

The **Anarchy** of the



IMAGINATION

Interviews, Essays, Notes

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The Cities of Humanity and the Human Soul

Some Unorganized Thoughts on Alfred Döblin's Novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

About twenty years ago—I was just fourteen or maybe fifteen already, and in the throes of an almost murderous puberty—I had embarked on my completely unscholarly, extremely personal grand tour through world literature, guided only by my very own associations, when I encountered Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

At first, to be quite honest, the book didn't turn me on at all; it didn't knock me over or hit me over the head as some books had, though not many, I admit. On the contrary, the first pages—maybe two hundred—bored me so completely and utterly that I might easily have put the book aside, in which case I would not have finished it, and then almost certainly would never have read it again. Strange! I would not only have missed one of the most stimulating and exciting encounters with a work of art; no—and I think I know what I'm saying—my life would have turned out differently, certainly not as a whole, but in some respects, in many, perhaps more crucial respects than I can even say at this point, differently from the way it turned out with Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* embedded in my mind, my flesh, my body as a whole, and my soul—go ahead and smile.

In fact the author skirts around his theme, or rather the actual theme of the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* for many chapters, for many, many pages, possibly out of cowardice, possibly out of an inexplicable timidity toward the prevailing morality of his time and his class, possibly out of the subconscious fear of a man who was somehow personally implicated. The "hero" Franz Biberkopf meets the other "hero" of the novel, Reinhold, a meeting that determines the future course of the lives of these two men, on page 155 of the 410-page paperback edition, more than a third of the way into the novel, and at least 150 pages too late, or so it seemed to me on first reading, an impression, by the way, that has basically not changed for me, though it has necessarily undergone some refinement.

For whatever reason, but fortunately for me at any rate, I got through that first third of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which, as I said, bored me more than it might have confused, disturbed, or even aroused me; I read on, suddenly found myself reading in a way that you would hardly call reading—more like devouring, gobbling, gulping down. And these expressions still don't do justice to that way of reading, which dangerously often wasn't reading at all, but more life, suffering, despair, and fear.

But luckily Döblin's novel is too good to permit a person to go under or lose himself in it. Again and again, I was forced, as any reader is, to return to my own reality, to analyze everybody's reality. A criterion, by the way, by which I would measure any work of art. It may be that *Berlin Alexanderplatz* helped me to recognize this requirement for art, to formulate it, and not least to apply it to my own work. So I encountered a work of art that was not only in a position to provide life support, and I'll talk about this, too; this work of art, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, also helps you get a theoretical handle on things without itself being theoretical, forces you to behave morally without itself being moralistic, helps you accept the ordinary as the real thing, as sacred, without itself being ordinary or sacred, or making much of itself as an account of the real thing, and all this without being cruel, something literary works as significant as this one often are.

But *Berlin Alexanderplatz* didn't only help me in something like a process of ethical maturation; no, it also provided genuine, naked, concrete life support when I was really at risk during puberty, because I was able to apply the story to my own problems and dilemmas, oversimplifying, of course; I read it as the story of two men whose little bit of life on this earth is ruined because they don't have the opportunity to get up the courage even to recognize, let alone admit, that they like each other in an unusual way, love each other somehow, that something mysterious ties them to each other more closely than is generally considered suitable for men.

Yet it's by no means a question of something sexual between two people of the same gender; Franz Biberkopf and Reinhold are in no way homosexual—they don't have problems in this area even in the broadest sense; nothing points to that. Not even Reinhold's unambiguously sexual relationship with a boy in prison, no matter how happy Döblin makes it out to be. I would argue that this has nothing to do with the bond between Franz and Reinhold. No, what exists between Franz and Reinhold is nothing more nor less than a pure love that society can't touch. That means that's all it really is. But of course both of them, Reinhold even more than Franz, are creatures of society, and

as such naturally not in a position even to understand this love, to accept it, simply to take it as it is, to become richer and happier from a love that in any case occurs far too seldom among human beings.

And indeed, what would a person raised just like us, or similarly, see in a love that doesn't lead to any visible results, to anything that can be displayed, exploited, and thus made useful? Such a love must—that's the sad situation with love, and how terrible—such a love must strike those who have learned that love is usable, or at least useful, in the positive as well as the negative sense (we've also learned to enjoy suffering)—such a love is bound to create fear, quite simply, in them, and that means of course in us. Every one of us.

That's the way I must have read *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that first time, or in some such way. And, to be quite specific, this reading helped me to admit to my tormenting fears, which were almost paralyzing me, my fear of my homosexual longings, to give in to my suppressed needs; this reading helped me avoid becoming completely and utterly sick, dishonest, desperate; it helped me avoid going under.

About five years later I read *Berlin Alexanderplatz* again. This time something entirely different shook me up or awakened me to an experience that again helped me to understand to a much greater extent what *I* really means—an experience that helped me not to do unconsciously something that I would like to describe roughly as “living life secondhand.” At this second reading, from page to page it became clearer to me, amazed at first, then more and more alarmed, finally so struck that I almost felt obliged to close my eyes and ears, that is, to repress; it became clearer and clearer to me that a huge part of myself, of my behavior, my reactions, many things I had considered part of me, were nothing more than things described by Döblin in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

Very simply, I had unconsciously turned Döblin's imaginings into my life. Yet once again it was the novel that helped me to overcome the alarming crisis that resulted and to work at establishing something that could eventually become, I hope, more or less that thing one calls an identity, to the extent that's even possible with all this screwed-up mess.

Next I saw the *Alexanderplatz* film by Piel Jutzi, which I found quite a good film, by no means bad, taken by itself. Though in making the film they had completely forgotten Döblin's novel. The book and the film have nothing to do with each other. Each of them, and that certainly includes the film by Jutzi, is art, independent of the other. And since film is the medium with which I identify most, I decided at the time that some day—and why only some day, I don't know; maybe

when I would have sufficient skill—I would make an attempt to venture on an experiment using my cinematic resources, an experiment in documenting, by way of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, my involvement with this very special literature.

It took ten years before I got that far. And if the situation hadn't been as it was, namely that I had to do it or someone else would, I probably would have given myself more time. But chronologically speaking, in many of my works of the last few years I slipped in many of what you could call quotations from Döblin's novel. And then at some point, because a book was being done on me, I reviewed all my old films over a period of three days. And again—this time it really took me aback—I realized that there were substantially more quotations than I had dreamt, and most of them unconscious.

So then I read the book again; I wanted to understand more clearly what was going on between me and Alfred Döblin's novel. Many things became clear, fundamental things, but probably most important was the recognition, and the resulting admission, that this novel, a work of art, had helped determine the course of my life.

Certainly anyone who hadn't read *Berlin Alexanderplatz* would ask at this point what kind of a story Alfred Döblin would have to have told for it to take on such a vast, almost existential significance for even one reader, which is, after all, a highly unusual impact for a single work of art. Well, a person asking about the story of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* would have to be told honestly that the story itself is actually no big deal. On the contrary, really. The story of the former teamster Franz Biberkopf, who gets out of prison and swears to stay clean, and what becomes of this resolution, is more like a series of dreary little stories, some of them incredibly brutal, each of which could supply the most obscene tabloids with the most obscene attention-grabbing features. So the crucial part of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* isn't the story; this is something the novel has in common with some other great novels in world literature; its structure is, if possible, even more ludicrous than that of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*—the essential part is simply the way in which this incredibly banal and unbelievable plot is narrated. And the attitude toward the characters, whom the author exposes in all their dreariness to the reader, while on the other hand he teaches the reader to see these characters, reduced to mediocrity, with the greatest tenderness, and to love them in the end.

At this point I do want to try to give a simple plot summary. As I said, the former teamster Franz Biberkopf is released from prison, where he had spent four years for killing his former girlfriend Ida with an eggbeater; during the hard times of the twenties she had walked



Cover of the program for Piel Jutzi's adaptation of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931), starring Heinrich George as Franz Biberkopf (Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar, Germany)

the streets for him. The released prisoner first experiences the usual impotence, which he overcomes by almost raping his victim's sister, so that after that he's in a position to begin an affair with the Polish girl Lina, and in such a way that she can mistake it for love and get

Franz to swear that he'll stay clean from now on, so help him ... ah, well.

Economic conditions are catastrophic; all attempts to get on a firm footing fail, whether selling tie pins, pornographic literature, or the Nazi *People's Observer*, which gets him into trouble with former friends, communists, with whom he once made common cause simply because he liked them. What's left are shoelaces, something people always need, and he peddles them with his uncle, until the uncle exploits the trust Franz places in him and blackmails and threatens a widow to whom Franz had given a bit of happiness, for which he'd gotten money. Franz, who has an unshakeable faith in human goodness, is so hurt that he withdraws from the world and other people, does nothing but drink for weeks on end, but then finally returns to life and other people.

Then he meets someone called Reinhold, who's a small-time crook, but remarkably fascinating somehow, so fascinating that Franz enters into a strange deal with him; he takes over his women when Reinhold's through with them, because this Reinhold gets tired of them too quickly. It's almost pathological with him: first he has to have one, come hell or high water, and then he has to be rid of her, suddenly, violently, but it's hard for him, even so; he has trouble with it. But Franz, who is clearly somehow fascinated by him, and whom Reinhold considers rather dumb, this Franz takes them off his hands, the women, first one, then a second, but when it comes to the third, he refuses. Reinhold should learn to stay with a woman longer, because it's healthy, and the other way is sick, and because Franz wants to help Reinhold, for real. And that the other one can't understand this and is offended, this Franz Biberkopf can understand and accept.

Shortly after this, it happens that Franz helps out with an undertaking that he thinks consists of handling a regular shipment of fruit, but suddenly realizes is stealing. He's standing guard, and wants to run away, but doesn't make it. After the robbery Franz is riding in the car with Reinhold when Reinhold suddenly gets the feeling they're being followed. Now fear of being followed mingles in Reinhold with his rage at Franz. And then—there's something somnambulistic about it—Reinhold suddenly pushes Franz out of the car. Franz is run over by the car behind them, and it must look as though he's dead. But Franz Biberkopf isn't dead; he only loses his right arm. His former girlfriend Eva and her pimp nurse him back to health, and without a right arm he goes back to the city, meets a petty gangster for whom he fences some stolen goods, which brings him a degree of prosperity. Then this Eva brings him a girl he calls Mieke, who, as it turns out,

walks the streets for him. Franz accepts this, and for a while the two of them are happy. But Reinhold interferes in this relationship, too, has several rendezvous with Mieke, until at last he kills her. Franz is arrested for this murder, is committed to an insane asylum, where, over a rather long period, he undergoes a "reverse process of catharsis" to become an ordinary, useful member of society. Nothing else special happens with him. He will probably become a nationalist, that's how much the encounter with Reinhold has ruined him. That's all there is to the story.

Basically nothing more than a threepenny novel, nothing more than just a series of several tabloid features. So what makes this plot into something so great? It's the how, of course. In *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the same degree of grandeur is accorded to the smallest, objectively speaking, and most mediocre emotions, feelings, moments of happiness, longings, gratifications, pains, fears, deficiencies of consciousness, of seemingly inconsequential, unimportant, insignificant individuals, the so-called little people, as is normally accorded in art only to the "great" ones. The people whose stories Döblin tells in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, especially the protagonist, the former teamster Franz Biberkopf, later pimp, homicide, thief, and pimp again, are credited with such a differentiated subconscious, combined with an almost unbelievable imagination and capacity for suffering, that one would have to look long and hard for their equal in world literature, at least to the extent I'm familiar with it, even among the highly cultivated, clever intellectuals or great lovers, to name just a few types of characters.

Döblin's attitude toward his characters, who are, objectively speaking, certainly poor, insignificant creatures, is, I would contend, in all likelihood influenced by Sigmund Freud's discoveries, even if Döblin disputed that on several occasions. That would make *Berlin Alexanderplatz* probably the first attempt to transform Freudian insights into art. Let that be said first.

Second, Döblin narrates every scrap of plot, no matter how banal, as a process that is significant and grand in its own right, usually as part of an only seemingly mysterious mythology, and then again as a translation into religious motifs, whether Jewish or Christian.

As someone who had converted from Judaism to Catholicism, Döblin had more problems with religion than most. Perhaps that was the reason he tried to master these problems, to discover in the ordinary that which is peculiar to religion, and to describe it as such.

In simple terms, that probably means that no motif of the plot stands merely for itself, even though that would be more than suffi-

cient, but is a motif in a second, different, more impenetrable and mysterious story, part, that is, of a novel within the novel, or perhaps also part of a private mythology of the author's, but I don't want to have to decide that at the moment.

Third, then, is the narrative technique Döblin invented for *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, or perhaps merely chose. By the way, I don't consider this question of whether it was invented or not at all important, for what's decisive is whether an author chooses the right means for expressing his intentions, not whether he's also their inventor; that may interest literary historians, but to the reader it doesn't really matter; he's lucky enough to be reading a novel whose author found the proper form, and Alfred Döblin did just that, with somnambulistic certainty, in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. And whether Döblin knew James Joyce's *Ulysses* before he wrote *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, or whether he didn't know it, doesn't make his novel any better or worse. Besides, I could imagine that two writers might well hit on practically the same narrative technique simultaneously; why not, after all? As in history itself, in literary history not everything can be explained from within. A mystery, even if it be only hope, will always remain.

To me the question whether Döblin knew *Ulysses* is less exciting than the idea that the language in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was influenced by the rhythm of the elevated trains that ran past the window of Döblin's Berlin study. The language is certainly shaped by such things—mostly the noises of the big city, the specific rhythms, the constant madness of an unceasing back-and-forth. And consciousness of life in a big city, a very specific alertness to everything that living in the city means, certainly provides the source of the montage technique Döblin uses in this novel, one of the few big-city novels that exist. Life in a big city: that means constant shifts in one's attention to sounds, images, movement. And so the means used for narrating the chosen elements shift, as the interest of an alert big-city resident may shift without his losing himself as focal point, as is also the case with the story.

I leave it to others to say more, and more specific, things about Döblin's particular narrative style; I can only point out that Döblin also wrote other works, works of art, which will possibly mean more to later generations, which will perhaps some day be more important than *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is today. And I can wish that Döblin might be read more, far, far more than he is read today. For the sake of the readers. And of life.