

Fatality

Character as Fate

§1

The Tragic Struggle for Freedom

Berlin Alexanderplatz, Alfred Döblin's novel relating the story of Franz Biberkopf, is a philosophically thought-provoking narrative about character and fate.¹ It was published in 1929 in Berlin as the Weimar Republic was crumbling. This was a time of great social, political and economic turmoil, agitation and unrest, and it was during this time that National Socialism, proclaiming its commitment to biological and cultural racism, and already encouraging intimidating brutality, began its rise to power. And it was around the same time that, in the south-German university town of Freiburg, nestled in the romanticism of the Schwarzwald, Martin Heidegger was arguing in a lecture course that there is an abyssal metaphysical difference between the human and the lower animal.² Döblin's great novel, composed in the coldly observant style of "Neue Sachlichkeit" realism, but with features drawn from surrealism, German expressionism, and modernism, is a montage of scenes drawn from the brutal, quotidian life of Berlin's criminal underworld, where it is difficult to discern that metaphysical difference.³ Also at that same time, the painter Georg Grosz was showing us the Berlin of a crude, corrupt, and degenerate bourgeoisie: a different social class, but the same underlying malaise.

In this chapter, we will reflect on how, in the unfolding of Döblin's story, character and fate get involved with one another, as if there were some tragic inner necessity at work. What makes the present study different from other studies on this novel is that fate will be interpreted as an expression and effect of the causality of language, a language that has been damaged from without and corrupted from within. In Döblin's narrative twist,

language finds itself possessed by the force of causality—a causality named Fate. In effect, his novel stages a struggle unto death—a struggle taking place within language—between language serving the causality of freedom, with its promise of happiness, and language serving the causality of Fate, with its pitiless sentences of judgment. In an unnerving, uncanny prosopopoeia, language has itself been turned into a character in the unfolding of the story—turned into the character whose name and causality is Fate. The claim for which I will argue, then, is that the story of Franz Biberkopf is illuminated in a singularly significant way when read as taking its readers into the course of his daily struggle for survival against the overwhelming forces of destruction and death ruled over by Fate—a demonic Fate that, invested in the very form of language, in the language it has taken violent possession of, manipulates him at every turn. Having overcome language, Fate takes possession of the promise of happiness, deciding its future.

Our attention to language warrants the marking, here, of a difference in meaning between “Fate” and “Destiny,” words that I propose to take as translations of the corresponding German words “Schicksal” and “Geschick.” I want to say that the triumph of Fate (“Schicksal”) is the *negation* of freedom, the *impossibility* of freedom. But in its struggle against Fate, freedom shows its sublime moral quality. Thus, in contrast to Fate, Destiny (“Geschick”) *requires* freedom—is actually impossible without it. One might accordingly read Döblin’s novel as representing Biberkopf’s struggle to overcome the power of Fate and give the character of his life the meaning of Destiny.

In his groundbreaking work on *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács argued that, in modernity, the totality of human life succumbs to forces that appear as forces of nature, “from whose omnipotence only the innermost part of the soul is withheld.”⁴ In Franz’s repeated expressions of a desire to cease a life of crime and lead a good life, one can hear, I think, a damaged longing for redemption. That desire, that longing, is in a terrible struggle against the archaic forces of nature. More specifically, however, if what is at stake is Franz’s attempt to overcome the criminal character of his past and begin to lead an upright, respectable citizen’s life, what the novel—or rather its language—never ceases to show is that he must constantly, desperately struggle—since he is nothing, after all, but a fictional character created by the writer’s use of language—against the virtually overwhelming power of the causality of Fate that is expressed in, and by, this use of language. More lucidly than is conventional, more stripped of disguise, and with stronger, more insistent compulsion, words show themselves here as a force of moral significance—the persistently propelling, rhythmically compelling force of judgment or pronounced resolution that they always already are.

(In this regard, I think it could be argued that the strange causality which Döblin bestows on language in his novel has a certain precedent in the inevitability of Emma Bovary's death, which one might read as an effect of the "fatality" in Flaubert's style.)

Of course, language is not the only moral force operating in this epic story: character is another, and so are the circumstances, two pressures pulling in opposing moral directions. And although it is, I think, illuminating to describe the language in this novel as a moral force, it might be even more provocatively illuminating to think of it here as a hyperbolic metaphysical force, for even whilst it warns, admonishes, and even announces prophecies, it nevertheless operates duplicitously, without moral scruples of its own, neither urging virtue nor tempting to errancy, but rather acting, instead, like a wind in the sails, an overwhelmingly powerful one, that freely exaggerates and italicizes what Fate has in store for the contingent conjunction of character and circumstance, propelling the protagonist, a non-hero whose pathetic passivity, weakness, and inertia constantly prevail over good intentions, toward the resolution of his life in the story.

The claim I am making for my reading of the novel, therefore, is that Döblin has staged a conflict between an expressive language that seems actually to propel Franz toward self-destruction and a language of freedom and redemption that, at the very last moment, supposedly salvages him from this fate. The happy ending of the story will always be, I think, a surprise, because the character seems to be moved by the causality of Fate expressing itself in and as language, toward a wretched death. Ultimately, though, neither the words that press Franz toward the worst nor the words that are supposed to rescue him at the end constitute reality: they are all merely words in a fictional story. It is the author's *words*, coming as his character nears the fateful sentence we assume is reserved for him, that save him at last from the fate toward which language—nothing, really, but the author's words—seemed to be bearing him.

Döblin's numerous evocations of ancient Greek epics and tragedies in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* are not incidental, neither mere ornaments of his narrative nor desperate attempts to justify the operations of his language. In Greek tragedy, the spoken word—a curse, an insult—can be fatal, actually causing death. With this causality of the word before him as he undertook the translation of Sophocles, Hölderlin limned a distinction, in his supplementary "Remarks on Antigone," between language that is "factically deadly," "tödlichfaktisch," and language that is "factically deadening," slowly mortifying, "tödtendfaktisch."⁵ There will be fatal consequences—for both the speaker and the object of the speech—when one is tempted into "nefas," uttering the unspeakable, that against the utterance of which divine

law rules. When language becomes causality; it becomes not merely an expression or representation of Fate, but Fate itself, slowly and inexorably leading toward death.

Drawing on Kant's distinction between the mechanical causality of nature and the causality of freedom, causality through freedom ("Kausalität aus Freiheit"), and on Hegel's profound discussion of a "causality of Fate" ("Kausalität des Schicksals"), I will argue that Döblin throws his main character into the force field of a demonic causality of Fate, doing so by his uncanny use of language: principally repetitions, rhymes, and rhythms. The story that unfolds thus concerns an epic struggle within Biberkopf's character to overcome this causality of Fate by virtue of his actions in a transformed life. According to Kant, such a life would manifest the causality of freedom that all human beings, as such, should in principle be able to actualize, gifted as they are by nature supposed to be, with the transcendental capacity to determine their causality in the world solely by reference to the moral law—indeed, not only in obedience to the moral law, but out of a truly disinterested respect for it.⁶ Stated using terms from Kant's conceptual architectonic, I suggest that Döblin has cast his epic hero into a lifeworld in which the deck of cards is stacked against him; because, as partaking of traits distinctive of both the empirical causality of nature and the transcendental causality of freedom, without being reducible to either one, the epic figure's adversary, the prevailing social reality, masquerading as the causality of Fate, becomes an intangible, almost invincible linguistic force, an archaic linguistic survivor from the time of Greek tragedy, a haunting prosopopoeia manipulating Biberkopf's world from a dimension that appears to be outside it, subjecting him ceaselessly and mercilessly to prophecies, warnings, and challenges that probe his moral character. In truth, though, this causality of Fate, operating through language and becoming language, is not a mythic power but the cruel social reality that, having hammered Biberkopf into the shape of a criminal life, is now relentless in its determination to punish and thwart him.

If Döblin's narrative use of this archaic trope, this vestige of Greek tragedy seems far-fetched, one should recall the opening sentence of Marx's "Manifesto of the Communist Party," sentencing the old Europe to a glorious fate that will defeat it: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism."⁷ Marx's prophetic use of that word is neither whimsical nor ironic; as his critical diagnoses of capitalism show, there is a spectral logic, a kind of illusionism, at work in its organization of the economy. Of course, in Döblin's modernized epic, the fate that is haunting Biberkopf's Berlin is the rise to power of National Socialism, its demonic promise defeating Communism for the loyalty of the German worker. What is it that haunts Biberkopf?

§2

Outline of the Story

The plot of this story draws us into the struggle of a group of unfortunates to survive in the indifference of the modern city during the Weimar Republic.⁸ For the main character, it is a tale somehow binding guilt, misfortune, and atonement, according to an inner necessity that leaves the reader questioning the claimed redemption. Franz Biberkopf, having served time in prison for causing the death of his girlfriend, returns, as the novel opens, to Alexanderplatz, his familiar neighborhood. (He was sent to prison for striking her in a moment of uncontrollable jealousy and, without intention, causing her death.) Once out of prison, Franz, vows to become “anständig,” honest, upright, and respectable. In his terms, however, this means that he must avoid his friends of old, pimps and thieves and thugs, and somehow survive peddling whatever he can: “hanging out” on the street, he is selling not only small necessities—shoelaces, for example, but also pornography and even Nazi newspapers. At first, he succeeds in his intent to stay out of trouble. Soon however, this unceasingly harsh life takes its inevitable toll. Feeling disillusioned, desperate, and betrayed by a society that had failed in its promise, he falls back into his old habits, rejoining a gang of criminals, the denizens of the city’s darker realms, living outside the law. Despite his attempts to begin a new life, Fate sends him blow after blow: first, he is betrayed by a friend after causing the death of his girlfriend, Ida, next he is pushed out of a moving motorcar and badly injured as he and his gang are escaping from a failed robbery and finally, a jealous thug he befriended and trusted murders Mieke, his new girlfriend. Franz is arrested and sent, because of his mental state, to a psychiatric hospital where he is almost defeated in a struggle with death. But in this fight for his life, he is reported to have gained a measure of wisdom, confessing his violent ways, acknowledging his guilt, and realizing that he must shoulder some responsibilities for the good of the community he lives in. Eventually, having undergone a miraculous apocalyptic resurrection and rebirth, he is released from the ward and returns to the streets. This time, however, he supposedly returns to Alexanderplatz as a genuinely new man, having found the moral strength that was given him through all the adversity in his life-experiences. Having failed in his search for a happiness he could not define, he finally finds its portion, accepting the simple necessities of life, harming no one, earning his living as an assistant caretaker in a small, local factory.

In reading this surprising end to the story, we are meant to become witnesses to the rebirth of the human spirit: a transformed Franz Biberkopf is said to have found meaningful redemption in belonging productively

to the community, and the causality of Fate against which he struggled is declared to be finally defeated: in a story made of words, the language of salvation has triumphed; words favoring redemption and freedom have vanquished the language that, by its terror, served to express the causality of Fate. I, however, will dispute this triumph, this vanquishing of Fate, and will explain, in due course, why the author's claims cannot be sustained.

For the time being, though, it may be observed that, to some extent, the problem is a consequence of the miserable social conditions of the proletariat. Doubts about the triumph, consummating the epic story, of the causality of freedom cannot attribute all the blame to Biberkopf's deficiencies of character. The society into which Biberkopf finally settles after prison is already shadowed by the rising power of National Socialism, its cynical politics offering false hopes for an end to poverty, unemployment, and all the shameful conditions of a nation defeated in war. Soon the precarious Weimar experiment in democracy would be abruptly arrested; the freedom that had erupted in Expressionism and the rigorous art of critique and utopian vision that had found moral lucidity in a style of "Neue Sachlichkeit," would be brutally suppressed; and a strange, new language, a sinister language drawing power from distortions, euphemisms, and degrading epithets, that of the Nazis, would attempt to ignite ancient hatreds, glorify war, and ennoble sacrifices for the good of the nation. The language of free aesthetic expression that briefly flourished, the liberating language of uncompromised truth, would soon be forced into exile—or into an underground survival.

Addressing other writers in 1921, in the wake of Germany's defeat in the First World War, about the moral and political task of the writer in relation to the state, Döblin wrote:

In this time of incipient freedom movements [. . .] writers must maintain the strictest reliance upon themselves, knowing what a fine and dangerous instrument they possess in language. Even in peaceful times, writers have observed that there is something rather awkwardly self-willed contained in words: one believes oneself to be writing and is being written instead; writers must constantly be on guard to assert themselves in relation to language [. . .]. It is dangerous for writers to lose composure, to fail to master their instrument, and to subordinate themselves to suggestive images that are at home with bad, unclear words. And this defeat of the writer, this failure in the face of his own words, is now apparent a hundred times over. This defeat puts the writer on a level with the little man inspired to excess by speeches bellowed in the streets.⁹

Although he had great sympathy for the plight of the proletariat class, understanding the urgent need to reform Germany's political institutions, Döblin feared mob psychology and worried about the dangers in the politicization of the discontented masses.¹⁰ But as an artist, a writer, one who understood that the creative, self-expressive freedom of the individual must be secured, Döblin opposed the false individualism of bourgeois capitalism, the fragmentation and anomie destroying individual autonomy, as much as he opposed the tyranny of the masses. And without compromising the autonomy of his aesthetic principles, he created a language, a style of writing, which could, he felt, address the consciousness of his time, its "petrifakte Geistigkeit," in an enlightening way.¹¹ Although one can discern in this style, spare, austere, hard-edged, a physiognomy that is reminiscent of Kleist and Kafka and Musil, can recognize its resemblance to Joycean stream-of-consciousness, and can even read the story in relation to the traditional "Bildungsroman" in German literary history, noting of course its conscious departure from the assumptions and conventions of that genre, it is essential to recognize that Döblin forged a truly original style and form: an experiment that, drawing inspiration not only from recent innovations in surrealism, modernism, and German expressionism, but also from psychoanalysis and the sociology of his day, attempted to invent a new narrative form and forge a new, historically effective experience with language.¹²

§3

Döblin's Prologue

There is a brief prologue for Biberkopf's story, framing its allegorical significance, condensed enough to permit its complete reproduction, introducing the dimensions of the story and, at the same time, conveying something, despite its being a translation, of Döblin's deliberately plain, emotionally flat style, rigorously denied all expressive adornment:

This book reports the story of Franz Biberkopf, an erstwhile cement- and transport-worker in Berlin. He has just been discharged from prison, where he has been doing time because of former incidents, and is now back in Berlin determined to lead a decent life.

And, at first, he succeeds. But then, though things go economically well with him, he gets involved in a regular combat

with something that comes from the outside, with something unaccountable, that looks like fate.

Three times this thing crashes against our man, disturbing his scheme of life. It rushes at him with cheating and fraud. The man is able to scramble up again; he is still firm on his feet.

It drives and beats him with foul play. He finds it a bit hard to get up; they almost count him out.

Finally, it torpedoes him with huge and monstrous savagery.

Thus our good man, who has held his own till the end, is laid low. He gives the game up for lost; he does not know how to go on and appears to be done for.

But before he puts a definite end to himself, his eyes are forcibly opened in a way that I do not describe here. He is most distinctly given to understand how it all came about. Through himself, that's obvious, through his scheme of life, which looked like nothing on earth but now suddenly looks entirely different, not simple, almost self-evident, but prideful and impudent, cowardly withal, and full of weakness.

This awful thing that was his life acquires a meaning. Franz Biberkopf has been given a radical cure. At last we see our man back in Alexanderplatz, greatly changed and battered, but, nevertheless, bent straight again. [BA 11/1–2]

This summary, though embodied in an expressionless, flat, matter-of-fact prose, nevertheless has evoked, countering the metaphysical causality of Fate, a sequence of enigmatic events that are anything but ordinary: revelation, conversion, and redemption. The final sentence, however, assuming a moralist's tone, suddenly returns us to the struggles of everyday existence, life in the metropolis, compelling us, the readers, to hear a powerful plea for social justice, an argument, as it were, formulated in the starkest possible language of materialism:

To listen to this, and to meditate on it, will be of benefit to many who, like Franz Biberkopf, live in a human skin, and, like this Franz Biberkopf, ask more of life than a piece of bread and butter. [BA 11–12/1–2]

I believe that there is, in this seemingly cold-hearted account of Biberkopf's life, an account that permits itself no affection, no pity, no expressiveness, something I want to acknowledge as real sympathy: perhaps, in truth, the finest and most authentic, because of its uncompromising moral lucidity.

This lucidity is what will give Döblin's use of language its frightening allegorical force, appearing with the greatest compulsion in its rhymes and repetitions, its rhythmic drum beats, and the persistent, inescapable reverberations of its prophecies and warnings.¹³

§4

Biberkopf's Character: Its Nature and Social Construction

In his essay, "Looking Back on Surrealism," Adorno reflects on the expression and representation of freedom in works of art, observing that,

[t]he subject, freely controlling himself, free of all concern for the empirical world and having become absolute, exposes himself as lacking animation, virtually as dead in the face of a total reification that throws him back on himself and his protest. The dialectical images of surrealism are those of the dialectic of subjective freedom in a state of objective unfreedom. [. . .] It has been said that in Hegel's thesis the Enlightenment abolished itself by realizing itself; the cost of comprehending Surrealism is equally high—it must be understood not as a language of immediacy but as witness to abstract freedom's reversion to the supremacy of objects and thus to mere nature. The montages of Surrealism are the true still lives. In making compositions out of what is out of date, they create *nature morte*. [. . .] If today, however, surrealism seems itself to be obsolete, it is because people already deny themselves that consciousness of denial that is sustained in the negativity of surrealism.¹⁴

Although Döblin's novel is a work of montage, it is not a work belonging to surrealism; nor can its principal character, Franz Biberkopf, be credited with the heroic, if futile gestures of freedom which surrealism prizes. However, the novel does "expose" Biberkopf to a hostile world of reification that throws him back on himself and reveals itself dialectically, through the "blows" that repeatedly defeat his gestures of subjective freedom, in all its objective unfreedom. Moreover, as I shall argue, the language of the novel does show Biberkopf in a way that effectively makes us helpless witnesses to the "reversion of abstract freedom to the supremacy of objects and thus to mere nature." As Döblin's "prologue" to the fourth chapter says, Biberkopf's gestures are futile; instead of manifesting his

freedom, they only imprison him more securely in the Fate that language is already preparing for him:

Here you are going to see our man boozing, almost giving himself up for lost. But it wasn't so bad after all [*noch nicht so hart*]. Franz Biberkopf is being spared for a harder fall [*für schlimmere Dinge aufbewahrt*]. [BA 121/92]

He is compelled, here, not only by *what* is said but also, in an uncanny way, by the very *rhythming* of the language. And it is in this chapter that Biberkopf's walking is described, as we noted earlier, with word-iterations assigning it a mechanical rhythm: "Right foot, left foot. . . ." In the "prologue" to the fifth chapter, Döblin sets in motion a contradiction: the very same words that ascribe a certain "freedom" to Biberkopf immediately take it away from him with their rhythm and their rhyming, enacting the causality of Fate:

A quick recovery, our man stands again where he stood before, he has not understood anything nor learned anything more. Now the first heavy blow falls on him. He is dragged into a criminal case, it's against his will, he defends himself, but the issue he must face.

Fiercely and bravely, with hand and foot, he tries to win the race, but it's no use, he's beaten, the issue he must face. [*Er wehrt sich tapfer und wild mit Händen und Füßen, aber es hilft nichts, es geht über ihn, er muß müssen.*] [BA 163/128]

The language we read here enacts and accomplishes exactly what it describes or predicts.

In a perceptive study of Döblin's novel, Gabriele Sander summarizes and then comments on the author's characterization of Biberkopf as "anständig" and "gutwillig," "von Natur aus gut":

The protagonist is cast as a man who is good-natured and naïve, but also compulsive and susceptible to excesses of violence and alcohol, a man who, because of his psychic as well as his political and ideological instability, cannot manage to realize his good intentions and establish a middle-class existence. He now experiences the urban reality from which he has been cut off for four years as an alarming pandemonium, as a chaotic, hostile place, which he believes he must counter with the attitude of a warring conqueror. He refuses the assistance offered from vari-

ous sides, believing only in his own strength. [. . .] Biberkopf's lack of human insight prevents the development of friendships and leads to repeated disappointment. [. . .] After Biberkopf has tried several occupations and, lacking perseverance, suffered several setbacks, he becomes an alcoholic and ends up in criminal circles.¹⁵

Since even his intentions, however admirable their goal, are so weak that they fail to overcome contrary impulses and inclinations, it is difficult for me to accept the benevolence and generosity of the author's characterization: considering the life that Biberkopf lives, these favorable descriptions are perplexing, if not to be taken as ironic. To be sure, I do not want to ontologize the nature of character, reducing Biberkopf to a criminal essence; nor do I want to legitimate an abyssal difference between the criminal world and the world of the bourgeoisie, for there is an uncomfortable truth in Adorno's claim that these two worlds are like mirrors of one another.¹⁶ Nevertheless, one cannot, and must not, overlook or excuse his brutality, the violence of his jealousy, and his weakness of will, his always being willing to take the easiest course, regardless of its ethical merit. Even though Döblin has characterized Biberkopf as "good-willed," he has also described him as a "rough, uncouth man of repulsive aspect" [BA 45/29].¹⁷

In this novel, possibly the boldest, most innovative, most thought-provoking literary work published in Germany during the tenure of the Weimar Republic, the life of its main character gives Döblin the opportunity to explore the ways in which, as Peter Jelavich phrases it, "thought and action are shaped but also confused by a variety of competing and often contradictory messages, [. . .] relayed to the individual through the mass media—newspapers, journals, posters, the phonograph, radio and cinema."¹⁸ Biberkopf returns to the life of a city in which he finds himself overwhelmed and confused, buffeted by all these messages, tossed around in the same way that, in the winds of a hurricane, the loose pages of newspapers are tossed around. He is captivated by fantasies of bourgeois respectability, seduced by easy criminality, and responsive equally and almost simultaneously to the revolutionary language of communism and the violently arousing language of fascism. Michael Baum justly describes him as like a marionette.¹⁹ He might also be characterized, borrowing Robert Musil's definite description, as exemplifying "der Mann ohne Eigenschaften": a man without reflectively formed judgments of his own, a man whose qualities are nothing but the reflections of others, hence a man without his own character.

In his book on Döblin's novel, Michael Baum concentrates on Döblin's narrative constructions and "semiotic structures," his ways of using

language to reveal Biberkopf's character. He calls attention, for example, to a passage in which the repeated use of "es" brings out Biberkopf's passivity. The following passage appears in a section bearing the ironic title, "Franz ist ein Mann von Format, er weiß, was er sich schuldig ist," translated by Eugene Jolas as "Franz is a Man of Form, he knows what he owes to himself":

[. . .] *Plötzlich brüllt er auch, was ist in ihm aufgegangen, und sprudelt nur so, es hat ihn losgelassen, ein Blutstrom flinkert durch seine Augen: "Verbrecher ihr, Kerle, ihr wißt ja nicht, was ihr tut, euch muß man die Raupen aus dem Kopf hauen, ihr ruiniert die ganze Welt, paßt auf, daß ihr nicht was erlebt, Blutvergießer, Schufte."*

*Es sprudelt in ihm, er hat in Tegel gegessen, das Leben ist schrecklich, was ist das für ein Leben, der im Lied weiß es, wie ist es mir gegangen, Ida, nicht dran denken.*²⁰

The English translation, though in many instances admirable, indeed sometimes incomparable, does not convey in the same way here, that is, by way of grammar, the passivity that is suggested by the German words:

[. . .] Suddenly he begins to shout, what's come over him, something bubbles up in him, something's being released, his eyes become bloodshot: "You criminals, you, you lousy fools, why, you don't know what you're doing, somebody has got to beat the hell out of you, you ruin the whole world, just watch out you don't get into trouble, you blood-spillers, you crooks, you."

He is bubbling over, he's done time in Tegel, life is awful, what kind of a life is this, the fellow who wrote that song is right, I mustn't think about what happened to me, Ida.

One should notice that the cause, signified twice by the word "something," is thereby indicated in the most vague terms, so that, as Baum argues, what is moving Biberkopf is represented as an unfathomable external force, a powerful natural or supernatural causality, and not an inner, reflectively developed motive cause.²¹ Döblin's grammar here denies Biberkopf subjectivity and individuality: it turns him into a puppet of Fate.

Biberkopf's character, his way of experiencing the world, and his relations with others are revealed not only in the language used to describe him but also in his own use of language. His own use likewise reveals his passivity. But when he says, referring to his time in prison, "They knocked hell out of me," his words in German betray more than mere passivity;

they show that he experiences himself as an object manipulated by Fate. “Mir haben sie verplempert” expresses his fatalism both in the words and in the very grammar of his phrasing. Although he cannot imagine another way of interpreting his experience, he nevertheless senses with audible pain that this fatalism denies him his humanity: “I ain’t a human being any more” [BA 36/22]. But to a considerable extent, he capitulates instead of resisting the adversity of his circumstances. Those circumstances are, to be sure, overwhelming in their hostility. Moreover, as Otto Keller has pointed out, in the Berlin underworld to which he returns, there is no authentic communication with others that would encourage his struggle for self-knowledge and moral lucidity.²² His frequently incorrect grammar, his parataxis and explosive, staccato-like speech, sentences either disjointed or connected without logical or grammatical order, are telling expressions of his disorientation, his confusion, and the turbulence and fragmentation of his experience. They bespeak a man not in control of his life, not in control of his words. But, as some scholars have noted, the way he talks, both to others and to himself, tells us not only about him, about his character and state of mind; it also reflects the violence, the shocks, and all the unresolved contradictions that prevailed in his urban, working class lifeworld: a world that was out of joint.²³

Taking a break from peddling racist, pro-Nordic newspapers on the street, the only way he could think of to make a little money, Biberkopf goes to a café, the “Kneipe” in the Elsasser Straße, with “his [Nazi] arm-band discreetly tucked in his pocket” [BA 83/59]. Very soon, however, knowing the Communist sympathies of some of the other customers, he is shouting wildly, and his agitated state is creating a disturbing atmosphere in the bar:

And he goes on shouting with a feeling of horror, what’s going to happen there, he wards it off, he steps on it, he must bellow, bellow it down. The café roars, Henschke [the proprietor] stands before him at the table, dares not come near him, standing there like that with that roaring coming out of his throat all topsy-turvy and foaming: “And none of you’s got anything to say to me, not one of you can tell me anything, not a single one of you, we all know better than that, we didn’t go to the front and lie in the trenches [*Graben*] for this, so you could bait me, you agitators, we’ve gotta have order, order, I’m telling you, order—and put that in your pipes and smoke it, order and nothing else” (yes, that’s it, here we are, that’s just it), “and if anybody comes and starts a revolution now and don’t give us order, they ought to be strung up all along the street” (black

poles, telegraph poles, a whole row on the Tegel Road, I know all about that) “then they’ll get theirs [*dann werden die dran glauben*], when they swing, yes, sir. You might remember [*Dann könnt ihr es euch merken*] that whatever you do, you criminals.” (Yes, then we’ll have order, then they’ll be quiet, that’s the only thing to do, we’ll find that out.) [BA 94/70]

This passage shows the extent of Franz’s confusion, the disorder of his mind in the shifts from “mir” to “wir,” “ihr” to “sie”: shifts, that is, from “I” and “me” to “we” and “us,” and from “you” to “they.” Is it any wonder that he fell for the Nazi program, promising a new society, a new nation, of law and order?

As we know from the *Book of Genesis*, to bestow a name on something is to assert power over it—creative power or possessive power. But Franz Biberkopf—“Ziberkopf, Niberkopf, Zieberkopf”—has got no real name, no authentically individuated identity [BA 335/275]. Even “Biberkopf,” the surname that Döblin assigns him, reduces him, denying him an individual biography, casting him into an externally imposed relation to the world. Thus, as we come to the very end of the story, we find our man in the detention ward of Buch Insane Asylum. Here, Biberkopf’s name is turned for a second time into a mocking, menacing question about his identity, his character or nature; and the hostile name-calling is preceded by words that not only *name* violent, threatening sounds, but themselves actually produce those sounds, rhyming and resounding with a threatening violence:

Boom, crash, zoom, crash, boom, a battering ram, zoom, a hammering at the door. Bashing and crashing, crackling and smashing. [*Wumm Schlag, wumm Schlag, wumm Sturmbock, wumm Torschlag. Wuchten und Rammen, Krachen und Schwingen.*] Who is this lying fool, Franz Biberkopf, this crying mule [*ein Wiedehopf*], this sighing ghoul [*ein Gliedertropf*], he’d like to wait here till it snows, then, he thinks, we’re gone and won’t come back again. Wonder what he’s thinking about, a feller like that can’t be thinking a great deal, he’s got water on the brain, he wants to lie around here and act like a mule. But never mind, we’ll make things hot for him, we have bones made of iron, crash door, look out, no door, just an empty hole, a gaping hole, boom, zoom, watch out, boom, zoom. [BA 423/350]

Relentlessly stalking him, Death has finally come to Biberkopf’s door; beating its drums and making frightful noises, it strikes with persistent insis-

tence. Death is even attacking his name, his very identity. What should we think about the word-sounds—and the words that play unkindly on the sounding of his name? Surely, these words are not only descriptive, a way for the narrator to indicate the gravity of Biberkopf's medical condition. Nor could they be merely a way for the narrator to dramatize the threatening presence of the staff at the door to Biberkopf's room. Do not the word-sounds themselves constitute the threat? My claim is that there is in operation here a force of language not merely telling us that Fate is knocking on the door, but actually embodying and enacting it, doing its work. This uncanny efficacy of words is what we need to question.

In a section of the sixth chapter, a section of the novel bearing the English title "Third Conquest of Berlin," there is another provocation related to Biberkopf's name, likewise raising a question about his very integrity as an individual, an autonomous man. After a little searching, Biberkopf has found a place to live and, to settle the entitlement, the landlady puts the police registration papers in front of him. Normal procedure in those days. But that requirement makes him begin to brood:

If I write my name's Biberkopf, they'll look me up in their files right away, they'll phone headquarters and they'll say, this way, old boy, and why don't you show up once in a while, and what's the matter with that arm, what hospital did you stay in, who paid for it, and it's none of it true.

So he broods and inwardly rages, "grübelt und wütet"; but eventually he signs his name. In this next textual passage, the narrator's third-person description abruptly shifts into Biberkopf's first-person ruminations, a stream of uncensored consciousness:

And as if writing with a stick, he chisels thick letters into the paper: I've never been a coward, and my name, I won't let any of 'em steal it from me, that's my name, that's what I was born, and that's what I'll remain: Franz Biberkopf. One thick letter after another, Tegel Prison, the street bordered with black trees, the convicts sitting there, at their gluing, carpentry, repairing. Dip it in again, I'll put a dot over the I. I'm not afraid of the coppers nor of the bulls with their brass badges. Either I'm a free man or I'm not. [BA 240–41/194–95]

What concerns him is his freedom: not only, though, his bodily freedom—not being locked up again, but also his identity as an individual. For in the

crowded metropolis, individuals can lose their individuality, can become a mere statistic, melting into the masses, lost in the crowd. Anomie threatens. And death, of the body and of the spirit, also threatens. For what immediately follows Biberkopf's attempt at self-affirmation is a mysterious warning, uttered by Death itself: "Es ist ein Schnitter, der heißt Tod." The translation, in archaic English evoking the mediaeval dread, reads: "There is a mower, death yclept." These same words, the voice of an impersonal power, occur many times, insistently interrupting the narrative with their haunting reminder. Thus, throughout the novel, from its beginning to its ending, the reader gets the impression that Biberkopf's every thought is being registered by an unknown mind reader, and that his every movement, every gesture, is being watched by some unseen presence: somehow, he is totally visible, and even his innermost thoughts are no secret, somehow registered in the memory of another presence. But it is not always the narrator—and not always Döblin, the author, who seems to be watching him, penetrating his consciousness, keeping a record, remembering every detail, even the details that seem quite insignificant. More often, it seems that it is Fate, wresting control even from the author, who is haunting the narrative, keeping an eye on Biberkopf's every gesture, every move, stalking him and marking him for death.²⁴ In the brief introductory summaries that appear at the beginning of every chapter and that, in an unsettling way, are both inside and outside the frame of the fictional world, a spectral Fate often seems to be hovering, minatory and prophetic. Not even the separateness of the parergon that precedes each of the chapters can restrain Fate from breaking through the invisible spacing of difference to enact what is being described.

But, at the end of the novel, Biberkopf eludes the death of his body when he instead surrenders his nature, his character, to Death and—at least according to the narrator—is somehow reborn, a redeemed soul. The narrator's claim is not, however, confirmed: since the story ends with the claim, readers are not actually *shown* a man whose behavior demonstrates a transformed character—a second nature, a second chance. In light of this abrupt ending, one can only wonder how convinced Döblin himself was regarding this second nature. We might recall that, reflecting, in his *Theory of the Novel*, on the question of "first nature" and "second nature," Georg Lukács asserts that what the bourgeois novel shows us is always a socially constructed "second nature" that is nothing but—

a complex of meanings that are petrified and estranged, and that are no longer able to awaken [a sense of] inwardness; it is a charnelhouse of rotted interiorities [*ein erstarrter, fremdgewordener, die Innerlichkeit nicht mehr erweckender Sinneskomplex; sie ist eine Schädelstätte vermoderter Innerlichkeiten*].²⁵

Even if we accept the claim and dismiss the hypothesis that Biberkopf's author has merely permitted himself the freedom to imagine the fulfillment of his hopes for the character, we must still consider whether, in his supposed transformation, Biberkopf merely exchanges one rotten nature for another. In the brief account of his new life, he certainly seems not to have formed a more admirable interiority. He may have received a second nature, hence a second chance in life; but whether what he has learned, if anything, from his experiences has developed his moral capacities and connected him in solidarity with others to the struggle for justice and peace is a question that remains stubbornly unresolved. One suspects, however, that he has merely adopted the "respectability" of the lower bourgeoisie.

In bed, delirious, sleeping off a night of drinking, Franz's chosen way of life is called into question. What are his deepest moral commitments? What does he really care about? Who is questioning him is not clear. Perhaps his conscience, perhaps the narrator, with whom, paradoxically, Döblin might have made him able, in his delirium, to communicate:

—Did you lose your heart in nature? That's not where I lost my heart. To be sure, it seemed to me as if the essence of the primal spirit was about to carry me away while I was standing opposite the alpine giants or lying on the beach by the roaring sea. Yes, something also bubbled and boiled in my bones. My heart was shaken, but I did not lose it, neither where the eagle nests, nor where the miner digs for the hidden ore-veins of the deeps.—

—Then where?

Did you lose your heart in sport? In the roaring stream of the youth movement? In the turmoil of political struggle?—

—I did not lose it there.—

—Didn't you lose it somewhere?

Do you belong to those who lose their heart nowhere, but keep it for themselves, to conserve it nicely and mummify it?—

The road to the supernatural world, public lectures. All Souls Day: Does Death really end everything? November 21, 8 p.m.: Can we still believe today? Tuesday, November 22: Can man change? Wednesday, November 23: Who is just before God? We call your special attention to the development of the Declamatorium, "St. Paul." [BA 128/97]

These are not so much questions for Franz, who obviously has more immediate questions to cope with, as they are questions for us. Who are we, the author seems to be asking, that we may pass judgment on the character of others? And what are *our* answers to these questions? I have not, in this

chapter, hesitated to judge what Döblin characterizes, perhaps with some irony, as Biberkopf's "good nature"; nor have I been reluctant to express my doubts about Franz's eventual "redemption." However, I will not undertake, here, to argue in defense of the moral judgments, inasmuch as that defense, although important in its own right, would ultimately require a lengthy theoretical excursus into moral philosophy.

§5

Human Nature and Fate

In "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," an extremely important early writing by Hegel, in which he begins to formulate thoughts on character, human nature, and fate that will be more fully developed in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, there is a discussion of law, transgression, punishment, and Fate that sheds light on Franz Biberkopf's character and his struggle, against the causality of Fate, to lead an upright life. Hegel's reflections on the causality of fate and related themes, an inspiration and provocation for both Benjamin and Adorno, bring out all the dialectical contradictions, all the tensions that we find in Biberkopf's life-world and in the character formed and acting within it:

Punishment is the effect of a transgressed law from which the trespasser has torn himself free but on which he still depends; he cannot escape from the law or from punishment or from what he has done. Since the characteristic of the law is universality, the trespasser has smashed the matter of the law, but its form—universality—remains. The law, whose master he believed he had become, remains, but in its content it now appears in opposition to him because it has the shape of the deed which contradicts what previously was the law, while the content of the deed now has the shape of universality and is law. This perversion of the law, the fact that it becomes the contrary of what it was before, is punishment. Even though the man has cut himself loose from the law, he still remains in subjection to it. And since the law, as a universal, remains, so too does the deed, since it is the particular.

Hegel continues his analysis:

Punishment represented as fate is of a different kind. In fate, punishment is a hostile power, an individual thing, in which universal and particular are united in the sense that in it there is no cleavage between command and its execution; there is such a cleavage, however, when law is in question, because the law is only a rule, something thought, and needs an opposite, a reality, from which it acquires its force. In the hostile power of fate, universal is not severed from particular in the way in which the law, as universal, is opposed to man or his inclinations as the particular. Fate is indeed an enemy, and man stands over against it as a power fighting against it. Law, on the contrary, as universal, is lord of the particular and has subdued this man to obedience. The trespass of the man regarded as in the toils of fate is therefore not a rebellion of the subject against his sovereign, the slave's flight from his master, liberation from subservience, not a revivification emerging out of a dead situation, for the man is alive, and before he acts there is no cleavage, no opposition, much less a mastery. Only through a departure from that united life that is neither regulated by law nor at variance with law, only through the killing of life, is something alien produced. Destruction of life is not the nullification of life but its diremption, and its destruction consists in its transformation into an enemy. It is immortal, and, if slain, it appears as its terrifying ghost which vindicates every branch of life and lets loose its Eumenides [i.e., the Furies].²⁶

Franz Biberkopf is pursued by a ghostly, demonic force, which Döblin incarnates in the words that tell Biberkopf's story, his struggle for redemption. Adopting the revolutionary teaching of Jesus, Hegel declares that only the redemptive power of love, operative within each individual and within society as a whole, can bring about a true reconciliation with the forces of Fate. Consequently: "A reconciliation with fate seems more difficult to conceive than one with the penal law, since a reconciliation with fate seems to require a cancellation of annihilation."²⁷ But the aesthetic nature of the language that Döblin uses to tell the story of Biberkopf's life makes us understand that such love, ultimately requiring a revolutionary transformation of society, is absent from the life-world depicted in Döblin's epic. And, in particular, there are no traces of love, no expressions of love, in Biberkopf's supposedly "reformed" life.

As every reader of Döblin's epic novel knows, it is impossible to read it in a thoughtful way without encountering the figure, the prosopopoeia, in

the language of Fate, and coming to terms with its haunting, spine-chilling omnipresence.²⁸ The first encounter takes place early in the second chapter. In the back of a small café on Rosenthaler Platz, two men sit drinking tea and talking. Georg, the younger of the two, has just lost his job and is not receiving the sympathy he needs from his friend. Contemplating his own misfortunes and the measure of happiness he now considers himself lucky to receive from the world, the friend offers only the consolation of stoic resignation:

A wife, a child, it looks as if that were the whole world. I have no regrets. I don't feel any guilt about it, we have to take facts, like ourselves, the way they come. We shouldn't brag about our fate [*Man soll sich nicht dicke tun mit seinem Schicksal*]. I'm an enemy of Destiny [*Ich bin Gegner des Fatums*], I'm not a Greek, I'm a Berliner. [. . .] At any rate, don't get yourself all muddled up. That's the beginning of the end.

Shamelessly smug about how he has handled the difficulties in his life, despite having just asserted that we should not be boastful about what good fortune fate has bestowed on us, the friend, a schoolteacher, concludes his lecture, advising Georg to drink some rum and go play a game of billiards, probably too wrapped up in his own life to be aware of his words' unspeakable coldness and "Schadenfreude," saying, as he departs:

I enjoy the Rosenthaler Platz, I enjoy the cop on the Elsasser corner, I like my game of billiards, I'd like anyone to come and tell me that his life is better than mine [. . .]. [BA 56–57/36–37]

What does the author think of Fate? "Where there is an absence of knowledge, an absence of will [*Erkenntnislosigkeit, Willenlosigkeit*], there is Fate. Where knowledge and will exist, there is a way around Fate."²⁹ But this way around Fate is hypothetical; it is neither universal nor guaranteed. Be this as it may, Döblin turns to the writing of stories as a way of gaining a deeper insight into the roots of evil in the world. As if anticipating Hannah Arendt's courageous study of Adolf Eichmann, Döblin declares his conviction, in one of his essays, that these roots are to be found in the little things of everyday life which, being all too familiar, are easily overlooked; and he suggests that "it would be worthwhile [*lohnend*] [for writers] to shine some light on these [presumed] banalities [*Banalitäten*]."³⁰ Although it is clear that Döblin thinks "human nature" predisposed to selfishness, jealousy, cruelty and violence, it is equally clear that he believes we are not only