

*The Critical Reception of
Alfred Döblin's Major Novels*

Wulf Koepke

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Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) was one of the major German writers of the twentieth century. His experimental, ever-changing, avant-garde style kept both readers and critics off guard, and although he won the acclaim of critics and had a clear impact on German writers after the Second World War (Günter Grass called him “my teacher”), he is still largely unknown to the reading public, and under-researched by literary scholars. He was a prolific writer, with thirteen novels alongside a great many other shorter fiction works and non-fiction writings to his credit, and yet, paradoxically, he is known to a larger public as the author of only one book, the 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which sold more copies in the first weeks of publication than all his previous novels combined. *Alexanderplatz* is known for its depiction of the criminal underground of Berlin and a montage and stream-of-consciousness technique comparable to James Joyce's *Ulysses*; it became one of the best-known big-city novels of the century and has remained Döblin's one enduring popular success. Döblin was forced into exile in 1933, and the works he wrote in exile were neglected by critics for decades. Now epic works like *Amazonas*, *November 1918*, and *Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende* are finding a fairer critical evaluation. Wulf Koepke tackles the paradox of Döblin the leading but neglected avant-gardist by analysis of contemporary and later criticism, both journalistic and academic, always taking into account the historical context in which it appeared.

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CAMDEN HOUSE

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Preface

ALFRED DÖBLIN belonged to the generation of Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Franz Kafka, Carl Sternheim, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Hermann Hesse. He was a prolific writer in many genres, but he is primarily remembered as a novelist. The experimental nature and the complexities of his texts have earned him the praise of many writers and critics, but only one of his major novels has enjoyed enduring popular success internationally: *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), which was hailed as the outstanding German big-city novel and as a German equivalent to the narrative strategies of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*. Döblin is recognized as one of the leading German prose writers of the twentieth century, and his impact has been acknowledged by no less a writer than Günter Grass, who has praised Döblin as "my teacher."

But the reception of Döblin's works was severely hampered by his exile in 1933, and by the reluctance of German publishers after 1945 to reacquaint readers with his texts. The considerable but belated scholarly attention given to Döblin's works has not translated into popular success, and among them only *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is widely known to the public, not least because of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's monumental television series of 1979. So Alfred Döblin, despite being recognized as one of the great German writers of the twentieth century, remains virtually unknown to the reading public.

This book traces the reception of Alfred Döblin's major novels, which, despite lack of popular success relative to *Alexanderplatz*, are still debated by scholarly critics. Most important among them (in addition to *Alexanderplatz*, of course) are *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun* (The Three Leaps of Wang-lun, 1915), *Wallenstein* (1920), *Amazonas* (1937–38), *November 1918* (1948–50), and *Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende* (1956). As will become clear from the discussion of the texts, the word "novel" is in many of these cases a misnomer. Furthermore, the line I draw between novels and other, usually shorter, narrative works is arbitrary at best. Döblin wrote autobiographical texts, short stories, and novellas, plays — including radio plays —, many essayistic works of varying lengths, and a host of shorter texts of all kinds, not to

mention political commentaries, texts of popular science, and scientific papers in the field of medicine (he was a medical doctor). There is a good deal of literature by now on Döblin's aesthetics and poetics, on his philosophy of nature, on his political views, on his attitude toward Judaism and Zionism, and on his conversion to Catholicism and his writings on Christianity. Although there is not yet a satisfactory comprehensive biography of Alfred Döblin, much has been written on his life, his family, and his professional and literary activities. None of this is within the scope of this book. Still, the study of the critical literature on Döblin's novels gives a good idea of the complexities surrounding his life and work.

With the issue of scope in mind, I have found it necessary to limit myself to the discussion of the novels, and to draw the line where such discussion turns to general issues concerning Döblin and his place in the cultural history of the first half of the twentieth century. I am aware of the drawbacks of my approach: most of Döblin's texts on aesthetics and poetics are directly connected with specific narrative works, and he had a habit of commenting on his works and their genesis. However, to go deeper into literary theory and provide more information on the cultural, social, political, and religious background, beyond providing a listing of secondary literature, would have made this project unmanageable. As it is, I hope that the limitation to the critical reception imposed by the focus of the *Literary Criticism in Perspective* series will meet with understanding, and that this work will serve to stimulate future scholarship beyond those bounds: to encourage exploration of other avenues of investigation into Döblin and his works.

There are a sufficient number of useful bibliographies, beginning with Louis Huguet. Matthias Prangel and Klaus Müller-Salget offer "user-friendly" overviews, and the periodical volumes of the colloquia of the International Alfred Döblin Society include up-to-date bibliographies of recent publications. The compilation of contemporary reviews by Ingrid Schuster and Ingrid Bode, *Alfred Döblin im Spiegel der zeitgenössischen Kritik* (1973), offers an excellent selection of the divergent views on Döblin's works at the time of their publication. I spent a good deal of time and effort locating and reading the original sources, and came to the conclusion that, by and large, Schuster and Bode's selections are indeed representative and reliable in their texts, so that I can with good conscience refer the reader to their anthology, which is widely available. I am certain that what I do offer in this book is a representative choice of the divergent and sometimes contradictory views on this difficult writer and his texts, which are notorious for their complexities and their

style, which can be characterized as aggressive, overwhelming, hard-to-grasp, opaque, emotionally charged, irrational; in any event: not easily accessible.

It is typical for such a writer that much of the secondary literature has come in the form of dissertations on very specific problems. Since 1980, the International Alfred Döblin Society has organized periodic symposia, usually every two years. These symposia have a particular, although not exclusive, focus on specific periods and themes. The published papers of these symposia offer the best insight into current thinking and research on Döblin's work. Another source for an introduction into Döblin's work are the "Nachworte" of the later volumes of the complete edition of his works, still modestly named *Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelbänden*.

It is inevitable that at the point of completion, the author sees most clearly the faults of and gaps in his work. For those who disagree with my presentation, who find it distorted, partial, or incomplete, please go ahead and improve upon it. This is what scholarship is all about. Döblin's works are so little known in the English-speaking world that we must welcome every attempt to spread the word about them. I hope I have done my part with this book.

Major Novels by Alfred Döblin

(With date of first publication and first translation, if any.)

All novels before 1933 were published by S. Fischer Verlag, Berlin.)

Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun, 1915. Translated by C. D. Godwin as *The Three Leaps of Wang-lun*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1991.

Wadzeks Kampf mit der Dampfturbine (Wadzek's Struggle with the Steam Turbine), 1918.

Wallenstein, 2 volumes, 1920.

Berge Meere und Giganten (Mountains Oceans and Giants), 1924; a simplified version was published as *Giganten. Ein Abenteuerbuch* (Giants. A Book of Adventures), 1932.

Manas. Epische Dichtung (Manas. Epic Work), 1927.

Berlin Alexanderplatz. Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf, 1929. Translated by Eugene Jolas as *Alexanderplatz, Berlin*. New York: Viking, 1931.

Babylonische Wandrung (Babylonian Migration). Amsterdam: Querido, 1934.

Pardon wird nicht gegeben. Amsterdam: Querido, 1935. Translated by Trevor Blewitt and Phyllis Blewitt as *Men without Mercy*. London: Gollancz, 1937; New York: Fertig, 1976.

Amazonas. First Part: *Die Fahrt ins Land ohne Tod* (The Voyage to the Land without Death). Amsterdam: Querido, 1937.

Amazonas. Second Part: *Der blaue Tiger* (The Blue Tiger). Amsterdam: Querido, 1938.

November 1918, Eine deutsche Revolution. Erzählwerk. (November 1918. A German Revolution. Narrative Work)

First Part: *Bürger und Soldaten 1918* (Citizens and Soldiers, 1918). Amsterdam: Querido, 1939.

Second Part: *Verratenes Volk*, Munich: Alber, 1948, translated by John E. Woods as *A People Betrayed*. New York: Fromm International, 1983.

Third Part: *Heimkehr der Fronttruppen* (Return of the Army from the Front). Munich: Alber, 1949, partially incorporated into the translation of *A People Betrayed*.

Fourth Part: *Karl und Rosa*, Munich: Alber, 1950. Translated by John E. Woods as *Karl and Rosa*, New York: Fromm International, 1983.

Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende. Berlin (East): Rütten & Loening, 1956. Translated by Robert and Rita Kimber as *Tales of a Long Night*. New York: Fromm International, 1984.

Introduction

ALFRED DÖBLIN WAS one of the great novelists of the twentieth century. Over a period of fifty years he wrote a dozen novels, in addition to a very large number of other fictional, critical, political, and philosophical texts, and was recognized early on as a major avant-garde writer. He has been compared to James Joyce. And yet, only once in his life did he manage to attract the attention of a large audience and of the majority of literary critics: with his 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. While the (still incomplete) collection of his works now numbers well above thirty volumes, only this one volume seems to matter. Not much energy has been spent on explaining this paradox, since most critics and scholars remain unaware of the dimensions of Döblin's oeuvre. Analyzing the reception of Döblin's major novels may offer answers to the riddle of why this is so.

There is no doubt that the nature of Döblin's texts forbids easy consumption as entertainment. But what exactly is it that makes *Wallenstein* such a forbiddingly monumental avant-garde epic and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* a bestseller for the ages? There is by now a sizable body of scholarship, yet this and related questions remain unanswered. Still, the immediate reception of Döblin's novels offers a fascinating insight into German cultural and political history. But the flipside of Döblin's high degree of relevance to German culture is another aspect of his reception that has limited scholarly attention to his works: while *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has been accepted as one of the great epic works of Western civilization in the twentieth century, along with works by writers such as Joyce, Proust, Thomas Mann, André Gide, and John Dos Passos, it, like most everything else that Döblin wrote, has proven to travel poorly in translation. His reception has been a German affair, in spite of his international reputation. Therefore, the rupture of 1933 was much more devastating for him as a writer and for the reception of his works than for writers who enjoyed a greater readership outside of Germany, for instance, Thomas Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger, Erich Maria Remarque, or Stefan Zweig. Döblin, however, shares this fate with other great writers, for instance Heinrich Mann. Döblin's reception in postwar Germany followed a similar pattern: while *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was reprinted

many times, his other works, especially those written in exile, did not find their audiences until long after his death. His monumental epic work *November 1918* did not attract a sizable number of serious readers until it was reissued in paperback in 1978!

Since the story of the reception of Döblin's novels is intertwined in a unique and complex way with the political history of the time, with Döblin's own biography, with ruptures in literary taste and critical judgment, it will be necessary to analyze the comments of critics not only with reference to what they say about Döblin, but what they say about themselves and their prejudices. From the beginning, Döblin's texts have polarized his audiences and critics. It seemed to be impossible to be neutral or "objective." While the public at large may have been unaware of his texts before *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, his readers were always fascinated or repelled. Döblin's reception moves along the fault lines of German criticism.

Döblin began writing novels as a student in the Gymnasium; but his first published novel, *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun*, did not appear until he was thirty-seven years old. He wrote incessantly, and in a vast array of genres: short stories; book and theater reviews; essays on aesthetics and poetics; political articles and essays; accounts of his travels, historical events, and personal experiences; articles on popular science; medical papers; essays on the philosophy of nature, on religion, and on the Jewish question; autobiographical sketches; documentary literature; stage and radio plays; screenplays. Döblin's novels do not contain only strictly narrative texts: rather a montage of heterogeneous materials is typical for this writer. He always wrote several works simultaneously, and therefore, the novels are influenced by the concurrent preoccupations. Most of all, until 1933, Döblin was a practicing physician, and valued that occupation more than that of a writer. All of his texts are informed by the diagnostic gaze of the physician and psychiatrist.

Döblin has frequently been called a "Proteus," since each new novel presented the reader with a surprise, being different in subject matter and style. On the other hand, the continuity of Döblin's thought, style, and approach is unmistakable. To understand this paradox, a chronological approach is in order. There were several turning points in Döblin's life and career: one coinciding with the First World War; the next, less pronounced, in the mid-twenties, before *Berlin Alexanderplatz*; the third some time into his exile; a fourth was his conversion to Catholicism of November 1941; and a fifth coincided with his return from exile in 1945. The aesthetic and literary consequences of these turning points were not always clear and direct, but they need to be considered. The

reader cannot expect this to be a book on Alfred Döblin. However, the reception of his works, the reflection of the texts in the minds of critics and readers, should shed light on the texts themselves as well.

Part One:
Contemporary Reviews

I: Contemporary Reviews before 1933

Döblin's Concept of the Novel in Crisis, and the Move to the "Epic"

AN ROMANAUTOREN UND IHRE KRITIKER," Döblin's commentary on the genre of the novel, written in 1913 after the completion of *Wang-lun*, was a polemic against what Döblin considered the then-dominant type of the novel, the psychological novel. With the negation of psychology as the central concern, Döblin turned against the predominance of subjectivity and the focus on the fate of individuals. This implied, for him, a break with the form of the novel as it was then understood. Döblin was never comfortable with the word *Roman* and the idea of fiction, as he valued scientific observation and reality. *Schöne Literatur*, fiction in particular, was morally suspect. This view had been reinforced by Döblin's materialistic family environment, above all his mother, so that as a youth Döblin had felt ashamed to admit that he was writing fiction, and had hid the fact from his family.

Döblin's new concept was the "epic," with the narrator as a self-eliminating medium. Döblin had already experienced what would later be termed the crisis of the novel, and the impossibility of writing novels in the traditional vein had been exemplified by the major anti-novels of the twenties, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Gide's *Faux Monnayeurs*, and Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg*, to which we should add Döblin's *Wallenstein* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Whereas the new epic would be exemplified by *Wallenstein*, its concept was clearly present in Döblin's first published novel, *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun*.

Imagining China: *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun*

Döblin's novel is not exoticist, but the image of the exotic Far East was prevalent at the time. It had three dominant aspects. First, the political actualities were the emergence of Japan as a modern power after the Russian-Japanese war of 1904–05 and the revolution in China, which led to the declaration of the Republic of China in 1911. Second, culturally, the impact of Japanese painting and graphic arts on the turn-of-the-century art in Europe had been considerable. And third, Europeans,

going beyond the pilgrimage to India, had discovered Chinese mysticism, as the texts of Lao-tse and his followers were translated into German for the first time.

Döblin, however, was equally attracted by another aspect that has since equally dominated the image of China and Japan: mass psychology. China is routinely seen as the most populous country, the country of the (dangerous) masses, and a megalopolis like Tokyo also invokes the image of masses of human beings. Mass psychology was very much in vogue, not only because of Nietzsche's dichotomy of elites and masses, but also as a new area of research beginning with Gustave Le Bon. It is clear that, in spite of the title of Döblin's book, the masses are the real hero of the text.

For most of the critics, Döblin was a new author, as many of them had overlooked his collection of short stories of 1913, *Die Ermordung einer Butterblume*. While the war year 1915 did not seem favorable for a novel on eighteenth-century China, major critics took notice of a new voice on the German literary scene. Beyond the expected diversity of views, they agreed on these points: Döblin's representation of China was "echt," authentic, even if it was purely imaginary. Döblin convinced through the power of his language. Döblin's text, although uneven and of unnecessary length, was great literature. Ludwig Rubiner began his 1917 review in *Zeit-Echo* with the sentence: "Das Buch des bisher unbekanntenen Döblin gehört zur Weltliteratur" (Sch 38).¹ Some critics had noticed that Döblin was a doctor in a military hospital at the time of the publication and recognized the significance of his profession for the book. In 1916, Döblin received the Fontane Prize for this novel, and critics mentioned this fact, sometimes despairingly (*Tägliche Rundschau*, 23 August 1916, Sch 18–19).

Remarkably, all critics, even those who doubted the accuracy of Döblin's facts, agreed on the authenticity of Döblin's eighteenth-century China. Wolf von Dewall considers it a collection of Chinese peculiarities (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, 1 August 1916; Sch 21), and Lion Feuchtwanger sees Eastern feeling and thought, forced into a rounded Western form (*Schaubühne*, 12 November 1916; Sch 23). He adds that "eine neue ungeahnte Welt ist da, Menschen und Dinge stehen da, ungeheuer fremd und seltsam, aber sie sind da." E. Pernerstorfer, writing in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, even poses the question whether the novel is a translation from the Chinese or an imitation of a Chinese original? (27 November 1916, Sch 25). Kasimir Edschmid, however, relativizes the point: "China ist nur Materie, Stoff, Andeutung. Das Buch erfüllt sich nicht darin" (*Masken* 12, 1916/17; Sch 28). Günter Mürr underlines that the Chinese element in the novel is not make-up or perfume, but its natural

form (*Hamburger Correspondent*, 24 June 1917; Sch 35). Writing later, in 1922, Otto Jensen defines it as Döblin's "großer chinesischer Kulturroman" (*Freiheit*, 19 March 1922; Sch 46).

Döblin describes the masses, but the text of his epic is also massive. Kurt Glaser, writing in *Das literarische Echo*, thinks that the novel rises to the level of a truly great epic in its portrayal of monstrously flooding masses of humanity (18, 1915/16; Sch 18). Otto Jensen observes a mutual effect between the masses and the individual (Sch 47).

Critics noticed analogies with new forms in the visual arts. For instance, Kasimir Edschmid finds that the fundamental artistic problem for Döblin is that of cubism, and that he pares his sentences accordingly (28). For Karl Korn futuristic-cubist technique and expressionistic psychology dominate the novel (*Die Glocke*, 1917; Sch 30). Alfred Lemm sees the impact of Expressionism, writing that "Der vielverleumdete Expressionismus hat als unschätzbar Gutes die Voranstellung des gestaltenden Willens zum Nachteil des gestalteten Stoffes gebracht" (*Die Weißen Blätter* 4,1, 1917; Sch 32). Camill Hoffmann sees the book as inspired through art, which he sees as its source, adding that "Die Metaphysik der Farben birgt sich hinter den Bezauberungen durch Exotik" (*Das Kunstblatt* 2, 1918; Sch 42, 44).

With this high praise, the critics also pointed out some weaknesses that would become a standard in the criticism of Döblin's texts. Adolf Behne dislikes the "elegiac speeches" at the end (*Die Aktion* 6, 1916; Sch 19), Wolf von Dewall the "metaphysical meditations" (23). He also suggests that the book should have been shorter. Alfred Lemm takes this one step further: he considers the abundance of detail arbitrary, and thus says that *Wang-lun* is an important, but unfortunately not a compelling book (32). As a first messenger of strictly ideological critique, the *Posener Neueste Nachrichten* of 12 September 1917 believes that the religious currents represented here stem from lack of faith and may therefore not be welcomed by every reader (Sch 38). A satirical poem by Karl Otten about *Wang-lun* appeared in *Die Aktion*, culminating in the verses "wie ist dir der vierte gelungen / Der Sprung in die Lächerlichkeit" (8, 1918; Sch 44): the opinion being that Döblin had made the fourth leap — from the sublime into the ridiculous.

However, a remarkable chorus of critics praised the book as a major event in German letters. Adolf Behne expected a masterpiece from Döblin following on this great novel. Edschmid pronounces *Wang-lun* "ein dichterisches Buch" (28). Julius Levin, writing in the *Vossische Zeitung*, says that the novel, viewed as a test of talent, is one of the most convincing of the decade (33). For Ludwig Rubiner the novel belongs

to world literature, and he adds: “Döblins Buch ist die vollkommenste Romanschöpfung, wirkliche Schöpfung, die in deutscher Sprache seit dem Tod der großen Dichter geschrieben wurde. Döblins Buch ist eines der vollendeten Sprachkunstwerke, die die deutsche Literatur besitzt” (38). For Otto Jensen the book is not just a novel, but like every great work of art it is also a picture of a time (“ein Zeitbild”) (47).

The critic Karl Korn describes vividly his battle with *Wang-lun*. First he finds it impossible to read, but then he succumbs to its fascination, which he compares to the effects of modern paintings: “Von ähnlichen Wirkungen einer künstlerischen Attacke berichten ja die Gläubigen der kubistischen und expressionistischen Malerei” (29). “Attacke” is a telling word: Döblin attacks the reader with his prose and forces him or her into the narrator’s dynamic. And from this point on readers would either engage with and follow his “attacks” or choose not to do so.

Wadzeks Kampf mit der Dampfturbine

Döblin followed *Wang-lun* with his first Berlin novel, *Wadzeks Kampf mit der Dampfturbine*, 1918, a book characterized by grotesque humor and a wild imagination paired with apparent realism. The expectations of readers and critics at the time were disappointed and subsequent generations have never warmed up to this tale. The appearance of the grotesque as the prevailing mood would repeatedly recur in Döblin’s texts, especially in the first novel of his exile period, *Babylonische Wandlung*, and it did not necessarily endear them to critics and readers.

The strongest blast against *Wadzek* came from one M. B., who wrote in the *Zeitschrift für Bücherfreunde* of 1918/19 that “Unsere Großstädte überkommt es von Zeit zu Zeit, daß sie sich vor der staunenden Provinz der Gase in ihrem Innern hörbar zu entledigen wünschen; sie erzeugen einen Schriftsteller, der diesem Unterleiblichen zur entsprechenden Kunstform verhilft” (Sch 58). In short: Döblin has turned a fart into a novel; *Wadzek* is bad-smelling hot air. But the book also had its strong defenders, all of whom agreed on the term grotesque as a descriptor. According to Hans-Georg Richter, Döblin had written a “humoristic-satirical” novel that was at the same time a “grotesque-cubistic” work (*Leipziger Tageblatt*, 8 December 1918; Sch 55). But Oskar Maria Graf finds “eine bis zur grotesken Verzerrung ausgerenkte Ironie” (*München-Augsburger Abendzeitung*, 25 August 1918, Sch 53). Kl., in *Geschichtsblätter für Technik, Industrie und Gewerbe* (6, 1919) observes that Döblin attempts unsuccessfully to copy the style of modern Expressionists like Edschmid and Sternheim (Sch 60).

It had to be expected that the new novel would be compared to *Wang-lun*. The anonymous reviewer in Berlin's *Die Post* starts by referring to *Wang-lun*, which he ranks among the strongest literary accomplishments of recent times (9 August 1918; Sch 52). In *Wadzek* he praises a masterful imagination that risks bold images and scenes (52). However, he detects "dangers" for Döblin, writing that the shortcomings of the work give an impression of overheatedness, deliberate exaggeratedness (52). Another anonymous critic, in *Die Neue Zeit*, admits that "the modern art of expression celebrates a triumph here" (20 September 1918; Sch 53). But the same critic then turns his praise on end, saying that when the reader comes to the book's end he thanks God and wishes never to read such a book again. Karl von Perfall, writing in the *Kölnische Zeitung*, remarks that *Wang-lun* had caused a sensation, and justifiably so ("berechtigtes Aufsehen," 25 August 1918; Sch 54). He has doubts about *Wadzek*, though it has a different, clearer power behind it than do the overexcited mindgames ("überreizte Gehirnspiele") of writers of the most modern school (54). Returning to Hans-Georg Richter's review in the *Leipziger Tageblatt*, he talks about a deficiency in the novel's character ("Mangel seines Wesens," 55), whereas Franz Herwig, writing in *Hochland*, says that if Döblin had told the same story in a simple manner it might have become a good novel (16, 1918/19; Sch 58). The review in the *Geschichtsblätter* speaks of platitudes and notes that the plot goes nowhere ("verläuft im Sande," 61). One critic, Hanns Johst, writing in *Die neue Rundschau*, turns this seeming weakness of plot into a strength, stating that the fragment is the essence of true German art ("das Wesen der wahrhaften deutschen Kunst ist das Fragment," 30, 1919; Sch 59) and Döblin's work is shockingly fragmentary ("erschütternd fragmentarisch," 59). However, he sees it as an inherent danger that the achievement of Döblin's personal argument with the world will stiffen into mania (60). In a more general sense, the critics saw the danger of Döblin's style becoming manneristic and repetitive, the author becoming the prisoner of his own language. It is an ironic twist to note that Johst, who called Döblin a true German writer, was prominent among those who burned his books in 1933.

The Crisis of German History: Coping with the First World War

In 1914, Döblin was swept along in the general outbreak of fervent patriotism and the optimism about the short duration of the war. Later, his perspective changed dramatically, not least because of his experiences as a doctor in military hospitals in Alsace-Lorraine. After the war had

been lost, having ended with a bad armistice and a peace treaty that was even worse, Döbblin was ready for a radical new beginning. He joined the USPD (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands), the “independent” left wing of the Social Democrats, and he wrote political commentaries under the pseudonym of “Linke Poot,” or “left hand” in Berliner slang. He was disappointed by the Weimar Republic and its compromises that allowed right-wing groups to flourish and eventually opened the door for National Socialism. Preceding this intense involvement in politics, Döbblin had written a historical novel during the later parts of the war. It dealt with the deepest crisis of German history before the twentieth century, the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), and Döbblin gave it the title *Wallenstein*, after the most notorious and successful of the war’s generals, assassinated in 1634. The modern image of Wallenstein in Germany had been largely determined by Friedrich Schiller’s dramatic trilogy *Wallenstein*, but shortly before Döbblin, the author and historian Ricarda Huch had published her three-volume work on the subject, *Der große Krieg in Deutschland* (1912–14). Döbblin’s *Wallenstein* appeared in 1920 in two volumes. While Wallenstein is one of the central figures in the text, Döbblin’s primary focus is on the devastating effect of the war on all people; on violence, destruction, and the efforts to find a way out of the vicious circle of violence begetting violence.

Critics were faced with the massiveness of the tale, the overabundance of facts and details, and, generally, a totally new variety of a hitherto despised genre, the historical novel. They also had to acknowledge that *Wallenstein* was indeed, for better or worse, a major work by an author who had established his reputation on the literary scene and among the avant-garde, if not with the public at large.

The Historical Novel in Germany

The development of the historical novel in Germany during the nineteenth century had been intertwined with the rise of German nationalism and struggle for the restoration of a true German Reich. The historical novel had established itself as a popular genre for a national audience, dealing primarily with German or Germanic history. With the overwhelming influence of the Scottish novelist Walter Scott (1771–1832) on form and style, German authors dealt with the overriding issue of German unification. While earlier historical novels chose regional themes, such as the very popular eight “Vaterländische Romane” by Willibald Alexis, which appeared during the period 1830–50 and treated the history of Brandenburg-Prussia from the Middle Ages to the present, the novels and *romans fleuves* after 1871 stressed the commonality of all

Germans. This was especially true of *Die Abnen* by Gustav Freytag (1816–95), which appeared in six volumes between 1872 and 1881 and was the outstanding work of the genre, but also, albeit indirectly, of the immensely popular four-volume *Ein Kampf um Rom* (1876–78) by Felix Dahn (1834–1912), which tells the story of the tragic end of the Ostrogoths in Italy. Both Freytag and Dahn were professors and popular writers. Freytag had preceded his novel with his historical work, *Bilder aus deutscher Vergangenheit* (1859–67, 5 volumes), and also wrote the novel *Soll und Haben* (1855, 3 volumes), which is still read, but is most controversial because of its negative portrayal of Jews.

The genre of the historical novel in Germany was therefore determined by particular political and nationalistic ideologies, especially German nationalism. It tended to cater to popular tastes in a manner similar to that of historical movies. Other historical novels and novellas, although popular, had impressed themselves much less on the collective mind of the nation: the works of the Swiss writer Conrad Ferdinand Meyer come to mind, specifically his novel *Jörg Jenatsch* (1878), Theodor Fontane's *Vor dem Sturm* (1878), Luise von François's *Die letzte Reckenburgerin* (1871), and Victor von Scheffel's *Ekkehard* (1855). There were also other foreign models of different kinds: Tolstoi's grand epic *War and Peace*, Flaubert's exotic tale *Salammbó*, de Coster's *Thyl Ulenspiegel*, novels by Victor Hugo, Scandinavian tales, to name a few. But any German writer portraying the past had to contend with the long shadows of Gustav Freytag and Felix Dahn.

Wallenstein and the Overwhelmed Critics

The two volumes of *Wallenstein* were a hard test for the patience of the critics in those turbulent and fast-paced years. It was not easy to get a handle on this monstrous volume of eruptive language. The critics groped for comparisons. Ricarda Huch's *Der große Krieg* came to mind, as did Flaubert's *Salammbó*, and then, inevitably, Schiller's *Wallenstein* and Leopold von Ranke's *Geschichte Wallensteins*; even Heinrich Mann's *Die Herzogin von Assy* and Hermann Löns's *Der Wehrwolf* were mentioned. Lion Feuchtwanger spoke of Döblin as the "Homer of the Thirty Years' War" (*Die Weltbühne*, 1921, Sch 95).

Many critics complained about the efforts they had to make to read the book. Victor Klages, writing in Bremen's *Weser-Zeitung* on 27 November 1920, moans: "O, es gibt Bücher, von deren Wert man überzeugt ist, die aber dennoch keiner bezwingen kann ohne Stöhnen und kalten Schweißerguß. Philosophische Bücher? Auch Romane!" (Sch 81) Friedrich Burschell, writing in *Der Neue Merkur*, puts it more bluntly,

stating that “Döblin ist ein irritierender Mann.” Lion Feuchtwanger, an admirer, admits: “Sie sind ein schwerer großer Brocken, zäh und saftig, an dem man lange zu kauen hat, und den man doch nicht aus den Zähnen lassen mag” (93). And he asks, with good reason, who at this time would have the nerves for this work, which he considers to be as demanding as it is profitable for the reader (“so voll von Anspruch wie von Verdienst,” 95–96). Gregor Knipperdolling, writing in *Die Glocke* in 1921, sums it up: “Er macht es dem Leser nicht leicht” (105): this is not a reader-friendly book.

The critics often used two attributes to classify Döblin. The first is “baroque”: “Seine Schreibweise ist nun allerdings sehr barock” (Kasimir Edschmid, Sch 92); “Döblin ist Barockkünstler”(Otto Ernst Hesse, *Der Tag*, September 1921, Sch 102); it is no accident that he wants to express the spirit of the Baroque age. But “baroque” was a dubious compliment, as is shown by Hesse’s explanation of what he sees as baroque in Döblin’s text: “Seine Menschen gehen nicht richtig, sie springen, schleichen, torkeln, stolpern; sie reden nicht, sie krächzen, lispeln, schnarren, brüllen; sie atmen nicht, sie keuchen, husten, röcheln speien; sie essen nicht, sie fressen, schlingen, gurgeln, rülpsen” (102). Döblin’s characters don’t just walk, speak, breathe, and eat; rather, their actions are most often described in more exaggerated terms: they jump, creep, stagger, and stumble; they croak, whisper, rasp, and bellow; they pant, cough, rattle, and spit; they devour, gulp, gurgle, and belch.

The second attribute critics applied to Döblin, one related to that of “baroque,” is “grotesque.” *Wallenstein* reinforced the views the critics had gained from *Wang-lun* and *Wadzek*. Karl von Perfall describes what Döblin does this way: “Döblin macht nämlich aus Wallenstein und anderen Gestalten seiner Zeit ein Riesengemälde ganz grotesken Charakters, so daß wir einen bunten Maskenzug spukhaft verzerrter Erscheinungen an uns vorüberziehen sehen, untermischt von Bildern des Grauens” (*Kölnische Zeitung*, 5 December 1920, Sch 83). For Friedrich Burschell this uncanny, carnevalesque “Maskenzug” is the predominant impression of Döblin’s grand narrative: “In diesem Wallenstein geht es auch wirklich toll zu” (Sch 85). Döblin’s images are confusing due to their colorfulness and harshness (“Buntheit und Grellheit”) according to Hans Friedeberger (Sch 87). For Franz Blei, Döblin has transformed the monstrous panorama of the war into a chaos of boiling steel (*Das Tagebuch*, 1920, Sch 90). Kasimir Edschmid, however, sees only fragmentation and not a whole picture: it is so hacked-up that instead of sirloin steaks one gets a huge portion of hamburger (Sch 92). And he reproaches Döblin for “Unkonzentriertheit” (93). Moritz Goldstein, an

old acquaintance from Döblin's Gymnasium days, expresses a fundamental criticism when he writes "Grotesken schreiben immer Leute, die nicht gestalten können": grotesques are always written by those who cannot create (*Vossische Zeitung*, 13 November 1921, Sch 100). But he admits that the grotesque is carried out masterfully: "Wie ist das gekonnt!" But Otto Ernst Hesse sees the other side of this artistic mastery, saying that Döblin's artisticness is oppressive, and the artist himself gloomy, dismal (102). The reviewer in the *Kölner Tageblatt* of 10 February 1921 considers the grotesque limiting, and misses the liberating voice of humor in this horrible phantasmagoria (107).

With all these reservations, most critics were overwhelmed by the achievement and considered that *Wallenstein* fulfilled the promise of *Wang-lun*. For instance, Otto Ernst Hesse wrote that *Wallenstein* represented a giant leap forward after what he saw as the small jumps of *Wang-lun* and *Der schwarze Vorhang* (102). Friedrich Burschell describes the progression from *Wang-lun* to *Wallenstein*:

Als man "die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun" gelesen hatte, wußte man, daß hier der bedeutendste Romanschreiber der heutigen Deutschland sich ankündigt. Er besaß etwas, das abhanden gekommen zu sein schien, Phantasie, Spieltrieb, und dies in reichster, aufschließender Kraft zentralen mystischen Problemen zugewendet. Sein zweites großes Buch enttäuschte darum um so mehr. Es war in einem unmöglichen gehetzten Tempo geschrieben, die Menschen und Ereignisse waren äußerst belanglos, es war quälend, sich durch tausend Zerfaserungen hindurchzukauen. Der *Wallenstein* hat diese Scharte wieder ausgewetzt. Es ist unleugbar, daß Döblin Distanz braucht. (84)

Not all critics were of such a positive opinion, however: Victor Klages exclaims: "Wohin ist dieser Mann geraten, der so prachtvoll mit dem "Wang-lun" begann?" (Sch 81). But for Hesse, Burschell, and others, Döblin had rehabilitated himself. This became something like a pattern of Döblin criticism: the critics who were won over by one work were disappointed with the next, but appreciated later ones. *Wadzek* in particular had not been well received, and it is evident that *Wallenstein* confirmed Döblin's status and convinced critics that *Wang-lun* had not been a one-time affair.

All critics agreed that *Wallenstein* was one of the most unusual works of the time. Karl von Perfall calls it one of the most notable ("denkwürdigsten") books, one that provided new illumination of Döblin's intellectual character (Sch 84). Friedrich Burschell defines it as an exceptional achievement, which however must not be taken without criticism ("Wi-

derspruch”) (Sch 84). Lion Feuchtwanger writes that “Wallenstein ist etwas durchaus Neues, Andres, Abwegiges,” meaning this in a positive sense (Sch 93). Hans Friedeberger calls it “ein Werk von so starker und bezwingender Wahrheit, daß es im deutschen Schrifttum einen hohen Rang behaupten wird” (Sch 96). Otto Ernst Hesse considers it a unique work that even attained the level of world literature (Sch 103). Otto Zarek, who considered it the decisive task of the novelist to bring into words the experience of time, argues that this is precisely what *Wallenstein* does: “diese Leistung ... bedeutet ... *Wallenstein*” (108).

Wallenstein was an “epic” and not a “novel”; Döblin’s rejection of the psychological novel and his idea of a new “epic” is reflected by the critics who agree or disagree with the direction the genre of the novel is taking. At the same time, the problematic label of “historical novel” is mentioned only to say that it does not fit. Karl von Perfall indicates that Döblin’s work does not fit the labels when he admits that it is problematic in literary terms, but full of imagination and originality, and a proof of extraordinary craftsmanship (Sch 83–84). Friedrich Burschell sees a fatal indecisiveness between novel and “Legende”: one cannot serve two masters at once; one has to decide between the narration of history and the elucidation of its meaning (Sch 86). This statement indicates the ideological standpoint of a reviewer who judges a literary work by its religious message. Franz Blei focuses on the genre problem, saying that perhaps the word “novel” does not fit: “Vielleicht paßt das Wort Roman, wie man es braucht, auf dieses Werk nicht. Vielleicht besser das Wort Epopöe, wenn ich mir für dieses Wort ein Werk denke, das weitesten Horizont oben und unten umspannend eine Diktion hat, voll von heißem Atem eines erregt Sprechenden” (Sch 90). Willy Cohn, however, feels lost in the superabundance of details; the text has many good qualities and shows what the author tried to accomplish, yet the end result is that one can’t forget the author, who hovers above the material, and the manneristic nature of the language is at times unbearable (Sch 91). Lion Feuchtwanger praises the epic flow but stresses that the two volumes are not a novel, and certainly not a historical novel (Sch 93). He likens *Wallenstein* to an old Indian epic, saying that the book is the first German epic in a very long time. Döblin is the “Homer of the Thirty Years’ War” (Sch 94–95). This is countered by Moritz Goldstein’s personalizing statement: “Ein schwer Kurzsichtiger, der die Objekte ganz dicht an die Augen bringen muß, hat ein Kolossalgemälde für Kurzsichtige zustande gebracht” (100). Döblin is near-sighted, myopic (as he was in real life), and his painting is made for people like him. Lulu von Strauss und