asking for sanctuary, basically?

CG: Right. And then he got onto the ferry, crossed over to Constance, a German town on the other side of the lake. And there's a Swiss town of Kreuzlingen, which actually the two towns are really one town, but they're divided by a national border. And he just strolls across a park and he's in Switzerland. And he knocks on the door. And it begins there.

KK: That's it. That's the ...

CG: The first minute of the first hour of the first day of 12 years of exile.

KK: 12 years of exile. Gosh. And so how long did he stay on this first stop?

CG: Well, just a few days, really, because just a day or two after he got there, Erna turns up with three of the boys. She had gradually realized that things really were quite serious, and she was a bit frightened.

KK: I see. And so there they are.

CG: He was called out from this clinic where he'd been staying for this day or two, and there she was, very tearful. And the three sons, all of the sons, except for Wolfgang, who had wanted to stay behind for a few weeks to complete his Abitur.

KK: What's that?

CG: His higher school leaving certificate, that gives you entry to university.

KK: OK.

CG: I think we'll be doing an episode on Wolfgang later on in this series because he was a mathematical genius, but unfortunately he died during the German invasion of 1940.

KK: So a sad, tragic story there, but a very interesting story. So I think we'll enjoy that.

CG: But the interesting thing is that the other two boys – not the youngest, Stefan, who was still in primary school, but the other two, Klaus and Peter. Well, Alfred sent them back to Berlin because they needed to complete the education courses they were on, because the end of the school year was just around Easter, just a few weeks ahead.

KK: And how old were they?

CG: Peter was 20, and Klaus, I think was 16. Peter was finishing an apprenticeship, and Klaus was finishing his junior school certificate. So they went off to stay with friends in Berlin, where they wouldn't be so easy to find.

KK: Oh, That's hard for them?

CG: Well, they probably weren't the immediate targets of the police and so on. So they went back to Berlin for a few weeks, but then Alfred had to think, right. Well, now, if I've got the family here, I can't burden this Swiss colleague of mine with the whole family. So he'd better head off to Zurich and think about long term plans when we get to Zurich, and find a place where the family can live.

KK: Yes. And how did this situation affect affect him?

CG: Well, he freely admits he was "elated". He was so happy that this awful, oppressive burden of a paralyzed political system, which he says, you know, it wasn't just the politics that were paralyzed. It was people's minds. Their intellect had been paralyzed. And it was such an oppressively awful situation for a creative, politically engaged person that he really felt a great sense of relief. And, I mean, the interesting thing is that he had already started his next big epic novel the previous November or so. And this novel was about exile. Listeners can find it in PDF on my website.

KK: Oh great! In full, right?

CG: It's called *The Babylonian Exile or Pride Goes Before a Fall*.

KK: Oh, I like the sound of that. And have you prepared a reading from that work?

CG: That's coming up in a few minutes!

KK: That's exciting!

CG: So he quotes a few lines from a poem by Schiller called *The Diver*, about a diver who's dived off a rock into a turbulent sea where the undertow is sucking him down. But then a big wave comes along and he gets washed to the surface, and Oh, he says, that's me. That's me, washed to the surface again.

KK: So, very good. And how did this situation affect his writing?

CG: He said it was an exciting time for him. Having started this new epic, he could spend most of 1933 sitting in the library in Zurich, just working away at this picaresque novel about this fallen Babylonian god wandering through 1930s Europe. And there's lots of historical references to events that happened over the previous 3000 years while this god has been asleep up in his crumbling heaven.

KK: I feel we definitely mentioned this in a previous episode haven't we? I think it rings a bell.

CG: I think maybe if we didn't talk about it, we definitely touched on it, mentioned it in passing. The first excerpt we included among the 70 excerpts from Dublin's epic works in our *Adventurous Readers Guide to the Epic Worlds of Alfred Dublin*, which was published last year. The opening scene from *The Babylonian Exile* where the moribund god is waking up in his crumbling heaven.

KK: Excellent! And you just said you've prepared a reading. Shall we launch into that now?

CG: well, have we any other points to cover?

KK: I don't think so. I think we can probably step right into the reading now.

- CG: Okay. Excuse me while I take a sip of tea.
- KK: That's a good idea! I haven't actually brought a cup of tea with me today.
- CG: Right. Well, this is this is from Part Two of *The Babylonian Exile*, where Marduk, who is now called Conrad because Döblin says we're not going to bother with all those grandiose Babylonian names – so Conrad and his sidekick George, who is quite a villain.
- KK: It's like calling him Dave. We're just going to call him Dave.
- CG: So he has gone in search of Babylon because he thinks, oh, they'll all be so glad to see me roll up there. I'm your god, you know? But all he sees is this great field of rubble. And so here we go, led by the archaeologist from Bremen.

READING

They set off for the Hill of Qasr, where once great Nebuchadnezzar was enthroned.

He went willingly, no one dragged him. He would take himself down to the depths of the abyss. There are cowards who accept whatever comes their way, fend it off and think themselves brave when eventually they come through alive. This was not his style. Already he saw within him a murky glow, and he knew this glow, the glimmer of his rage that ignited in times of utmost peril. The glimmer had to grow brighter, *woe unto you lot, I understand you, dogs, you think me an invalid, you think to leap around me because you toppled me when I lay up there snoring. I am the sinister jaws of a lion, hearken now to my breathing and my roar, soon your walls shall echo, take flight, you don't know me, you don't know how I leap over hurdles, woe unto you.*

The hill is called Qasr; it is also called “the Inverted”, and is a futile warning to all who creep there and still have a big mouth, who are mighty, ride in on big horses and smoke fat imports, and those who live on the inheritance of parents or grandparents, and those puffed up with newspaper fame, and those too that have been shaped by a gracious nature, ah how soon do beauty and form vanish.

Monstrous walls along this path, seven metres thick they were, on their front of brick long rows of lions strode in relief, in dazzling colours. All this was once your mighty realm, O Conrad. The rubble field was endless, fissures everywhere, a cool breath came from below, sometimes a horrid thick miasma, walls dropped vertically to the depths. A volcano had erupted over this city. The Earth had grown up over the city.

The Ishtar Gate was already behind them. Conrad, head drawn in, was hard-faced. His stride was firm, his eyes burned into every item that appeared before them. On the gate he had spotted the Surrush, the snake with legs, his ancient symbol, gleaming unchanged from the olden days. The beast with the coat of scales, elongated head, two-tongued, stepping high like a cat on raptor-bird feet, and lofting its menacing tail.

Don't close the eyes, take it all in.

“And this – watch your step, gaps – this is the most important thing I can show you, apart from the famous stepped ziggurat! Esagila, the airy house, the actual abode of the lord of the gods on Earth. Here's where he had his cell, and his famous statue of gold, which was carried off a few times. You have no concept, gentlemen, what the presence of this divine statue meant to Babylon.”

Now – it has happened. Now the world rests.

Nothing, Conrad believed, can surprise me now. But as at Esagila before his own temple, it all became too much for him. For the third time the Great One took a fall.

When he opened his eyes, his head was in George's lap, the Doctor had placed his pith helmet on him. Conrad flung it off, was already on his feet, the snake that walks, it's just the unsteady ground, and the disgusting air as well.

"Let's go back down," the Doctor whispered. Below them gaped the canyon of an excavated street. "Come," whispered the Doctor, "I'll help you climb down. I'll tell you more at the bottom, it's like a cellar in there." And already he had jumped down a step, then another, turned back to watch Conrad. A slow walk following the ruined walls, they circled in serpentine coils.

They were in deepest shadow, metres deep below the surface of the Earth, no sound came from above.

"We are in the realm of the dead, gentlemen. Everything has ended, and everything is here again!" And he took Conrad, who merely glowered and was silent and was not dumbfounded, by the hand, led him into the dark cave, whispered: "Don't talk. Sit on this stone. This is the chapel of Marduk. There, yes. And now you are the Great One! Chief of all the gods! Marduk." And he took off his helmet, sank to his knees before Conrad, who sat there silent: "You'll understand it all better now."

The man from Bremen launched into an ecstatic liturgy: *"Most revered of all the great Gods art thou! May thy destiny be without compare, thy commandments all-powerful! From this moment thy dictates are unalterable, raising up and striking down lie in thy hand! Oh thou who wouldst be our avenger, to thee we give kingship over the entire universe!"*

And with a snow-white face, sweating brow, the man climbed trembling to his feet, bowed once more, whispered, eyes shining: "We're celebrating the New Year. How joyful I am. I am the High Priest. Excuse the lack of proper costume. I the High Priest, this the King. Here, Great One, Greatest One, is the King your servant, he wants to show himself to you. Permit me to admonish him, warn him." He pointed at George. Conrad leaned back against the wall. The German went over to lanky George: *"Hand over, King, these things you wear! Lay down before him the tokens of your might, your sceptre, your ring, the sickle, give to him your kingly crown. Marduk shall examine you."*

George moved not a finger ...

KK: Bravo, bravo! Very good.

CG: Oh, it shows all of Dublin's talents in there. You know, the visual description, the mood depictions.

KK: It absolutely paints a picture, doesn't it.

CG: Yes. And the fun in mixing expectations versus the reality.

KK: Oh, very good, very good. I enjoyed that a lot. Chris. It's always good to hear the excerpts. Let's see, that's 30 minutes of the show so far. Is there anything else we want to include?

CG: Oh my goodness. We seem to be making such good progress, why don't we head off into Episode 2?

KK: Oh, is that a bit premature? Shall we wrap it up here and say, we're really excited to be back.

CG: And we encourage everyone to look at the website Beyond-hyphen-Alexanderplatz.

KK: Perfect, perfect. And am I right in thinking we have at least six episodes coming up?

CG: I'm sure as we go on they may well be more. At least six, might expand possibly to eight.

KK: Exciting, right. And again, we relish people's comments and opinions. And if we're making people think, then that's always a good thing. So thank you so everyone for joining us today.

CG: And let's encourage people to spread the word among their social media contacts. And hopefully the podcast can reach more ears. And are we going visual. this season, Katie?

KK: We are, yes, we will be on YouTube as well.

CG: So all of this content that we've recorded today?

KK: We'll be up on YouTube. I'll probably put all of Season One on there as well. Anyway, thank you for listening, everyone. Actually I feel like we've probably got enough content to do some outtakes at some point, but for now, well, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much, Chris.

CG: And thank you. Katie, and we'll be back again shortly with the next episode.

KK: Yes. All right. Bye bye.

CG: Thank you. Bye bye.