Formative Fictions

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Urban Vernaculars: Joyce, Döblin, and the “Individuating Rhythm” of Modernity

In his review of Berlin Alexanderplatz, entitled “Crisis of the Novel,” Walter Benjamin became the first critic to link Alfred Döblin’s 1929 masterpiece to the novel of formation, declaring it to be the “most extreme and vertiginous, the last and most advanced stage of the old bourgeois Bildungsroman.” 1 This was a backhanded compliment at best, for as the title of the review already indicates, Benjamin’s main purpose was to plumb the depths of a putative crisis confronted by the bourgeois novel, and to show how this established form was forced into a retreat by the inexorable advance of modernist (or, as Benjamin called it, “epic”) writing. For Benjamin, Döblin’s work combined elements of both of these competing styles, a fact already indicated by its paradoxical title, which reads in its entirety Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf. Whereas the first two words draw attention to a social space in a constant state of transformation, the subtitle focuses on an individual being whose development from a criminal into a petit bourgeois lends a sense of unity to the otherwise disparate elements that comprise the novel. Benjamin resented this attempt at formal wholeness, which he declared to be “no more than a heroic metamorphosis of bourgeois

consciousness.” For him, the revolutionary genius of Berlin Alexanderplatz lay instead in its loving depiction of the human detritus that comprises the metropolis: the whores and petty criminals who collectively form a popular consciousness that stands in opposition to the older bourgeois variety.

The notion that the modern city—cosmopolitan, frenetic, and constantly self-reinventing—resists the organic metaphor of continuous growth on which historicism (and with it traditional Bildungsroman theory) was built certainly did not originate with Benjamin. Twenty years earlier, in his influential Berlin: Destiny of a City (1910), the art historian Karl Scheffler had already approached urban space itself as a kind of defective Bildungsroman protagonist, summarizing his findings with the pithy observation that the German capital was “a city forever condemned to become, and never to be.” And many of the most famous films of the Ufa studios, from Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927) and M (1931) to Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin: Symphony of a Large City (1927), sought to describe urban life in filmic rhythms that bore little resemblance to those of the nineteenth-century novel.

Modern approaches to Berlin Alexanderplatz have for the most part hewed close to the terms already laid out by Scheffler and Benjamin, frequently diagnosing a tension between two different approaches to the narrative treatment of time in the novel. Marilyn Sibley Fries, for instance, observes:

Döblin’s Berlin image is characterized by the alternating interplay of realistic and dry presentations of factual information with complex metaphorical and symbolic images, of the objective with the subjective. A fundamental premise of his city concept is contained in this interplay; while human beings whose lives are measured and defined by time comprise the city, the visual city image is always momentary, contained precisely in the “Augenblick.” The city is thus presented as an interface between the historical or temporal, as embodied in the human and unidentified mass as well as in specific characters, and momentary reality, presented in recurring concrete visual images. In this context the title assumes a new and more profound meaning: Berlin Alexanderplatz—the designation of the visual and the immediate—is juxtaposed and united with Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf, which implies in the ambiguity of Geschichte the historicity of man.

According to this analysis, Döblin’s art juxtaposes concepts such as “human time,” “Geschichte,” and “the historicity of man,” that is, precisely those elements that are constitutive of traditional Bildungsroman theory, with the Nietzschen “Augenblick,” and thus with a philosophy of truth revealed not through a process of gradual

unfolding, but rather through the superimposition of incommensurate elements, as it is done in Döblin’s favorite literary technique, the montage.\(^5\)

Ever since the so-called expressionism debate of the 1930s, there has been an influential strain within Marxist criticism that sees the clash between different forms of temporal emplotment as a defining characteristic not just of select works from the early twentieth century, but of modernism per se. On this account, modernism is that which gives a narrative shape to Ernst Bloch’s notion of the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous.” According to Fredric Jameson, the most influential contemporary critic to hold such a position, modernism is furthermore linked to the rise of imperialism, for it is in imperialist societies that the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous” is experienced most intensely.\(^6\) Colonies in particular will feel the clash between lingering forms of historicity and the new mechanical temporality that is imposed on them by an exploitative social order. If Jameson’s thesis is correct, then the stylistic elements that Fries diagnoses in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* should have found earlier expressions in colonial novels that also try to mediate between the demands of *Bildung* and those of the modern city. Among such novels, James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) presents an especially powerful example.

*A Portrait* is of interest to a discussion of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* not only because the former presents an early example of colonial modernism, but also because Döblin drew stylistic inspiration from Joyce’s later *Ulysses* (1922). The relationship between the two novels that I plan to compare in the following pages thus differs from those operative in the previous two chapters, where I intentionally chose works that presented unexpected and even shocking juxtapositions. Nevertheless, my basic ambition remains the same: to examine the changes brought about in the literary history of the *Bildungsroman* by the advent of new forms of historical consciousness, to document how these changes interact with established local ways of expressing collective identity, and, finally, to show the previously hidden connections that unite seemingly oppositional national traditions. In the present case, this will entail showing how the new modernist sensibility of an asynchronous reality took root in the very different Irish and German contexts, and how Döblin’s version of modernism was directly influenced by the Irish conception of colonial modernity that he assimilated from Joyce.

The approach to modernism pursued in this chapter differs sharply from the fundamentally Lukácsian paradigm pursued by Franco Moretti in the afterword to his revised second edition of *The Way of the World*. For Moretti, modernism is

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5. More recently, Paul K. Saint-Amour has examined what he calls “an uncanny splitting in the temporality of a certain recurrent symptom” in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. He points out that Franz Biberkopf’s traumatic hallucinations of the city collapsing in upon him not only interrupt and hinder his development into a fully functioning member of society but can actually be interpreted as regressions in which Döblin’s protagonist is taken back to his experiences in the trenches at Arras. See Paul K. Saint-Amour, “Airwar Prophecy and Interwar Modernism,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 42:2 (2005): 151.

a discrete period in literary history, separated from nineteenth-century realism by the four years of the First World War, and characterized by plots in which episodes are juxtaposed more or less randomly, as opposed to those in which the action develops organically.\(^7\) Moretti refers directly to both *A Portrait* (which he regards as a “late realist” text) and *Ulysses* in an attempt to demonstrate his thesis, and to argue that the Bildungsroman effectively meets its end on the battlefields of World War I. He provides no explanation for the fact that *Ulysses* in turn gave rise to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, a novel that is undeniably both modernist and a Bildungsroman. The literary history of modernism thus turns out to be just as complex and internally asynchronous as the texts that are subsumed by it.

**James Joyce and the “Individuating Rhythm” of Colonial Modernity**

Any serious approach to the formal structure of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has to begin by considering the crucial influence that Georg Goyert’s 1927 German translation of *Ulysses* exerted on Döblin.\(^8\) Briefly put, Döblin came across Goyert’s *Ulysses* soon after its publication, at a time when he had completed roughly the first quarter of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. He immediately began to make heavy revisions to the passages he had already drafted in order to incorporate characteristically Joycean devices, such as the stream of consciousness or montage sequences. The rest of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was then continued in the new style. *Ulysses* provided Döblin with at least two main sources of inspiration: a sophisticated literary meditation on the nature of twentieth-century cities and, as a direct outgrowth of this, a radically cosmopolitan inquiry into the spatial and temporal construction of modern subjectivity. Combined with one another, these two aspects of *Ulysses* allowed Döblin to craft the formally most innovative Bildungsroman of the early twentieth century. To understand precisely what the German writer gleaned from Joyce, however, it is necessary to take a step back and take a look at Joyce’s own attempt to write a novel of formation. Döblin was apparently not familiar with *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (the novel appeared in German translation only in 1926 and was not favorably received by most reviewers). Nevertheless, some of the problems that Joyce’s earlier novel articulates found poetic echoes in *Ulysses* and through this intermediary also affected *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* concludes with a brief postscript: “Dublin 1904 Trieste 1914.”\(^9\) In contrast to the similar phrase that James Joyce would later

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append to *Ulysses*, the two terms of this addendum aren’t connected by hyphens indicating a spatiotemporal continuity but instead remain discrete entities, as if to indicate that the work had been carried out twice. A more suitable ending to a novel that similarly frustrates the conventions of the well-made plot by its constant vacillation between disjunctive and conjunctive tendencies could hardly be imagined. *A Portrait* refuses to develop smoothly: at times it moves forward by leaps and bounds, skipping from one phase in Stephen’s life to another; at others it seems to merely spin around in circles as each new episode takes on a disturbing resemblance to those that preceded it.

The tension between these narrative vectors can also be felt on the level of style. The epiphany and the leitmotif, the two devices that more than any others define Joyce’s prose, are essentially opposites of one another. The epiphany is fundamentally disjunctive: by “transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life” (240), it necessarily destroys the flow of mundane reality and therefore also the continuity of sensation. As *A Portrait* demonstrates time and time again, the only way to follow up on an epiphany is with a chapter or section break. The leitmotif, on the other hand, is entirely conjunctive: it points out the prosaic underpinnings of lofty emotions and ties each stage in the development of both plot and protagonist back to the ones that preceded it. The endearingly frustrating nature of Joyce’s text stems from the fact that epiphany and leitmotif can hardly be separated from one another. Stephen’s famous encounter with the bird-girl on Sandymount Beach is at once radically disjunctive, pushing him “on and on and on and on” (186), and completely overdetermined, invoking a network of well-established motifs that includes birds, Mariolatry, eyesight, falling water, and several others.

The ambiguous status that the concept of “development” thus occupies in Joyce’s novel is perhaps best demonstrated by the inevitable contradictions one encounters in the canonical attempts to classify *A Portrait* as a Bildungsroman. In order to reconcile Joyce’s work to the tradition, Jerome Hamilton Buckley, for example, is forced to dismiss great chunks of the novel as “unnecessarily long-winded” and to remind Joyce’s readers that “indecision and inconclusiveness” have always characterized the endings of classical novels of formation.10 On the other hand, Franco Moretti celebrates precisely the indecision of the final chapter as Joyce’s ultimate vindication. By asserting prosaic reality over poetic meaning, leitmotif over epiphany, and (in Moretti’s own terms) Flaubert over Rimbaud, Joyce has earned for himself the status as a modernist writer: “the merit of *Portrait* lies in its being an unmistakable failure” as a novel of formation.11

The opposition between conjunctive and disjunctive tendencies in Joyce’s *A Portrait* parallels, though it does not exactly mirror, that between human historicity

and the simultaneity of the big city that Fries noted in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. And indeed, it is just a short step from Moretti’s condemnation of *A Portrait* to his celebration of *Ulysses* and the modernist urban novel. But there is something else going on here. Joyce’s postscript puts into conjunction with one another two cities that otherwise would seem to have little in common except for their sad colonial legacy: Dublin on the shores of the Irish, and Trieste on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. This imaginary conjunction remains somewhat underdeveloped in *A Portrait*, although Stephen’s call to spread his wings and arise from the Daedalian labyrinth—“Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous Stephaneforos! (182)—is voiced in Greek and comes to him through a group of young boys who look as though they had just stepped out of foamy breakers onto one of the beaches of Cythera. In *Ulysses*, however, the novel in which Joyce famously refers to Dublin as the “Hibernian Metropolis,” the connection between “snotgreen” and wine-dark seas is made explicit, most overtly through the allegorical structure that recodes the journeys of Odysseus as the modern-day peripatetics of the advertising salesman Leopold Bloom.  

Both *A Portrait* and *Ulysses* thus insert Dublin into a symbolic network that exceeds the span of the national imagination temporally as well as spatially. There is, I would argue, an intimate connection between this cosmopolitan ambition and the sophisticated ways in which *A Portrait* moves beyond the developmental dynamics of the traditional novel of formation. Earlier in this study, I pointed to Mikhail Bakhtin’s essay “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism” as a text that exerted a profound impact on Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of a “vernacular cosmopolitanism.” In that same text, Bakhtin notes of Goethe’s writing that in it the “background of the world’s buttresses begins to pulsate . . . , and this pulsation determines the more superficial movement and alteration of human destinies and human outlooks.”  

For Bakhtin, Goethe’s genius lies in his ability to mediate between the cyclical experience of time characteristic of the premodern agrarian society into which he was born, and the essentially linear, progressive “historical time” that comes to dominate during the last thirty years of the eighteenth century. As I have also argued, however, care needs to be taken to adequately acknowledge the invariably local and culturally “thick” nature of such mediations.

In his 1904 essay, “A Portrait of the Artist,” which contains the first seeds of the novel he would complete a decade later, Joyce came up with a useful shorthand term for such localized mediations between emergent and cyclical temporalities. At the beginning of this essay, Joyce declares his dissatisfaction with all representations of personal growth premised on the “characters of beards and inches,” and

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thus implicitly also with traditional conceptions of the *Bildungsroman*, which valorize growth that occurs organically and in gradual increments.\(^{15}\) He casts his lot instead with those who “seek through some art, by some process of the mind as yet untabulated, to liberate from the personalized lumps of matter that which is their individuating rhythm, the first or formal relation of their parts.”\(^{16}\) This metaphor of an “individuating rhythm” ingeniously points to a structural compromise between cyclical and progressive elements, between a temporal sequence that moves relentlessly forward and one in which individual stresses are repeated and thereby create compositional units (musical bars or, in Joyce’s case, sections and chapters).

The relevance of this rhythmical metaphor is demonstrated by a little-noticed episode in the second chapter of *A Portrait*, which tells the story of Stephen’s visit, along with his father, to the city of Cork in the west of Ireland. The excursion begins with a detailed description of Stephen’s impressions during the journey on the Dublin–Cork night train. As the train leaves the station, the boy is overcome by a curious feeling of detachment that enforces a definite rupture between his present self and his personal recollections: “As the train steamed out of the station he recalled his childish wonder of years before and every event of his first day at Clongowes. But he felt no wonder now. He saw the darkening lands slipping past him, the silent telegraph poles passing his window swiftly every four seconds, the little glimmering stations, manned by a few silent sentries, flung by the mail behind her and twinkling for a moment in the darkness like fiery grains flung backwards by a runner” (92). A consummate modernist subject, Dedalus is no longer capable of feeling any wonder, for wonder presupposes rootedness in familiar circumstances. Yet as he continues on toward an uncertain destination, Stephen leaves all prior allegiances behind him. He appears as a monadic entity cutting a solitary path through historical time and into the promise of modernity. As the landscape that he has known for all his life fades into darkness, his primary markers of experience become the passing telegraph poles, which no longer frame recognizable vistas but instead measure out the relentless advance of empty time at the rate of one bar every four seconds.

In a move that is typical of *A Portrait*, however, a psychosexual component is immediately added to Stephen’s exhilarating experience of modernist vertigo. His self-assured demeanor on the train corresponds to a simultaneous debasement of

\(^{15}\) Joyce would, of course, have approached the *Bildungsroman* tradition (which at any rate lacked a name until Wilhelm Dilthey introduced this term to modern criticism in 1906) primarily through the impact it left on nineteenth-century French and English novels of literary realism. It does not appear that he had read Goethe by 1904, though Breon Mitchell has suggested that Stanislaus Joyce came up with the name Stephen Hero by analogy to Wilhelm Meister (i.e., “William Master”). See Breon Mitchell, “*A Portrait and the Bildungsroman Tradition,”* in *Approaches to Joyce’s “Portrait”: Ten Essays*, ed. Thomas F. Baley and Bernard Benstock (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), 65 n. 5.

his father, who now appears to him as stuck in the past, and as futilely clinging to experiences that history has long since condemned to irrelevancy: “Stephen heard but could feel no pity. The images of the dead were all strange to him save that of uncle Charles, an image which had lately been fading out of memory” (92). Stephen tosses his personal recollections into the darkness behind him in roughly the same way in which the night train flings backward the “fiery grains” of the provincial postal stations. His father, who still held a position of supreme respect in his life during the earlier Christmas dinner scene, now seems to him ludicrous—a weak old man who nurses the fires of past passions with occasional sips from his pocket flask. The endless succession of telegraph poles thus flanks a trail that leads Stephen not only into historical modernity, but also toward an unencumbered personal development.

But as night yields to day, Stephen’s initial exhilaration has to make room for a very different, and much more depressing, experience: “The cold light of the dawn lay over the country, over the unpeopled fields and the closed cottages. The terror of sleep fascinated his mind as he watched the silent country or heard from time to time his father’s deep breath or sudden sleepy movement. The neighborhood of unseen sleepers filled him with strange dread as though they could harm him: and he prayed that the day might come quickly” (92). For the first time since his evening departure, the Irish landscape becomes visible as something more than a mere abstraction, something more than a dark mass of shades broken up every four seconds by a telegraph pole. And what Stephen views through his window isn’t just any landscape (and certainly not the urban agglomeration of Dublin in which he has lived for most of his life), but rather a landscape of cottages and “unpeopled fields,” an almost mystical vision of rural Eire. Suddenly, the previous feeling of detachment and disjunction gives way to a definite sense of place: the experience of a locality that is steeped in custom, organic social experience, and intransigent historical continuity.

Stephen’s sense of his own position in the world changes in accordance with the landscape that he glimpses outside of his window. His father’s presence, so easily dismissed just a few hours ago, takes on an almost claustrophobic heaviness, and the dim outlines of the fellow passengers in his compartment inspire a strange dread in him. Stephen’s experience of time changes as well. His attention is no longer held by the passing telegraph poles, which measure out the advance of historical time in a relentlessly repetitive mechanical continuity, but by his father’s heavy breathing and occasional sleepy movement. The mechanical thus yields to the biological, and mere repetition is replaced by the organic cycle of pulmonary activity. Time no longer progresses but appears at a standstill.

To contain his fears, Stephen takes recourse in a sort of prayer, which, “addressed neither to God nor saint, began with a shiver, as the chilly morning breeze crept through the chink of the carriage door to his feet, and ended in a trail of foolish words which he made to fit the insistent rhythm of the train; and silently, at intervals
of four seconds, the telegraphpoles held the galloping notes of the music between punctual bars” (92–93). An important change occurs over the course of these four lines. The telegraph poles that fly by outside of the window are no longer merely described as markers of a spatiotemporal contiguity, but as the “punctual bars” that create an underlying “rhythm” for the “galloping notes” of Stephen’s prayer. Stephen’s prayer is the direct result of his newly apprehended spatiotemporal situation, an insight that negates his earlier feelings of modernist vertigo. Clock time and circadian time, the linear and unbroken expanse of the railroad tracks and the cyclical movement of pulmonary activity, have blended to create a rhythmical structure.

Stephen’s prayer provides a vivid illustration for the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous” that Ernst Bloch diagnosed as a characteristic of modernity and employed as a conceptual weapon in the struggle with Lukácsian totality. To be more precise, it illuminates with almost uncanny precision Fredric Jameson’s argument, itself inspired by Bloch, that “the subjects or citizens of the high-modern period are mostly people who have lived in multiple worlds and multiple times—a medieval pays to which they return on family vacations and an urban agglomeration whose elites are, at least in most advanced countries, trying to ‘live with their century’ and be as ‘absolutely modern’ as they know how.” Nevertheless, despite its considerable formal innovation, this passage still employs the rhetorical vocabulary of nationhood: it is precisely the recognition of an Irish landscape outside that allows Stephen to arrive at a sense of who he is. In another essay, Jameson would even go so far as to say that this recognition of place, by means of which both a psychic and a national identity come into stable focus, is what differentiates Joyce from most other modernist writers.

In another passage in A Portrait, however, Joyce already uses the rhythmic metaphor in a quite different fashion that points beyond the nation as a construct with which to suture the psychic wound that separates emergent and cyclical temporalities. Father Arnall’s sermon in the third chapter forms both the literal and the symbolic centerpiece of Joyce’s novel. The priest begins his descriptions of hell with a proem reminding his students of the future that awaits them in colonial service—a future imagined as the very negation of present circumstances: “Many of the boys who sat in these front benches a few years ago are perhaps now in distant lands, in the burning tropics or immersed in professional duties or in seminaries or voyaging over the vast expanse of the deep or, it may be, already called by the great God to another life and to the rendering up of their stewardship” (117). From this proem, the sermon gathers force over the span of almost forty pages, before it culminates in an elaborate metaphor intended to dramatize the quite literally inconceivable duration of an eternity of suffering:

You have often seen the sand on the seashore. How fine are its tiny grains! And how many of those tiny little grains go to make up the small handful which a child grasps in its play. Now imagine a mountain of that sand, a million miles high, reaching from the earth to the farthest heavens, and a million miles broad, extending to remotest space, and a million miles in thickness: and imagine such an enormous mass of countless particles of sand multiplied as often as there are leaves in the forest, drops of water in the mighty ocean, feathers on birds, scales on fish, hairs on animals, atoms in the vast expanse of the air: and imagine that at the end of every million years a little bird came to that mountain and carried away in its beak a tiny grain of that sand. How many millions upon millions of centuries would pass before that bird had carried away even a square foot of that mountain, how many eons upon eons of ages before it had carried away all. Yet at the end of that immense stretch of time not even one instant of eternity could be said to have ended. (142)

The image of sand that needs to be cleared away from a beach has become a familiar symbol of the progressive urge ever since Goethe finished the second part of his *Faust* in 1832. But in Father Arnall’s hellscape, this struggle for improvement has been converted into a futile and repetitive activity: hell quite literally is development at a standstill, a denial of the teleological promise modernity holds out to its faithful disciples. Father Arnall’s point is that only devoted service to the imperial powers of London and of Rome can overcome this image of development at a standstill. This, after all, is why he begins his sermon with references to graduates who now labor in the “burning tropics” or in seminaries. The Irish national struggle, by contrast, does not fit into his rhetoric: the imperialist logic associates the colony not with a process of gradual emergence, but only with eternal stasis. Stephen’s formation over the course of the novel will largely consist of finding a middle ground between these calls: on the one hand, the summons of cultural nationalism, which in the context of the Gaelic revival is premised on continuity and repetition; and on the other, the call of imperialism, which urges him to forget where he has come from and create a new identity for himself in the slipstream of modernity. Stephen’s paradoxical resolution at the end of the novel says it all: “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (275–76). His aspiration is for a conscience that is as yet “uncreated,” but in order to achieve it he has to tread down a path that has been walked a million times before. The “rhythmical” construction of *A Portrait*, in which emergent and cyclical temporalities play an equally important part, and its cosmopolitan message are inextricably intertwined.

**Dublin, Berlin, and the Globalizing Logic of the Modern City**

By the time that he finished *Ulysses* eight years later, Joyce’s meditations on the relationship between the local and the global had become a good deal more complex.
It is commonly acknowledged in the critical literature that the “Cyclops” chapter pivots around the encounter between the ultranationalist and anti-Semitic “citizen” and the cosmopolitan Jew (of sorts) Leopold Bloom. What is less frequently commented on, however, is the fact that both the citizen and Bloom understand Irish identity to be a global construct. The citizen does so when he says, in reference to the postfamine exodus, that “those that came to the land of the free remember the land of bondage. And they will come again and with a vengeance, no cravens, the sons of Granuaile, the champions of Kathleen ni Houlihan” (12.1372–75). Bloom, on the other hand, after a series of stumbles arrives at the definition of a nation as “the same people living in the same place . . . or also living in different places” (12.1422–28). The distinction here is that the citizen still works with an organic, albeit “rhythmic,” understanding of what Ireland is: he conceives of the postfamine émigrés as the lifeblood of the nation that has been scattered all over the world in a kind of systolic expansion only to eventually return in a diastolic contraction. Bloom’s definition, on the other hand, is genuinely cosmopolitan and diasporic—not so much national as it is transnational, in the sense given to that term by Arjun Appadurai.

“The same people living in different places”: this phrase is not a bad definition of Ulysses itself. Indeed, Ulysses is divided into eighteen different chapters, almost none of which share the same setting, and almost all of which (as we know from the schema Joyce loaned to Valery Larbaud) take place at different times of day. 19 It would be difficult to imagine a novel that more eloquently undermines the narrative logic of simultaneous action that Benedict Anderson characterized as one of the foundational principles of national consciousness. Ulysses documents a single calendar day (June 16, 1904) in the history of Dublin, but Dublin does not appear as one city over the course of the entire book, nor are the people that populate it always readily discernible as one implicitly national community. There are, instead, multiple communities (the students in the Martello tower, the congregants at Dignam’s funeral, the revelers at Barney Kiernan’s pub, to name just a few) that inhabit discrete spaces, both geographical and textual. In addition, each of these discrete communities is described by a different textual logic, a different way of organizing experience in narrated time. There are the hectic street scenes of the “Lestrygonians” chapter, for instance, which takes place in the early afternoon in the middle of downtown Dublin and is stuffed full of information. Or the contrapuntal style of “Sirens,” in which simultaneous events are played off of one another, though not in the usual way that this is done in the realist novel: instead, Blazes Boylan’s jingling pockets are integrated into the musical texture of the Ormond Hotel, so that his progress down the street toward Molly’s house can no longer be truly said to be separate from Bloom’s own situation. Or the lazy

19. The exceptions, of course, are that parts of “Calypso,” as well as all of “Ithaca” and “Penelope” are set in Leopold Bloom’s house, and that “Telemachus,” “Nestor,” and “Proteus” unfold in parallel with “Calypso,” “Lotus Eaters,” and “Hades.”
and overindulgent style of the “Eumaeus” episode, which perfectly captures the 
mind-set of a couple of drunkards staggering home from a pub at one o’clock in 
the morning.

Without these differing narrative treatments, all the individual spaces and com-
munies of _Ulysses_ would be immediately recognizable as part of a larger whole, 
namely turn-of-the-century Ireland. But the style of _Ulysses_ prevents such ready 
assimilation to a common frame of reference, and not just because the dazzling 
array of techniques that Joyce brings to bear on his materials serves to estrange 
the reader. Instead, the individual communities of _Ulysses_ can be said to follow differ-
ent rhythmical patterns—patterns that vary according to the time of day and the 
place in which they are located: both “Lestrygonians” and “Eumaeus” take place in 
the same square mile of city streets, but the rhythm of Dublin and of its residents 
at 1:00 p.m. differs profoundly from that at 1:00 a.m. The city thus emerges as in-
ternally fragmented, no longer simply the largest settlement in Ireland, but rather 
a contested space in which multiple modes of belonging come into conflict with 
one another.

In this context, Joyce’s definition of Dublin as a “Hibernian metropolis” takes 
on a new significance. As Henri Lefebvre has pointed out, “The large Mediter-
ranean towns appear to have always lived and still to live in a regime of compro-
mise between all the political powers. Such a ‘metastable’ state is the fact of the 
polyrhythmic.” 20 “Polyrhythmicality” in this context should be understood as the 
simultaneous existence in close spatial proximity of lifeworlds that place differing 
emphases on the linear and cyclical elements that constitute historical experience. 
The forum, for example, in which each successive ruler reconfigures public life 
through a series of legal and even architectural adjustments coexists with older 
parts of town in which traditions pass unchanged from one generation to the next. 
Joyce would have had ample opportunities to observe this phenomenon in Trieste 
and Pola, the two colonized cities in which he wrote _Ulysses_, and what he saw un-
doubtedly influenced his depiction of the colonial city of Dublin. In an urban space 
in which national temporality is prevented from exercising a hegemonic influence, 
the rhythms of the city itself assert their prominence and foreground hitherto un-
recognized forms of belonging that have their basis in the accidents of spatiotem-
poral contiguity, rather than in any sense of a shared destiny. Colonial domination, 
in other words, renders communities of men who gather in a pub or at a funeral 
into inherently meaningful units, whereas otherwise they would simply be subor-
dinated to a larger national collective.

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20. Henri Lefebvre, _Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life_, trans. Stuart Elden and Ger-
ald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004), 92. For an introduction to Lefebvre’s theories and some pre-
liminary theses regarding their applicability to Joyce’s works, I am sincerely indebted to Tom Sheehan, 
“Colonial Rhythms” (unpublished manuscript circulated at the MSA Conference, November 2005), Mi-
crosoft Word file.
In this fashion, *Ulysses* undermines the historicist foundations of traditional national thinking, according to which national communities are characterized by the preservation of a common formative drive—or what we may now call a common rhythm—through historical time. In place of this historicist logic, Joyce’s novel strives to offer a textual correlative of Bloom’s hypothesis that a nation is “the same people . . . also living in different places.” The cosmopolitan implications of this endeavor are articulated in a number of places in the novel, perhaps most overtly in the “Ithaca” chapter, where Bloom tries to enlist the skeptical Stephen Dedalus in an ingenious “get rich quick” scheme. Bloom’s proposal is described by the Joycean “arranger” in the characteristic question-and-answer format that distinguishes this episode, in which both of the central characters have returned to a tenuous sobriety after a night of boozing and are clinging to facts:

> What rapid but insecure means to opulence might facilitate immediate purchase [of a country residence]?
>
> A private wireless telegraph which would transmit by dot and dash system the result of a national equine handicap (flat or steeplechase) of 1 or more miles and furlongs won by an outsider at odds of 50 to 1 at 3 hr 8 m p.m. at Ascot (Greenwich time), the message being received and available for betting purposes in Dublin at 2.59 p.m. (Dunsink time). (17.1672–78)

Bloom’s scheme relies on the fact that colonial Dublin was quite literally, rather than just figuratively, “left behind” by modernity and was excluded from Greenwich Mean Time, which held sway throughout the rest of the British Isles and had been made the cornerstone of the universal day by the International Meridian Conference of 1884. Dublin, like the rest of Ireland, was instead subject to Dunsink time (named after Dunsink Observatory just outside of the city), which trailed GMT by roughly twenty-five minutes and thus formed a temporal exclave within the modern system of global time zones. Because of this twenty-five-minute difference, however, it would theoretically have been possible for a gambler who received almost instantaneous information about the outcome of a horse race at Ascot to place a wager before the close of the Irish betting offices. Bloom, in other words, is proposing to turn national belatedness into a weapon by cunningly exploiting inherent structural flaws in the global financial system. His scheme is a recognizable instance of the cliché of Irish cunningness, but it is possible only because of his prior cosmopolitan recognition of the place that Ireland occupies in the world at large.

Taken together, the two dynamics that I have just described illustrate Saskia Sassen’s contention that the concepts of “the national” and “the global” do not constitute discrete analytical domains but rather form “a spatiotemporal order with considerable internal differentiation and growing mutual imbrications with [one another]. Their internal differences interpenetrate in ways that are variously
conflictive, disjunctive and neutralizing."\textsuperscript{21} The arena in which this interpenetration occurs most overtly is the modern city, in which global processes shatter the integrity of national-historical time and create a number of local temporalities, which in turn undermine the universal reach of globalizing currents. Joyce's modernist technique is among other things a way to give a narrative shape to this dually disruptive process.

In reflecting on the manner in which Döblin followed on the path that Joyce had blazed for him, one encounters the obvious objection that Dublin in 1904 was a truly colonial city, whereas Berlin in the 1920s was a postimperial metropolis. Joyce experienced the fragmenting influence of colonial domination as part of his everyday reality and at a very early age rejected all organic metaphors to describe modern reality. Döblin, on the other hand, made no overt references to Germany's former status as an imperial power, and, in his manifesto "The Spirit of the Naturalist Age," written just a few years before \textit{Berlin Alexanderplatz}, still compared modern urban centers to "coral reefs for the collective organism man."\textsuperscript{22} For him, in other words, cities are organic entities, comprised of smaller beings that go about their errands without realizing that they each contribute to the compound life of the whole. This compound life, in turn, possesses an animating individuality of its own and is subject to a process of growth like any other living being: "Taken as a totality, the collective organism man represents a superior expression of mankind. It would be careless to say that the mighty force of the social drive that formed this collective organism arose from pure need. All that we can say is that the drive is there and possesses an incomparable strength."\textsuperscript{23} These lines include a strong reference to Germany's historicist tradition that is entirely absent in Joyce. How, then, could any of the lessons that the Irish writer drew from the political history of his own country be applicable to Döblin's novel?

The starting point for an answer to this question can be found in Karl Scheffler's \textit{Berlin: Destiny of a City}, which I have already mentioned as one of the most influential analyses of the German capital to appear during Döblin's lifetime. This book makes an intriguing case for Berlin as a colonial settlement. Scheffler's argument proceeds from the observation that "Berlin became what it is as the seat of power
I derive this quotation, as well as the figures on Berlin’s population growth, from Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 74–75. It should be noted that the popular comparisons of Berlin to U.S. frontier settlements owed much more to the imagination than to experience—few Germans had actually visited the American West. And while Berlin’s population growth exceeded that of London or Paris, it lagged far behind the demographic explosion of a city like Chicago, the population of which grew about tenfold during the same period.

Scheffler’s troubling rhetoric about “blood mixture” and his consistent denigration of the Slavic peoples as a “lazy race” (16) aside, there can be no doubt that he puts his finger on an essential aspect of Berlin’s unique identity. All major cities sustain and replenish themselves through a continual influx of new residents from the provinces, but Berlin has always been an extreme case. Between 1865 and 1910, Berlin’s population more than trebled, only to double again in 1920, when the surrounding suburbs were belatedly incorporated into “greater Berlin.” A large percentage of these new residents (some estimates put the figure as high as 50 percent) came from East Prussia as well as from other surrounding Slavic regions such as Russia and Bohemia. This rapid influx of immigrant populations did indeed create an atmosphere that reminded more than one observer of the boomtowns of the U.S. frontier. The economist Moritz Julius Bonn, for instance, who visited Berlin in the closing years of the nineteenth century, reported: “Everything was new and extremely clean; streets and buildings were spacious, but there was a lot of tinsel meant to look like gold. The place was not unlike an oil city of the American West, which had grown overnight and, feeling its strength, insisted on displaying its wealth.”

In point of fact, the “local color” that Döblin works into his novel and that so many critics (Benjamin foremost among them) have praised is in reality an

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expression of the multitude of migratory and transnational movements that converge on the Prussian capital. Few of Döblin’s characters are native Berliners; almost all of them come from the territories to the east, from Silesia, Pomerania, or East Prussia, from towns like Breslau, Czernowitz, and Frankfurt on the Oder. The Berlin dialect, in which the entire book is written, similarly bears testimony to the city’s tumultuous history of migration, occupation, and forced resettlement: Flemish, French, Polish, Czech, Yiddish, and Hebrew all intermingle with German to form an utterly creolized patois. The first people with whom Biberkopf engages in a meaningful human relationship following his release from prison are the Jews Nachum and Eliser, whose accent and behavior betray them as recent emigrants from a shtetl; his first girlfriend is “Polish Lina” Przyballa. Together, all these characters and the patois in which they communicate form the “individuating rhythm” of the Alexanderplatz: a vernacular form of cosmopolitanism expressed entirely through the characteristic activities of a built environment.

The subsection of the second book of Berlin Alexanderplatz in which Döblin describes a typical day in the urban triangle between Alexanderplatz, Rosenthaler Platz, and Hackescher Markt tellingly begins with the statement “The Rosenthaler Platz carries on a conversation” (“Der Rosenthaler Platz unterhält sich”—imprecisely translated by Eugene Jolas as “The Rosenthaler Platz is busily active”). These conversations among ordinary people are explicitly contrasted with the administrative announcements that formed the previous section, which Döblin copied verbatim from official publications of the Berlin magistrate. As a sort of transition between the two styles of writing, the very first conversation that the reader subsequently witnesses is, fittingly enough, carried out between two officials (a policeman and a street-car inspector) who momentarily forget their professional duties to have a laugh at the expense of a reckless passerby: “In the middle of the Rosenthaler Platz a man with two yellow packages jumps off from the 41, an empty taxi glides just past him, the copper looks at him, a street-car inspector appears, cop and inspector shake hands: damned lucky that fellow with his packages” (54). Needless to say, this conversation, like all those that will follow, is carried out in the local dialect and sounds even less formal in the original: “Der hat aber mal Schwein gehabt mit seine Pakete.”

Döblin’s Berlin thus begins where official administrative language ends, along with the temporal rhythms that it, in turn, tries to impose on the city. The “Chief Burgomaster, Controller of Hunting Licenses,” may issue strict decrees as to how the citizens of Berlin should comport themselves (“Shooting must cease in summer, from April 1st to September 30th, by 7 p.m., in winter, from October 1st to March 31st, by 8 p.m.” [52]), but the actual rabbit hunt that constitutes the main plot of the novel obeys different temporal laws. This conflict between state power and the life of Döblin’s protagonist is portrayed in its most extreme form at an even earlier point in the novel, when Franz Biberkopf receives an official notification from the chief of police regarding his recent release from prison. Once again, Döblin
employs montage to contrast administrative language with the earthier tone of the Berlin residents. The notification informs Biberkopf: “According to documents in my possession, you have been convicted of assault and battery with fatal consequences, as a result of which you are to be regarded as dangerous to public safety and morality” (44). There then follows a list of forty-two administrative districts in and around the city that Döblin’s protagonist is henceforth prohibited from entering. The narrator conveys Biberkopf’s reaction with the succinct statement “A staggering blow, that” (45).

This passage emphasizes that the relationship between state power and city life as it is portrayed in Berlin Alexanderplatz in fact closely parallels the opposition between colonizer and colonized that is the basis of Joyce’s Ulysses. Biberkopf is quite literally being resettled, with the technocratic logic that underlies many colonization efforts. And just like Joyce’s character, he retreats into a subnational space created for him by his urban environment. Taken into the protective custody of a prisoner’s rehabilitation society, Biberkopf settles in a part of town known to the locals as the Scheunenviertel (Barnyard Quarter), which formerly lay outside the eastern gates of the city, where Jews and other suspect arrivals from Eastern Europe were allowed to settle. The Scheunenviertel is, of course, never mentioned by name—it exists as an experience, a concretely realized example of urban cosmopolitics, not as an administrative abstraction. Indeed, state power penetrates it only imperfectly: while the police headquarters at the Alexanderplatz is compared to a “panoptical building” (583), its presence has no unifying effect on the text that would be comparable to the Tower Society initiation chamber in the seventh book of Wilhelm Meister.

Berlin Alexanderplatz between Bildungsroman and Big City Novel

The thematic affinities that connect Berlin Alexanderplatz to the traditional German novel of formation are, in fact, already suggested before the narrative proper actually begins. In a brief preface, the narrator summarizes Biberkopf’s story as one in which “his eyes are forcibly opened in a way which I do not describe here. He is most distinctly given to understand how [his present situation] came about. . . . This awful thing which was his life acquires a meaning. Franz Biberkopf has been given a radical cure.” And, with an optimism that recalls Morgenstern’s, he also declares: “To listen to this, and to meditate on it, will be of benefit to many who, like Franz Biberkopf, live in a human skin” (2). Once the story gets under way, however, Döblin’s novel is much more difficult to reconcile with traditional expectations. Franz Biberkopf is a petty crook rather than a bourgeois citizen of the kind that dominates the nineteenth-century examples of the genre. He is also middle-aged, has held a previous job as a furniture mover, has served in World War I, and has done four years time in Tegel Prison for killing his girlfriend Ida in an argument.
Perhaps most importantly, he is not particularly given to self-reflection, and the three successive catastrophes that eventually “open his eyes” (an act of personal betrayal by an acquaintance, the loss of his right arm after a close friend pushes him from a moving vehicle, and, finally, the murder of his girlfriend Mieze at the hands of that same, ostensible friend) are much more extreme than anything that Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister or any of his successors had to endure.

Nevertheless, Biberkopf’s trajectory, when viewed from a certain magnanimous distance, bears an unmistakable similarity to that of more traditional heroes. The four years that Döblin’s hero served behind prison bars have estranged him from the world, and not just in the sense that he has to relearn simple social interactions, but also because Germany itself has changed so much. When Biberkopf entered Tegel in 1923, the Weimar Republic was just emerging from a period of hyperinflation. Industry was at a standstill, poverty and hunger were widespread, and Germany in general was marked by its war defeat. The years 1927 and 1928, however, in which Berlin Alexanderplatz is set, arguably saw the economic zenith of the short-lived republic. Business had been booming for the past three years, leading to comparative affluence, amply filled department stores, infrastructural developments on a massive scale, and a new symbolic ecology aimed at directing the desires of the masses. Döblin refers to Biberkopf’s overwhelming difficulties with all of these changes in his opening pages, which survey the glittering shop windows lining the Seestrasse (“Let ’em blaze away, are they going to make you afraid or something, why, you can smash ’em up, can’t you?” [2]), the subway construction at Rosenthaler Platz (“Just go ahead and mix with people, then everything’s going to clear up” [2]), and the tawdry movie theaters that line the Münzstrasse (“On the huge poster a beet-red gentleman was standing on a staircase, while a peach of a young girl embraced his legs, she lay on the stairs, and he stood up above with a leering expression on his face” [28]). Biberkopf, in other words, has to find his place in a complex society about which he is just as ignorant as Wilhelm Meister was about his own world when he first accepted employment with the Count.

Biberkopf’s ignorance of recent developments has a richly symbolic dimension as well. When he is first dumped onto the streets of Berlin after serving his time, Döblin’s protagonist steels himself by quietly humming the opening lines of “The Watch on the Rhine,” a nationalist and anti-French song that served as a kind of unofficial anthem of Wilhelmine Germany and enjoyed great popularity among the reactionary circles that so heavily influenced public affairs during the years following the Great War. Over the course of the book, Biberkopf will sing this song over and over again; in a pivotal scene, he bellows it at the top of his voice in a courtyard and thereby attracts the attention of Nachum the Jew. What he does not realize, however, is that his song choice is fraught with troubling overtones in the politically charged atmosphere of the late Weimar Republic. The Germany in which Biberkopf was initially socialized, and the one that he took with him into Tegel Prison, stood united behind its Kaiser; Germans from all over the social and
political spectrum would have joined to sing the jingoistic chorus of “The Watch on the Rhine.” To perform this song in 1928, however, means to pick sides in a frequently violent struggle over the future of the Republic—and to make a choice, furthermore, that may not be entirely advisable in the working-class Berlin neighborhoods in which Biberkopf lives out his existence.

Biberkopf’s problem, in other words, is that he is unable to figure out exactly what has happened to his country (and to his city) in the past four years, and to determine a proper course of action for himself. He was quite literally overtaken by modernity while he sat in his prison cell, and he still acts in many ways according to the customs of a world that no longer exists. (This, incidentally, differentiates him from the protagonists of the great French and English Bildungsromane of the nineteenth century, who were almost universally creatures of the provinces. At the end of their respective stories, Balzac’s Lucien, Dickens’s Pip, and Flaubert’s Frédéric all can and do return to the provincial towns from which they started out. Biberkopf, however, is temporally rather than geographically dislocated. He has no simpler world to which he could return.) This same problem also afflicted German society as a whole during the 1920s. The years of the Weimar Republic were a time of tremendous social, political, and economic progress: a period in German history that brought women’s suffrage and the first democratic elections, did away with censorship and the more medieval aspects of the penal code, and brought the fruits of modernity to ordinary people. Yet German society as a whole never found an adequate response to these developments, never fully accepted the democratic institutions that governed it, and never embraced the new freedoms that it had been given.

In many ways, then, Biberkopf represents the tendencies of his age, internally contradictory as these might have been. This is certainly the way in which Berlin Alexanderplatz was interpreted by its first readers. The respectable Frankfurter Zeitung, which had serialized the novel, received several letters to the editor pleading to “show some consideration for the readership abroad, which should not be privy to such a view of German life.” Clearly these readers went beyond the reaction that Döblin anticipated in his narrator’s preface: they related to Biberkopf not just as a fellow man “in human skin,” but rather more specifically as a contemporary German, fearing that his frequently coarse and violent exploits might be interpreted as national characteristics in the foreign press.

25. Hermann Kasack, “Mosaik: Briefe zu Döblins Berlin Alexanderplatz,” in Materialien zu Alfred Döblin, Berlin Alexanderplatz, ed. Matthias Prangel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 60. This article was first published in the Frankfurter Zeitung of November 1, 1929.

26. These reactions may seem extreme, but it is possible to do them one better by referring to academic literary criticism. In 1968, James H. Reid published an article that interpreted Biberkopf not simply as a paradigmatic German, but rather as an allegory of Weimar Germany: newly released into the world, prone to fall in with the wrong kind of friends, saddled with territorial losses (the amputated arm), and marching into the future with headstrong determination. I will have more to say about such allegorical readings in the conclusion of this study. See James H. Reid, “Berlin Alexanderplatz: A Political Novel,” German Life and Letters 21 (1968): 214–23.
If Döblin’s more naïve readers thus feared *Berlin Alexanderplatz* because the novel held up a mirror to a side of themselves that they would rather not submit to greater scrutiny, Walter Benjamin criticized the work precisely because it does aim, in the end, for some kind of harmony and reconciliation. For much of the story, Biberkopf may march on with almost bovine determination, oblivious to the fact that his “friends” constantly betray him and that he, in turn, inflicts a similar kind of punishment on his long string of girlfriends, to whom he later serves not only as boyfriend, but also as pimp. But by the time that the ninth and final book comes around, he has reached some higher level of awareness about his life, which he immediately transforms into a resolution:

Much unhappiness comes from walking alone. When there are several, it’s somewhat different. I must get the habit of listening to others, for what the others say concerns me, too. Then I learn who I am, and what I can undertake. Everywhere about me my battle is being fought, and I must beware, before I know I’m in the thick of it.

He is assistant door-man in a factory. What is fate anyway? One is stronger than I. If there are two of us, it grows harder to be stronger than I. If there are ten of us, it’s harder still. And if there are a thousand of us and a million, then it’s very hard, indeed.

But it is also nicer and better to be with others. Then I feel and I know everything twice as well. A ship cannot lie in safety without a big anchor, and a man cannot exist without many other men. The true and the false I will know better now. Once I got myself into trouble for a single word and had to pay bitterly for it, this shan’t happen to Biberkopf again. The words come rolling up to us, we must be careful not to get run over; if we don’t watch out for the autobus, it’ll make apple-sauce out of us. I’ll never again stake my word on anything in the world. Dear Fatherland, be comfort thine, I’ll watch, and use these eyes o’mine.

Often they march past his window with flags and music and singing. Biberkopf watches coolly from his door, he’ll not join the parade any more. Shut your trap, in step, old cuss, march along with the rest of us. But if I march along, I shall have to pay for the schemes of others. That’s why I first figure out everything, and only if everything’s quite O.K., and suits me, I’ll take action. Reason is the gift of man, jackasses replace it with a clan. (633–34)

These are not the reflections of an analytically trained mind, nor do they remain entirely steadfast. When Biberkopf dwells for too long on the kind of “words that come rolling up to us,” his thoughts are once again hijacked by “The Watch on the Rhine,” and the chorus of the nationalist song (“Dear Fatherland, be comfort thine”) seamlessly blends with his own mental idiom (“I’ll watch and use these eyes o’mine,” instead of the original “Firm stands and true the watch on the Rhine” [Lieb Vaterland, magst ruhig sein / Fest steht und treu die Wacht am Rhein]). But Biberkopf’s conclusion is nevertheless clear. He renounces his prior egotism, which
caused him to lay the blame for all of his problems on other people, rather than on his frequently execrable behavior, and he now acknowledges that “I must get the habit of listening to others, for what the others say concerns me, too.” At the same time, he has learned to eschew the simplistic politics of community that characterize late Weimar culture and to interrogate everything that he is told. His foot may occasionally still tap to the beat of a marching drum, but his thoughts no longer automatically fall into the same rhythm.

Biberkopf’s resolution, which at once affirms the value of community and stresses the necessity for each individual to maintain his or her separate identity, recalls the quotation from “The Spirit of the Naturalist Age” that identified cities as the “coral reefs for the collective organism man.” Döblin’s analysis of man’s social impulse in that essay similarly stresses a tension between the desire of the individual to find strength in numbers and the desire of the collective to “reduce its members to specialized beings in order to internally differentiate itself”—a problem that, in turn, sounds eerily similar to the one raised in one of the foundational pieces of Bildungsroman criticism, Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man. Döblin’s approach, however, is ultimately very different from Schiller’s. Whereas Schiller saw man’s collective existence realized in the state, Döblin confines his discussion to cities, that is, to empirical entities held together not by law but rather by vernacular quotidian praxis. Identifying as a resident of modern-day Berlin signifies something very different from stepping forward as a citizen of ancient Athens or Sparta. It implies not submission to a specific demos, but rather acculturation to certain customs, rituals, and rhythms that govern everyday life. And these customs, unlike the laws of the state, change and grow organically in tune with the times; they undergo a Bildung of their very own.

Biberkopf’s formation, then, does not result in the creation of an autonomous subject in the way that traditional Bildungsroman criticism imagined this process to work. Döblin’s hero instead maintains a subservient yet critically reflective relationship to the collective entity of which he is an immediate part: the metropolitan identity of Berlin, not the national one of Germany or the statist one of the Prussian-led Reich. Rather than taking his cue from the ideology of imagined communities or from the institutions of an authoritarian state, he models his behavior on the actual community with whom he interacts on an everyday basis, the community of Berliners. This community is clearly “subnational” in one sense, since it is held together by purely local affiliations. But it is also “supranational,” since Berlin is an immigrant capital, and many of the most endearing characters in Döblin’s novel are neither a part of the German national imaginary, nor do they readily submit to Prussian state power.

It is easy to read Biberkopf’s relationship with the built environment that surrounds him in psychoanalytic terms, as a series of coping mechanisms meant to preserve an invariable identity against the pressures of an all-too-variable modern city. In the following passage, for instance, psychic trauma is projected outward, onto a series of rooftops and glass facades that promptly seem to separate from the houses that held them together:

But then his glance slipped with a jerk up the house-fronts, examined them, made sure they were standing still and did not stir, although really a house like that has lots of windows and could easily bend forward. That might get the roofs started, carry them along with it, they are liable to start rocking. They might begin to shake, to rock, to jolt. The roofs could slide down, obliquely like sand, like a hat falling down from a head. Why, they’re all, yes, all of them, standing obliquely over the roof-tree along the whole row. But they’re nailed down fast, strong beams below and then the roofing, the tar. Firm stands and true, the watch, the watch on the Rhine. (165–66)

The same passage can, however, also be read in the opposite direction, as a merciless laying bare of the relentless pace of urban modernization by means of a prophetic vision. The visual vocabulary of Berlin Alexanderplatz is thus more complexly coded than it is in the masterworks of expressionist cinema, such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) or The Blue Angel (1930). The angled streetscapes, which tower over the protagonist and are seemingly ready to collapse at any minute, do not merely signify the pent-up anxieties that are a by-product of cultural sublimation and therefore of internal modernization. They are also visual correlatives of external urban modernization, which in turn sets into motion a complex chain of psychological responses. Biberkopf’s instinctive reaction, which is once again to hum “The Watch on the Rhine,” is comically inadequate to the situation with which he is confronted, and not just because the nineteenth-century lyrics about military prowess have been rendered absurd by the mechanized warfare that we know him to have witnessed at Arras. His problems also arise from the fact that the old equation, in which the psychic integrity of the bourgeois subject is matched with the territorial integrity of the nation-state, has been rendered absurd by the cityscape of modern Berlin.

The same dual movement between subjective and objective world, between individual and urban environment, can also be observed in one of the most famous passages of Berlin Alexanderplatz: the opening scene of book 5, in which the narrator describes the giant pile-driver that is laying down tracks for the city’s newest subway line: “Boom, boom, the steam pile-driver thumps in front of Aschinger’s on the Alex. It’s one story high, and knocks the rails into the ground as if they were nothing at all” (216). The psychic damage that is wrought by this primordial manifestation of urban renewal becomes evident only a page later, when the narrator interrupts his description of the changes imposed on the city with an otherwise
unmotivated conjugation of the verb “to beat”: “They have torn down Loeser and Wolff with their mosaic sign, 20 yards further on they built it up again, and there’s another branch over there in front of the station. . . . I beat everything, you beat everything, he beats everything with boxes of 50 and cardboard packages of 10, can be mailed to every country on earth, Boyero 25 pfennigs, this novelty has won us many friends, I beat everything, but I never retreat” (217–18). Yet another few pages later, the internalized violence becomes external again, when it is projected onto the steam pile-driver, which now becomes imbued with a destructive agency of its own: “Rrr, rrr. The pile-driver thumps down, I beat everything, another rail” (222).

Far from being structural opposites in a novel that vacillates between descriptions of human subjectivity and urban environments, Döblin’s protagonist and the city in which he lives thus exist in a kind of codependent relationship. Sabine Hake speaks, in this context, of metropolitan Berlin as a “production site of the modern mass individual or, to use a more accurate term, the post-humanist subject.” Drawing heavily on theoretical models developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, she further interprets Biberkopf’s strolls through the city as those of a paranoid schizophrenic, occupied with a “gradual dismantling of the oedipal structure and its replacement by an all-encompassing, but highly volatile, narcissistic complex.”

I myself am less willing to sacrifice the territory of classical humanism (which is, after all, the logical domain of the novel of formation) for the theoretical allure of the posthuman. Döblin’s image of the city as a coral reef, and of individual human subjects as its constituent polyps, is undoubtedly posthumanist, but as I tried to show by grounding Biberkopf’s struggle in the concrete reality of Weimar modernization, the literary realization of this metaphor in Berlin Alexanderplatz introduces (rather than forecloses) new tropes of historical emplotment. Schizophrenia, which is the name commonly given to any psychic disorder marked by the inability to maintain a coherent identity over time, is surely the opposite if not of “history” as such, then at least of “historicism” in the traditional sense of the term. If this is true, then any “schizoanalytic” reading of Döblin’s text would necessarily have to pit itself against the historicist legacy of the classical Bildungsroman. By contrast, I would like to propose that Berlin Alexanderplatz stages not “urban paranoia,” but rather the creation of a new rhythmic synchrony between the Bildungsroman hero and his environment—a synchrony premised not on the concept of the nation, but rather on that of the modern city. Cities, unlike nations, are naturally permeable and mutable entities. Except in some very rare instances that themselves do violence to what an urban environment should be (Berlin between 1961 and 1989, for instance) they aren’t surrounded by demarcated borders but rather fade gradually

into the surrounding countryside. Nor are they generally subject to the same kind of emotional and ideological cathexis that nation-states are; transformative change is, instead, an important source of pride for the typical inhabitant of a modern metropolis. Döblin’s challenge, then, was to create the same kind of relationship between his protagonist Franz Biberkopf and the city of Berlin that the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* found in the homology of the individual subject and the nation.

From the very beginning, the technical vocabulary used to describe modernist city texts has owed a heavy debt to the discipline of psychoanalysis, which emerged alongside the twentieth-century metropolis. “Shock,” “trauma,” “rupture,” “paranoia,” and even “schizophrenia” figure large in such accounts. Occluded in many discussions is the positive role that urban environments can play in the structuring of human experience. Far from being merely the source of countless essentially random shock experiences, the modern city is instead a place where different communities, classes, and ethnicities intermingle, rendering identities fluid and forcing individuals into a constant dialogue with their surroundings. Unlike the nation, which is an imaginative construction premised on a theoretical ideal of existential homogeneity, the modern city takes shape through the practical and quotidian experience of existential *multiplicity*. This “vernacular” quality manifests itself not only on the level of content (e.g., in the fact that a typical modernist city text features a much more diverse set of characters than a realist country-house novel, or even a work by Dickens), but also on the level of form. The competing experiences that characterize the metropolis require different kinds of temporal organization, and thus each possesses what Joyce himself called an “individuating rhythm.” This polyrhythmic complexity works against the totalizing logic of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, but it need not negate the genre altogether. Joyce and Döblin instead embrace the chaos of the urban environment and use it to shape a new kind of formative fiction.

**The Slaughterhouse and the Train Car**

Unlike Wilhelm Meister, who eventually penetrates into the panoptical tower that has been surveilling, administrating, and recording his life, Franz Biberkopf never settles his differences with the Prussian state. He remains an inscrutable cipher for both the police and the medical professionals who examine him after his arrest following Mieze’s murder and a barroom brawl. Biberkopf’s epiphany instead takes place in the closed ward of the Buch insane asylum—another locus of state power, to be sure, but also a place where the state confines those over whom it implicitly acknowledges having lost all dominion. In this borderline space—a “heterotopia” rather than a panopticon, to stay with the language of Michel Foucault—Biberkopf struggles with death and experiences a feverish vision of the city’s Eastern hinterland that leads him toward his final realization of who he truly is:
So let it come—the night, however black and nothing-like it be. So let them come, the
black night, those frost-covered acres, the hard frozen roads. So let them come: the
lonely, tile-roofed houses whence gleams a reddish light; so let them come: the shiv-
ering wanderers, the drivers on the farm wagons traveling to town with vegetables
and the little horses in front. The great flat silent plains crossed by suburban trains
and expresses which throw white light into the darkness on either side of them. So let
them come—the men in the station, the little girl’s farewell to her parents, she’s trav-
eling with two older acquaintances, going across the big water, we’ve got our tickets,
but good Lord, what a little girl, eh, but she’ll get used to it over there, if she’s a good
little girl it’ll be all right. So let them come and be absorbed: the cities which lie along
the same line, Breslau, Liegnitz, Sommerfeld, Guben, Frankfurt on the Oder, Berlin,
the train passes through them from station to station, from the stations emerge the cit-
ies, the cities with their big and little streets. Berlin with Schweidnitzer Strasse, with
the Grosse Ring of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Strasse, Kurfürstendamm, and everywhere
are homes in which people are warming themselves, looking at each other with lov-
ing eyes, or sitting coldly next to each other; dirty dumps and dives where a man is
playing the piano. (607–8)

The generic status of this dream fragment is difficult to decide. Clearly, it does not
belong to the same Homeric or biblical register that characterizes so many of the
novel’s “epic” intrusions. Perhaps its closest analogue is the long description of the
slaughterhouses in the fourth book of Berlin Alexanderplatz, a passage to which it in-
deed bears a strong resemblance. Both the slaughterhouse narrative and the dream
fragment tell the story of migratory train travels from the east to the west, from
the provinces into urban centers: on the one hand, the voyage of “specimens of the
genus sheep, hog, ox, from East Prussia, Pomerania, Brandenburg, West Prussia”
(174); on the other, the journey of a young Silesian girl to Berlin and, presumably,
from there on further west to Scheffler’s cities of the “American outback.” In both
passages, the city is also characterized first and foremost as a succession of rings
made up of broad streets like the Kaiser-Wilhelm Strasse, the Kurfürstendamm,
and the Landsberger Allee, and of railway tracks.

In the slaughterhouse passage, however, these city streets resemble fortifications.
To the modern reader, they likely recall descriptions of concentration camps, or
perhaps the inner-German border of 1961–89: “Along Eldenaer Strasse run the
dirty-gray walls topped with barbed wire. The trees outside are bare, it is winter,
the trees have sent their sap into the roots, to wait for spring.” The atmosphere
here is depressed, characterized by opportunism and cruelty: “Slaughter wagons
roll up at a smart gallop, with yellow and red wheels, prancing horses in front.
A skinny horse runs along behind a wagon, from the sidewalk somebody calls
‘Emil,’ they bargain about the old nag, 50 marks and a round for the eight of us,
the horse turns, trembles, nibbles at a tree, the driver tears it away, 50 marks and a
round, Otto, otherwise we’ll let it drop” (173). Döblin’s prose also veers back into
monologic bureaucratese: the narrator meticulously lists lot sizes (“47.88 hectares, equal to 118.31 acres”) and real-estate prices (“27,083,492 marks were sunk into this construction, of which sum the cattle-yard cost 7,682,844 marks, and the slaughter-house 19,410,648 marks” [173]). We learn that the stockyards employ an administrative staff of 17 and a further 258 employees. If the slaughterhouse is a synecdoche for the city as a whole, then it is a city of the worst kind, in which urban space has simply been turned into an administrative unit.

Franz Biberkopf’s fever dream, on the other hand, presents a very different kind of city image, even though it employs many of the same descriptive elements. The streets are not fortified enclosures but instead sprout organically from train tracks that in turn connect them to a far-reaching communications network. Horses trot gaily in front of farm wagons loaded with vegetables, not with the carcasses of fellow beasts. And human beings, at least some of them, have homes to go back to, private retreats where they can gather warmth and strength. This is the positive side of Döblin’s vision of the city as a giant coral reef, in which the overall entity is only as alive as the multitude of its constituent parts.

This fever dream of a train journey represents the pivotal point in Franz Biberkopf’s development into a man who has been “bent straight” (2), just as the train journey to Cork represents a pivotal point in Stephen Dedalus’s autopoiesis. In either case, the “frost-covered acres” and “hard-frozen roads” that glide by outside the windows represent not only a landscape (though they represent that, too) but also an emotional attachment that needs to be overcome through a new form of spatial organization, a new way of dwelling and being. For Stephen Dedalus, this attempt takes the form of Parisian exile, and thus of another journey from the periphery to the center; it wasn’t until *Ulysses* that Joyce fully realized the power of native Irish spaces to articulate a “vernacular” critique of national belonging. On the other hand, a spatial dislocation is never an option for Franz Biberkopf, who, like his creator, is entirely the product of a metropolitan environment.

What makes city spaces so attractive to cosmopolitan projects is, of course, the fact that they offer spaces in which people who might otherwise never encounter one another can mingle. For the *Bildungsroman*, this means in concrete terms not only a new openness toward hitherto unknown subject matter, but also an opportunity for a break with the historicist logic that characterizes nineteenth-century examples of the genre. Modern cities do not submit to the developmental logic according to which imagined communities come into being through the experience of a common trajectory through time; instead, they present both individuals and local communities with a chance to organize around “individuating rhythms.” Both Joyce and Döblin dramatize this search for an individuating rhythm in their novels. Modernist devices such as montage and stream of consciousness allow them to play with the ways in which narrative transforms time into experiences, while the use of local idioms, such as the Berlin patois, enables them to escape the administrative grip of the twentieth-century state. Of course, Joyce, in transitioning from
A Portrait to Ulysses, also decided to leave the Bildungsroman conventions behind, and to focus his gaze on a single day in the life of Dublin. But Döblin’s strong belief in the organic life of cities allowed him to situate Berlin itself on a new kind of developmental trajectory. Just as Biberkopf turns from a delusional fool into a man of modest wisdom, the city itself turns from an uncompromising slaughterhouse into a welcoming environment. With this move, Döblin shows that human historicity and the time of the city, Bildungsroman and Großstadtroman are ultimately reconcilable to one another, and he also proves that the characteristic nonsynchronicity of the Weimar Republic can be read as a symptom of an emergence into a properly global modernity.