As German as Kafka

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CHAPTER 3

CITY DWELLERS
BETWEEN DIFFERENCE
AND INDIFFERENCE

3.1 Images of the city: emancipatory visions and spatialized difference

In an interview for the journal *Transit*, the Hungarian-born writer Terézia Mora discusses the artistic impetus that comes with her residence in Berlin. Inspiration and creation are, to her, inextricably bound up with living space, and only in Berlin does she experience a sense of artistic liberation:

It has become clear to me that I need this and no other place to write what I want to write. I have a feeling of insanely irritating alienation everywhere, really everywhere in the world, in every place, even in the place where I was born.

[[Es] ist mir klar geworden, dass ich diesen und keinen anderen Ort brauche, um das zu schreiben, was ich schreiben will. Ich habe überall, wirklich überall auf der Welt, an jedem Ort, auch an dem Ort, an dem ich geboren wurde, das Gefühl von irrsinnig irritierender Fremdheit.]¹

While *Fremdheit* may be a recurring theme throughout her writings, it is, as she indicates herself, not a matter of ‘foreignness’—of autobiography, a lost *Heimat*, or the experience of being displaced. Nor does she consider the city’s inspirational
quality in terms of its lived character, the visual abundance of architecture, bustling streets, or cultural diversity. Rather, the city releases her from an existential alienation that she associates with being unable to articulate herself:

I am very susceptible to disturbances, and I work slowly, and I have to get rid of this alienation before I can say a word. And Berlin is the only place that disturbs me so little in my existence that it becomes possible, that there is enough air and space.

[Ich bin sehr störungsanfällig, und ich arbeite langsam, und ich muss mich dieser Fremdheit erst entledigt haben, bevor ich ein Wort sagen kann. Und Berlin ist der einzige Ort, der mich so wenig stört in meiner Existenz, dass das möglich ist, dass da genügend Luft ist und Raum.]

A condition of, rather than a challenge to her artistic self-understanding, Berlin offers Mora the exact opposite of the Reiz that inspired so many modernists of the early twentieth century; to her, Berlin is a silent backdrop that accommodates her literary voice.

Berlin: image of an unsettled national identity

Mora’s statement bespeaks the versatility of the metropolis as a literary concept. Attempts to decode the artistic appeal of the city, beyond that which Klaus Scherpe defined as the “unreality of cities [Unwirklichkeit der Städte],” easily lapse into commonplace. While it may not always have been considered beneficial to one’s sense of self—as it does to Mora—Berlin has most certainly and most profoundly inspired several generations of artists in various ways. German literature has featured the metropolis throughout the entire twentieth century, from avant-garde experiment to the (Post-) Wandeliteratur of the 1990s, in addition to a revival of Pop-Literatur in the early 2000s. Berlin modeled in the development of artistic concepts that explore subjectivity in relation to either real or fictional, textual spaces against the backdrop of German (national) history. Alfred Döblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz (1929) and Rainer Maria Rilke’s Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) are paradigmatic of the modernist urban experience, depicting city dwellers whose visual and corporeal experience in a “shocking perceptual space [schockierender Wahrnehmungsraum]” leads to fragmentation and alienation. While by the end of the twentieth century, focus had shifted from the sensory impact onto imaginary and semiotic significance, the metropolis has remained a typical locus of Verfremdung. As Erk Grimm observes, the individual
in contemporary texts “cannot simply be resynthesized [kann [...] nicht einfach
resynthetisiert werden]” and is best understood as a “polycentric subject
[polyzentrisches Subjekt]”, “already disintegrated in modernity and trapped in its
alienation [schon in der Moderne zerfallen und in seiner Alienation gefangen].”

Berlin furthermore symbolizes a historical and political dimension of
alienation and fragmentation. Once the symbol of an ideologically divided
world, Berlin remains, even as the capital of a unified Germany, the image of
an unsettled national identity. In his acclaimed study Ghosts of Berlin, Brian
Ladd calls Berlin “a haunted city,” where the present always bears the traces of
Germany’s past, and where remembrance and a desire to forget are in permanent
dialogue: “The calls for remembrance—and the calls for silence and forgetting
make all silence and all forgetting impossible, and they also make remembrance
difficult.” Adding to this ambiguity of memory, Berlin symbolizes Germany’s
contested status as Einwanderungsland. Migration and plurality determine
its everyday reality—“Large cities are immigration magnets [Großstädte
sind Zuwanderungsmagneten]” is the hardly surprising conclusion of a 2013
microcensus. The study observes that a current “renaissance of cities [Renaissance
der Städte]” is mostly due to a considerable increase of inhabitants with a migration
background, which compensates for tendencies of Stadtflicht. Historically
as well, urban development has thrived on the dynamism of newcomers and
minority cultures—from French Huguenots and Bohemian religious refugees
in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to Polish immigrants throughout
the twentieth century, and, of course, the Jewish community, which contributed
considerably to Berlin’s economic and cultural life. The historical normality
of transit and intercultural exchange is, of course, not exclusive to Berlin. Large
cities are, in Erol Yildiz’s words, “sites of uncertainty and unfamiliarity [Orte der
Ungewissheit und des Fremden]:

They hold niches ready for idiosyncratic self-designs, provide a daily
experience of transitions, interstices, and new beginnings. [...] This
urban diversity is not a static juxtaposition of disparate elements that
like mosaic tiles result in a uniform overall picture but, rather, is to be
found in movement and counter-movement, alternating mixing and
discontinuities that repeatedly force reorientation and a change of
perspective.

[S]ie halten Nischen bereit für eigenwillige Selbstentwürfe, bieten die täg-
liche Erfahrung von Übergängen, Zwischenräumen und Neuanfängen. [...] Diese urbane Diversität ist kein statisches Nebeneinander unterschiedlicher
As such, the metropolis and Berlin, in particular, challenge notions of national identity defined as a static German *Leitkultur*. Berlin indeed owes its endless artistic appeal to an entanglement of its particular memory with the urban dynamism that resists translation into myths of nation, language, ethnicity, or religion. Its “complex intertwining of history, memory, architecture, and apparitions of national identity,” as Azade Seyhan notes, “implicitly and explicitly perform[s] an ongoing discourse of the city [...].” A witness to European history and at the same time a tangible illustration of Germany as a country of immigration, Berlin has become for many artists “a desired object of affiliation, for it represents a territory to which no essentialist national interest can lay claim.” Indeed, the metropolis can be regarded as in and of itself cosmopolitan, a place where artists can find refuge from enforced cultural identities and national affiliations: “The writer does not have to swear allegiance to the nation in the cosmopolitan city; she or he is only the citizen of the city.” According to James Donald, city life constitutes “a normative ideal” beyond cultural and national belonging. It acknowledges the “desire for the security of home, but also the inevitability of migration, change, and conflict, and so too the ethical need for an openness to unassimilated otherness.” The upside of the paradigmatic experience of alienation, in a city where everyone is a stranger, is the opportunity to live according to one’s own principles, undisturbed by tradition, culture, or nationality. *Fremdheit*, then, is not merely an isolating but also an emancipatory aspect of city life.

**Indifference to difference**

As early as 1903, Georg Simmel reflected on the nature of modern metropolitan subjectivity. In his well-known essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life [Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben],” he discusses the significance of urban anonymity in emancipation and liberation. Simmel ascribes the modern city resident a general indifference to difference. Confronted with its elementary form of experience, the shock, the city dweller is forced to develop an “intellectuality [Verstandesmäßigkeit]” that is seen to preserve subjective life against “the overwhelming power of metropolitan life [gegen die Vergewaltigungen der Großstadt].” The metropolitan’s “blasé attitude [Blasiertheit]” is at once
“stimulus shield and distancing device [Reizschutz und Distanzorgan],” without which he would be at the mercy of an overwhelming abundance of stimuli.

Simmel bridges two seemingly contradictory notions of modern(ist) subjectivity and authorship. On the one hand, the modernist “crisis of the senses” implies a “world-sensitive” subject, characterized by experiences of distraction, disintegration, and a loss of self. On the other hand, modernist fiction is commonly associated with formal mastery and the invention of a unique personal style, implying a strongly individualistic notion of subjectivity and authorship, marked by observational, intellectual, or skeptical distance. This “defensive” approach is, from Simmel’s perspective, simply an alternative manifestation of the same loss of self: both the authorial voice embodied in formal mastery and its fragmentation are literary expressions of the same experience. Simmel suggests that, paradoxically, detachment derives from susceptibility to experiences and does not amount to a simple retreat into isolation. The city dweller’s blasé character even constitutes a moment of individual liberation, emancipation, and socialization. The internal unity of a group, Simmel writes, loses coherence to the extent that it increases numerically, spatially, or in terms of life purposes, allowing the individual a freedom of movement beyond previous limitations. Due to the abundance of differences and external stimuli in modern city life, the city dweller loses the desire or the capacity to give meaning to it and is encouraged to assert himself beyond familiar differences and relations, thus escaping the exigencies of traditional community life. In this respect, Simmel acknowledges the modern metropolis as a fundamentally social space—not as a collection of isolated individuals, but as a “functional extension beyond its physical boundaries [funktionell[e] Größe jenseits ihrer physischen Grenzen]:”

Man does not end with the limits of his body or the area comprising his immediate activity. Rather is the range of the person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially. In the same way, a city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its immediate confines. Only this range is the city’s actual extent in which its existence is expressed.

[Wie ein Mensch nicht zu Ende ist mit den Grenzen seines Körpers oder des Bezirkes [...] sondern erst mit der Summe der Wirkungen, die sich von ihm aus zeitlich oder räumlich erstrecken: so besteht auch eine Stadt erst aus der Gesamtheit der über ihre Unmittelbarkeit hinausreichenden Wirkungen. Dies erst ist ihr wirklicher Umfang, in dem sich ihr Sein ausspricht.]
The city as a site of Jewish self-definition

In the context of identity debates, both at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century, the city has acquired highly ambivalent connotations. It is often associated with cosmopolitan and emancipatory tendencies—Berlin in particular is considered to challenge notions of static cultural identity. Yet the city provides a popular image in support of exclusionary discourse as well. The city then becomes a projection screen for destructive stereotype and irreconcilable difference, a site where liberating encounters are kept at bay.

Many European Jews were drawn to the cosmopolitan aspect of the metropolis, as it provided an alternative to the dilemma between commitment to the Jewish community and pressure to ‘dissolve’ into their host societies. “The idea of cosmopolitanism in its modern incarnation,” as Miller and Ury observe, “presents itself as the standard bearer of the struggle of the universal against the particular, or the interests of humanity against this or that local community.” That ideal was to a large extent rooted in urban culture. Urbanization played a significant role in the Jewish process of self-definition and in coming to terms with the challenges of modernity. Processes of acculturation, secularization, and social mobility coincided with (though were not strictly dependent on) that of urbanization, a process that took place two to three times faster in the Jewish community than in society as a whole. In contrast to the old rural shtetl and urban immigrant neighborhoods, which were usually strongly influenced by traditional Jewish culture and tradition, the cosmopolitan appeal of the metropolis fit well the adoption of the ethic of Bildung as an emancipatory strategy. Berlin stood out as a city inhabited by a wealthy, educated Jewish middle class, and although the Jewish community never constituted more than four percent of Berlin’s overall population, their contribution to its intellectual and economic life exceeded their demographic representation. Berlin provided ample opportunity for experiment in the many semi-public places of artistic and cultural creation, which became popular sites for artists of disparate backgrounds and inclinations to meet and exchange ideas.

Noah Isenberg concludes that the city thus became “a place where Jews tend[ed] to define themselves in terms of their Germanness more than their Jewishness.” Even so, any acculturative optimism was also met with distinct German-Jewish anti-urban sentiments mourning the loss of authentic Jewish culture in city life. In an article for Die Freistatt, Arnold Zweig, who had Zionist and socialist sympathies, counters anti-Semitic attempts “to deny Jews their creativity [den Juden das Schöpferische abzusprechen].” Zweig attributes the perceived inability of German Jews “to produce an ingenious poet [einen
genialen Dichter zu erzeugen]” to their enforced urban existence and alienation from their Völksgemeinschaft: “The metropolis has become his surrogate for the lost community of the people in his own state. [Die Großstadt wird ihm zum Surrogat für die verlorene Gemeinschaft des Volkes im eigenen Staat.]” What Simmel considered a liberation also signaled to some Jews a loss of authentic identity and rekindled their desire for a unified Gemeinschaft. The tension between emancipatory and anti-urban positions grew especially urgent with the mass immigration of Ostjuden into larger cities, further fueling the debate on German-Jewish identity. The overwhelming presence of Ostjuden in Berlin, in the Scheunenviertel ghetto, polarized opinions of German Jewry regarding the potential impact on their self-perception. To convinced Zionists and opponents of assimilation, the Ostjude represented an untainted pre-urban authenticity to be protected from “the backlash of emancipation: the massive trend in baptisms, the destruction of Jewish family life, and, most significantly, the disruptive forces of the cities.” At the same time, to a majority of Germans Jews, Berlin remained a space of accelerated secularization and acculturation. Early twentieth-century Berlin was, in conclusion, a “laboratory and prism of modernity,” a site of alienation, but at the same time a site of cultural pluralism and emancipation.

**Urban stereotype and spatialized difference**

The metropolis may thrive on the dynamism of migration and diversity, but discourses of the city are often intent on keeping otherness at bay. Its emancipatory promise then turns into the opposite: the city becomes a projection screen for exclusionary discourse, destructive stereotype, and irreconcilable difference.

Today, the term Parallelgesellschaft, having gained currency in German public debates since the 2000s, is part of an urban integration discourse that casts cultural difference into stone. Introduced in urban sociology in the 1990s in the context of ethnic segregation in German cities, there remains a lack of consistent evidence that such areas are indeed monocultural “ethnic colonies.” Nevertheless, the notion has been readily deployed in German public debates to denounce the perceived unwillingness to integrate that these areas are thought to represent. Criticizing this Paniksemantik, Bade points out that the term creates a false impression of political and scientific consensus, and that spatial separation is unjustly perceived as a withdrawal into anti-Western tendencies. The current usage of the term illustrates how urban imagery serves the discursive consolidation of cultural difference—or “[h]ow strangers are made [wie Fremde gemacht werden].”
The historical example of Berlin Jews reveals a similar discursive ambivalence. In their case, too, the city was not merely a site of self-expression and emancipation but also the source of anti-Semitic stereotype. According to Joachim Schlör, the construction of a Jewish “urban type [Urbantyp]” or “urban race [Stadtrasse]” had been a crucial element in modern Jewish self-definition. At the same time, such types became a device of anti-Semitic, anti-urbanist, anti-modern discourses. As Isenberg summarizes, “[w]hile German Zionists focused on the rapid decline of Judaism due to modernization and urban growth, German nationalists exploited such data to support their claims of the impending [...] Jewish contamination of the German city.” The assimilated German Jew thus came to represent cosmopolitan mass society and modernity in general. Exemplary of that reactionary discursive link are the writings of social and economic historian Werner Sombart. In a monograph on Jews and modern economic life, Sombart argues that the Jews are pre-eminently urban people. Despite their assimilation and ‘invisibility’, their diasporic history and nomadic origins had prepared them exceptionally well for the economic and cultural restlessness of modern city life. Their “intellectual rootlessness, combined with a nomadic adaptability enables [them] to place themselves ‘in another’s position’, a capacity for empathy that allows them to excel in journalism, jurisprudence, and theater—the three most distinctive and, to his mind, most troubling expressions of urban culture.” Yet even the Ostjude, who lived separated from modernity and was hailed by Zionists as the epitome of authenticity, was perceived to confirm the affinity between Jews and city life. The ghetto Jew represented “the quintessential urban Volk” and became “a master icon of identification for Jews at large.” The image of the Ostjude—his conspicuous difference and stereotypical physiognomy—shaped the suspected invisible cultural difference of assimilated German Jews.

A foil of metropolitan indifference and anonymity, twentieth-century Berlin has provided the scene for intensive identity negotiation and artistic self-expression. Against the backdrop of opposing liberal and reactionary tendencies, the city dweller navigates between emancipatory vision and reductive stereotype, between enforced identity and self-liberation. The current chapter examines four texts with regard to their literary approaches to the intangible experience of Fremdheit or Verfremdung, an apparent constant in urban narratives of the modern individual. Crucial to these stories is the ambiguity of alienation—the distancing that Simmel interprets as at once defensive and liberating, and which manifests itself as either differential, in Ludwig Jacobowski’s Werther, der Jude (1892) and Terézia Mora’s Alle Tage (2004); or as relational, in Franz Hessel’s Spazieren in Berlin (1929) and Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s story “Der Hof im
Spiegel” (2001). In all four examples, the metropolitan experience supports the recalibration of the autonomous, Enlightened individual. The city emerges as an ambivalent space that exposes the futility of emancipatory effort and erodes individualistic self-assertion but at the same time engenders experiences of vulnerability and the potential for reconnection. The four city dwellers discussed here illustrate how neither radical individualism nor collectivism can lay claim to the city. Rather, the city space enables a resistance to immanence.

3.2 The failure of exemplarity—‘Figures of immanence’: Ludwig Jacobowski’s Werther, der Jude (1892) versus Terézia Mora’s Alle Tage (2004)

Exemplarity, identification, alienation

Born in a Jewish merchant’s family, Ludwig Jacobowski (1868–1900) moved with his family from Strelno, Posen to Berlin in 1874, where he studied history, literature, and philosophy. After obtaining his doctoral degree in literature, Jacobowski became a prominent figure in the publishing field, as co-editor of several literary anthologies, as founder of the magazine Der Zeitgenosse, and as editor-in-chief of Die Gesellschaft. Halbmonatsschrift für Litteratur, Kunst und Sozialpolitik, a leading magazine of the naturalist movement. Shortly before he died, Jacobowski founded Die Kommenden, a reader’s circle attended by Stefan Zweig, Else Lasker-Schüler, and Rudolf Steiner. A prolific writer, Jacobowski published his work in over thirty magazines and newspapers. Both his fictional and essayistic writings are concerned with matters of Jewish life and culture, on the whole reflecting the liberal-humanist views of the Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus, of which Jacobowski was a member as well. He was convinced that the solution to increasing anti-Semitic sentiment was to be found in a common ideological platform for Germans and Jews, where a tolerant and progressive German Geist would accommodate the aspirations of a new Jewish generation “to participate honestly, genuinely, and warmly in the further development of the German people [um ehrlich, echt und warm theilzunemen an der [...] Fortentwicklung des deutschen Volkes].” When he became acquainted with the idea of Zionism shortly before his death, he remained convinced that German culture and literature would remain not only his personal Heimat but also that of Berlin Jews in general.
Werther, der Jude reflects Jacobowski’s commitment to the Jewish cause. It appears to be what he considered an instance of successful German-Jewish cultural symbiosis, “the epitome of what German-Jewish literature should be about.” The novel transposes the main theme of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774) onto the quandary of German Jews. Against a Berlin backdrop, Jacobowski relates the story of Jewish philosophy student Leo Wolff, whose determined effort at ethical improvement through Bildung is thwarted by anti-Semitic sentiment encountered in every aspect of his social life: in the streets of Berlin, in the lower middle class family of his (Christian) girlfriend Helene, and most significantly among his fellow fraternity members. Leo’s unrequited love of German culture eventually leads to his downfall; he shoots himself and dies in the arms of his (gentile) friend.

Jacobowski’s adaptation of Goethe’s epistolary novel received wide popular acclaim, particularly from mainstream liberal German Jewry. It remained in print for almost forty years. Its resonance with an assimilated audience was in part due to its claim to exemplarity. Paul Rieger, a prominent figure of the liberal Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens, praised Werther, der Jude for its depiction of the protagonist’s individual struggles in such a way that it offered a “symbolic transfiguration of the modern sufferings” of all German Jews. Leo’s exemplarity, however tragic, was read as an encouragement to counter anti-Semitism with a Jewish effort at ethical improvement, by “envisioning a scenario in which Jews [would] embody the grandeur of German classical humanism.” Indeed, in the preface, Jacobowski presents his novel as a promotion of assimilation, in spite of emerging Jewish nationalist tendencies—he defends “always only the one direction: integral absorption into the German spirit and German morality [immer nur die eine Wegrichtung: Restloses Aufgehen in deutschen Geist und deutsche Gesittung].” However, while Werther, der Jude seems to set out as a German-Jewish Bildungsroman, the protagonist’s aspiration to become a ‘better’ Jew eventually ends in tragedy. His exemplarity as an assimilated Jew draws on an Enlightened notion of self-improvement. Yet several aspects of the story indicate that that notion is losing ground, setting the novel apart from a tradition of German-Jewish Bildungsnovelle. As an instance of psychological naturalism, Werther, der Jude prefigures the dissolution of an autonomous subject seemingly impervious to social influence. Not only does Leo appear to have internalized anti-Semitic prejudice, he is moreover confronted with it in the one paradigmatic locus of Bildung—at university. The novel evokes a pervasive anti-Semitism that affects both the vehicle and the optimism of assimilation, thus containing a hint of fatalism regarding its own exemplary purpose, despite Jacobowski’s explicit intent.
Alle Tage, too, addresses the destructiveness of stereotype and imposed identification but does so in a very different way than Jacobowski’s novel, especially with regard to the role of exemplarity. Exemplarity establishes a relationship between particular characteristics and an abstract, conceptual whole. It aims at reader identification: “The ‘whole’ [...] is not just the whole of the work but that of a world of which the work is a part, and to which the work and the exemplary instance within it are tied by the work’s claim to relevance, to legibility.”

The exemplarity of Werther, der Jude indeed follows an “always-unstated logic according to which readers identify with the characters of a work, or by which they may search in it for indications of how to live.” In Alle Tage, however, the exemplary protagonist is designed to impede that logic. The narrative structure of the novel fosters alienation, subverting the very principle of identification. The novel portrays the futile efforts of war refugee and language prodigy Abel Nema at finding solid ground in an unspecified German metropolis. As the ‘symbolic transfiguration’ of ‘the stranger’, of the rootless immigrant roaming the margins of society, Abel embodies the inversion of Leo Wolff’s rational self-sufficiency. Unlike Leo, who believes himself on a linear path of self-improvement, Abel is a decentered, radically ‘postmodern’ figure, a faltering subject who fails to steer his life into a particular direction. He exists merely through external determination. Whereas Leo embodies the author’s programmatic intent and confidence in the Enlightened individual, Abel’s non-identity is a device in a narrative, linguistic, and philosophical puzzle that questions the legitimacy of a subject with an appointed subject position. In terms of successful Subjektwerdung, each novel suggests that, in the end, neither the ‘autonomous’ nor the ‘deconstructed’ extreme is viable.

Jacobowski’s and Mora’s opposite uses of exemplarity—identification versus alienation—traces back to their poetological views. Jacobowski’s novelistic work pursued the same purpose as his contributions for the Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus, which “directed its energies both at unmasking the irrational nature of antisemitism and at encouraging internal Jewish efforts at ethical improvement.” Mora, on the other hand, claims to have no such educational intentions. When asked about the “vanishing point [Flüchtpunkt]” of her writing—whether it is part of an “Enlightenment project [aufklärerisches Projekt]” or responds to a need for genial self-expression, she states that, to her, “to be a writer and to be present in one’s life [Schriftstellerin zu sein und in seinem Leben anwesend zu sein]” are one and the same thing. The significance of her work should be found in existential rather than quantifiable elements: “Art has no purpose, it has a reason. [...] To a successful work of art, there is always this inexplicable and incomprehensible dimension that has come into being, even
though I did not make it. [Kunst hat kein Ziel, sondern einen Grund. [...] Es gibt immer diesen unerklärbaren und unfassbaren Bereich, der in einem gelungenen Kunstwerk da ist, der entstanden ist, obwohl ich ihn nicht gemacht habe.] 65 Her statement indirectly responds to the critical tendency to interpret a text in terms of its author’s biography, and, in a similar vein, to attribute a sense of Fremdheit to novels by writers of ‘non-German’ origin, which forces them into an artificial framework of, indeed, exemplarity of cultural difference:

You are estranged from yourself or have a sense of foreignness because you do not live in the same place you were born, or because you have another or two more mother tongues. But of course otherness does not work at this level at all. I’m sorry, but it’s not that way.

[[M]an ist sich selbst entfremdet oder hat ein Fremdheitsgefühl, weil man nicht an dem Ort lebt, an dem man geboren wurde, oder weil man noch eine weitere oder noch zwei weitere Muttersprachen hat. Aber natürlich funktioniert Fremdsein überhaupt nicht auf dieser Ebene. Tut mir leid, aber es ist nicht so!] 66

Mora emphasizes that the significance of any work of art, and its inherent Fremdheit, goes beyond intention, purpose, or biography—as her own perspective on her life and works illustrates. Mora was born in 1971 in a Hungarian town, Sopron, near the Austrian border. She belonged to the German-speaking minority that had lived there since the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy. She left for Berlin in 1990, where she completed her education in Hungarian, theatre studies, and screenwriting. When Mora was awarded the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 2010, she was lauded for her contribution to intercultural exchange that altered the German “view of one’s own culture as well as of the foreign culture [Blick auf die eigene, wie auch auf die fremde Kultur].” 67 However, such references to being a “border crosser [Grenzüberschreiterin]” are, for Mora, relevant only in aesthetic terms, never in terms of her personal history. Crossing boundaries is an indispensable quality for any artist. 68 Likewise, she considers her linguistic sensibility not really as a side-effect of her bilingualism but of her fundamental distrust towards language and narration in general. 69 Additionally, the fact that her work reflects her affinity with the German literary Moderne—Alle Tage contains allusions and references to the writings of Franz Kafka, Alfred Döblin, and Ingeborg Bachmann—is far from an indication that she strives for an assimilatory, ‘integral absorption’ into ‘German’ culture.
‘Figures of immanence’: the atomic individual versus the Leerstelle

In both novels, the city motif highlights the ‘failures’ of the protagonists—two opposite but equally problematic types of individual. A German Jew and an immigrant attempt to carve out a space for themselves in society, in defiance of stereotype and cultural difference. In the city, the emancipatory promise of Bildung or multilingual competence proves inadequate to counter the language of prejudice. At the same time, the city offers them temporary refuge from these exclusionary mechanisms, as urban life initiates fleeting and fragile moments of connection. The tragedies of these city dwellers question radical forms of individualism, on the one hand, and of dissolution into homogeneous collectivities on the other. However, the potential for such ‘inoperative’ moments of connection is nipped in the bud by repeated acts of linguistic violence.

The protagonists are two opposite types of individuals: in *Werther, der Jude* a centered, atomic individual recognizable as a (mockery of the) Romantic genius; in *Alle Tage* an entirely decentered subject devoid of meaning and identity, a negative space created by expressions of meaning surrounding it. As entirely self-sustaining sources of meaning and absence of meaning, respectively, both individuals represent two extremes of what Nancy considers highly problematic “figures of immanence:”

> [T]he individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature—as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible—the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition. It is […] [a] figure of immanence: the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and as certainty.⁷

These types of individuals are characterized by a state of undivided (lack of) selfhood: either completely independent from external influence or entirely determined by their environment. While the city motif accentuates the problem of their individualism, the urban experience also disrupts their state of ‘immanence’. As such, the city motif is a crucial element of the critique of cultures as monadically, self-enclosed entities which are fully present with themselves—immanent, or identical to itself. In what may appear to be entirely different novels, both Mora and Jacobowski articulate their criticism of cultural self-presence by exposing the unsustainability of the individual as ‘absolutely detached for-itself’.
The atomic individual

Werther, der Jude proposes a notion of the subject—and of art itself—that is very different from the one presented by Goethe’s epistolary novel. The latter relies on the unique self as a major source of literary material and is an instance of the radical inward turn that marked the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism.  

 Knife, the Jude on the other hand makes a moral example out of a romantic’s troublesome conversion to the principles of Enlightenment. Leo Wolff embodies a conflict between Romantic and Enlightened perspectives on the individual, and symbolically, on German-Jewish culture. Several allusions to (Jewish) Enlightenment thinkers inscribe him into an assimilation paradigm that relies on rationalism, progress optimism, and emancipation. Not only is Leo working on a dissertation on the Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), Leo’s own name alludes to Christian Wolff (1679–1754), another rationalist at the peak of German Enlightenment. Wolff had been of great influence on Moses Mendelssohn, who became the most prominent advocate of the Haskalah. Wolff is especially known for his systemization and adaptation of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’ theory of monads—the elementary, individual, independent, and irreducible particles of the universe. Aspects of Wolff’s views resonate in Jacobowski’s deployment of urban space and his proposal for a comparably monadic understanding of the individual.

Werther, der Jude takes place in Berlin. Although the city does not really acquire a narrative character of its own, as it does in for instance Döblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz, the bustling streets do have a very tangible presence in the story. Like Leo himself, the city is ‘set up for identification’. His walks on the streets, for instance, when he is looking for his girlfriend Helene, can be traced on a map (WJ 143). The city motif serves a stark demarcation between the cold, grey, wintry streets outside and the warm inside of Leo’s home. His mood improves in contrast with the street: “Leo was happy about the winter mood in the street. Snow flurries were part of his genuine, pure winter pleasure and added an even more cozy and intimate atmosphere to his warm, comfortable home. [Leo freute sich über die Winterstimmung der Straße. Schneegestöber gehörte bei ihm zum echten, rechten Wintervergnügen, und machte ihm die Stimmung in seinem warmen, gemütlichen Heim noch heimlicher und traulicher.]” The city highlights the distinction between the self-contained individual and his environment—even if Leo remains aware of his surroundings and acquires a sense of self by distinguishing himself from the bustling streets—the distance he creates is a difference. Leo thus embodies the notion of atomic self-identity described by Christian Wolff. The atomic elements that constitute the universe
are each “defined, or individuated, by its own distinctive internal state.” The atomic self, considered as a coherent unity “indivisible in-itself” acquires self-consciousness in the gesture of placing things outside of the self: “Looking at ourselves, we will find that we are aware of many things as being outside ourselves. But we put them outside ourselves by recognizing that they are different from us. [Wenn wir auf uns acht haben; so werden wir finden, daß wir uns vieler Dinge als außer uns bewußt sind. Wir setzen sie aber außer uns, in dem wir erkennen, daß sie von uns unterschieden sind.]” Leo’s experience of the city is portrayed accordingly in terms of individuation and externalization. As long as Leo remains inside, street noises enter the house, conveying an urban reality that, for now, remains in the background: “As if subdued, the noise of the city roared into his room, and occasionally it shuddered when heavy carriages rumbled past him below. [...] Otherwise soft, comforting silence. [Wie gedämpft brauste der Lärm der Großstadt zu ihm ins Zimmer, und manchmal nur zitterte es, wenn schwere Wagen unten kollernd vorbeipolterten. [...] Sonst weiche, wohlige Ruhe.]” (WJ 6–7)

Leo furthermore embodies Wolff’s principle of individuation by externalization as determining the position of the atomic self in the order of things: “When we consider things—existing at the same time that they are not another thing—as external to each other, a certain order emerges among them. And as soon as we imagine this order, we imagine space. [Indem nun viele Dinge, die zugleich sind und deren eines das andere nicht ist, als außer einander vorgestellet werden; so entstehet dadurch unter ihnen eine gewisse Ordnung. Und so bald wir uns diese Ordnung vorstellen; stellen wir uns den Raum vor.]” Once Leo goes out into the streets, that order is upset. First, Leo is depicted, in a slightly mocking tone, as a typical romantic—inspired by the beauty of nature, thriving on introspection, and divorced from the real world—“What a dreamer he was! [Was er doch für ein Träumer war!).” (WJ 17) As such, he is out of place in the modern metropolis, which physically startles him out of his reveries:

Cheerfully he swung his walking stick in his right hand and gazed ahead as if lost in thought. He loved that. He had been a bad observer of life since early on [...]. He much preferred to reflect silently on various chains of thoughts and did not pay attention to what was happening around him. It often happened that he unwittingly collided with a lamppost or a person, jerking him back into reality.
Leo’s penchant for daydreaming and a life immersed in thoughts evoke the Romantic idea of an essence that defines the subject, which asserts itself through the exploration of individuality and imagination. Yet as Leo searches for meaning in an inner depth that is “socially indifferent [sozial indifferent],” he has become a bad observer, oblivious to his surroundings. Outside, however, the city acquires a “Physiognomie” (WJ 55) of its own, forcing itself upon Leo more insistently, at times even overpowering him. In the city, the rules of individuation and externalization no longer seem to apply: “He, the provincial man, thirstily absorbed all the impressions that were assailing him. He walked the busiest streets with listening eyes [...]. [Durstig sog er, der Provinziale, all die Eindrücke ein, die auf ihn einstürmten. Er ging die belebtesten Straßen mit horchenden Augen ab [...].]” (WJ 55) The crowd on the street becomes a single, uncanny entity—“an eternally flowing black river [ein ewig flutender, schwarzer Strom]” that sucks him in, while “an unspeakable sense of fear [ein unnennbares Angstgefühl]” creeps up on him. (WJ 55–6) Only by escaping the city center—or rather, by being expelled from it as an incompatible element—does Leo manage to restore his centered self, as well as his capacity to distinguish individualized images and people:

The pressure of the metropolis would be heavy on his chest, forcing him out of the noise and screeching and hustle and bustle. Then he would flee to the suburbs, where life did not cast such hasty circles on the surface, where the mighty roar of the inner city itself sounded only timid and subdued. Here his eye caught a richly varied abundance of single images; here he observed the common man of the people, the craftsman, the worker, the starving proletarian.

[[S]chwer lag ihm dann der Druck der Großstadt auf der Brust, daß es ihn hinausdrängte aus dem Lärm und Gekreisch und Gewühl. Dann flüchtete er sich in die Vorstädte, wo das Leben nicht so hastige Kreise an der Oberfläche warf, wo das mächtige Brausen der eigentlichen Innenstadt nur zaghaft und gedämpft herausklang. Hier faßte dann sein Auge eine abwechslungsreiche Fülle von Einzelbildern, hier beobachtete er den kleinen Mann des Volkes, den Handwerker, den Arbeiter, den hungernden Proletarier.] (WJ 55–6)
The city motif thus accentuates Leo's initially atomic individuality but exposes the fragility of that self-enclosure at the same time. Gradually, the urban experience—threatening as it is to the unassimilable atomic subject—will force Leo out of his self-involvement and initiate an experience of connection and potential ethical improvement.

The individual as Leerstelle

Alle Tage, in contrast, does not focus on a centered and self-determined individual but on the obtrusive force of external identification instead. Abel's incapacity for self-assertion—which makes him the opposite of the enlightened individual—is particularly linguistic in nature, as reflected by Mora's narrative experiment. His Subjektwerdung is conceived as the quest for an individual language that sets him free from his quite literal Unmündigsein.

Abel Nema is a war refugee in denial of his traumatic past, who attempts to find solid ground in a German metropolis. The absence of a personal history is mirrored by Mora's remarkable polyphonic narrative strategy. Numerous plot threads, as well as a highly inconsistent narrative perspective, complicate a sequential reconstruction of the protagonist's past. Abel appears to have started traveling after the love of his youth Ilia rejected him. On the road he becomes involved in a peculiar accident with gas, which inexplicably takes his memory yet replaces it with the gift of multilingualism. His new talent, however, proves of little help, as he fails to communicate and to establish simple human connection. The moment of the accident coincides with the outbreak of a civil war in his home country, preventing him from returning. He eventually arrives in the unspecified metropolis B., where he is taken care of by several individuals from various social strata. Nevertheless, he fails to settle, remaining rootless and roaming the margins. Alle Tage is, unlike Werther, der Jude, characterized by an emphatic refusal of temporal, spatial, and narrative specificity. The opening sentence—a subtle reference to the opening line of Goethe's Wahlverwandtschaften—establishes an undetermined narrative present, in which various focalizing and authorial voices attempt to reconstruct Abel's past: "Let us call the time now; let us call the place here. Let us describe both as follows. [Nennen wir die Zeit jetzt, nennen wir den Ort hier. Beschreiben wir beides wie folgt.]" (AT 6) That vagueness lends Abel's story a degree of universality and exemplarity. It is clearly situated within a fictional framework generalized enough to allow identification. Yet the lack of specificity is so overstated that identification eventually remains impossible. While the city B. may be reminiscent of Berlin—one narrator describes it as the "most pulsating metropolis of the hemisphere [pulsierendste [...] Metropole [der]
As German as Kafka

Hemisphäre” (AT 96; emphasis in original)—it is never mentioned explicitly. This is not simply a matter of omitted topographical detail; it is a meaningful lack of clarity that has been referred to as “circumlocation.”

The “practice of bordering-on-names” presents the reader with a blurred outline of narrated space yet refuses to focus, fixate, or identify, forever avoiding a center of meaning. As a result, any representation of the city B. negates itself immediately. The city is indeed a negative space marked only by absence and emptiness:

Brown streets, warehouses empty or full of no one quite knows what, and jampacked human residences zigzagging along the railway line, running into brick walls in sudden cul-de-sacs. [...] No park, just a tiny, desolate triangle of so-called green space left over when two streets came together in a point. An empty corner of land. Sudden gusts of early-morning wind [...] rattle a playground carousel, an old or merely old-looking wooden toy at the edge of the green space. There is a ring nearby, the kind used to pull litter-bins, but free-floating, with no bin attached.

The avoidance to arrive at a ‘center’ of meaning is mirrored by the enunciative instability of the novel. Countless voices, some of them familiar, others impersonal, alternate quickly and often even mid-sentence in recovering Abel’s story. The continuous change of personal pronouns, otherwise the markers of a stable point of view, blurs the distinction between direct and indirect speech and, furthermore, undermines a hierarchy of supposedly objective, authorial and, on the other hand, subjective, focalizing perspectives. Italics and parenthesized stage directions occasionally attempt to restore a sense of location, restraining the changeable and placeless narration to some extent.

Abel’s character is introduced in the same polyphonic fashion as the nondescript setting. Compared to Leo Wolff, whose self-containment makes him
a ‘figure of immanence’ in the Nancian sense, Abel Nema represents its inversion. His name alone is indicative of the absence, negation and absolute *Fremdheit* he evokes: “Nema as in ‘nothing’? [Nema. So wie das Nichts?]” (AT 27) The name seals his indefinite, only vaguely perceptible appearance. His pretended wife Mercedes loses grip on his shapeless features:

From the outside he looks like a perfectly normal man— correction, a perfectly normal person. Correction: delete the entire sentence, because Mercedes realized immediately that even the first part, from the outside, made no sense when applied to a person (man), so there was nothing left, nothing that would hold water. Sometimes I doubt whether a single thought . . . She felt herself swaying as she stood there. She wanted to look him in the face, but kept having to focus, as in a moving train. My eyes had begun to hurt, and suddenly he seemed no longer to have a specific sex, he was a hermaphrodite.


As an inverted figure of immanence, Abel Nema elicits a desire for identification but undermines it at the same time. Lacking all typical identity markers—gender, memory, an accent, and even a voice of his own—he exemplifies ‘the stranger’ in absolute terms; he is a cipher of non-identity.

Mora’s ‘circumlocation’ technique, which draws a parallel between the urban setting and Abel’s *Leerstelle*, temporarily suspends the mechanism of identification. On the technique, which she explored already in her story collection *Seltsame Materie*, she comments that it serves to safeguard the text from interpretive bias: “Some words take over a text completely and immediately. One cannot mention Gestapo, the Yugoslav Wars, or 9/11 just in passing. Such words dominate a text, the text is about them, no matter what it is otherwise supposedly about. [Es gibt Wörter, die reißen einen Text mit Mann und Maus an sich. Man kann Gestapo,
Balkankriege oder 9/11 nicht nebenbei erwähnen. Solche Wörter dominieren einen Text, er handelt von ihnen, egal, worüber es sonst zu handeln meint."

In this respect, Mora’s strategy of avoidance sets up a space specific enough to interpret Abel’s story as that of the immigrant’s troublesome settlement in a metropolis. At the same time, it steers away from that exemplary status and, in doing so, exposes that status, or any other specific interpretation, as a potential act of reductive identification.

The narrative instability and polyphony in Mora’s text are reminiscent of Alfred Döblin’s characteristic montage in Berlin Alexanderplatz. In the case of Döblin, montage highlights the local specificity of Berlin, which becomes a “city that narrates itself [Stadt, die sich selbst erzählt].” By lending the city a voice of its own, Döblin firmly anchors the text in reality, which—even as it remains an instrument of his authority—conceals the author’s voice. Mora’s novel can be regarded as a radicalization of that technique. The loss of authorial stability in Alle Tage then parallels the ‘deterritorialized’ state of the globalized city. The disembedding of social relations from their local contexts results in a loss of familiarity of the local, which thus acquires a phantasmagoric quality.

Indeed, whereas Jacobowski’s preface unambiguously establishes his intent, Mora’s authorial voice remains absent from any diegetic or extradiegetic level. The preface to Alle Tage is instead provided by what appears to be an editor, who, however, has no narrative authority whatsoever over any of the countless voices relating Abel’s story. It simply summarizes his exoticist expectations about the novel—it should be “extreme and quirky [Extremes und Skurriles],” rather than authentic or true-to-life, as should any foreign or multilingual story: “The Latin countries are particularly fertile. Good old Babylon. And of course Transylvania. The Balkans etcetera. [...] For all I care, you can lie and/or invent. [Die lateinischen Länder sind besonders ergiebig. Gutes altes Babylon. Und natürlich Transsylvanien. Der Balkan etcetera. [...] Meinetwegen lügen undoder erfinden Sie auch.” (AT 5).

Mocking both exoticist expectations and narrative authority, the seemingly insignificant preface “only examines the gestures that might point to the origins of Abel’s stories—and not to these origins themselves.” It thus sets the stage for the plurality of voices that will interpret Abel’s Leerstelle: they will attempt to fixate and identify him in a language of assumptions, prejudice, and clichés.
Metropolitan milieus: ‘the law of the proper’ versus Verletzbarkeit

Although they are situated at opposite ends of a spectrum, both Leo and Abel are, as Nancy would refer to it, “set up for identification.”\(^90\) Leo exemplifies an Enlightened emancipation ideal; Abel’s Leerstelle forces him to blend in completely with several social identities enforced upon him. Both protagonists are thus characterized by a state of undivided (lack of) selfhood—either atomically independent from external influence or entirely determined by their environment. They move in social circles that abide by what Nancy calls “[t]he absolute and vertiginous law of the proper,”\(^91\) and which sustain themselves through linguistic violence: the language of exclusionary stereotype, nicknaming, insult, or even the mere absence of proper names. In doing so, these communities aim to secure the ‘proper’—the identical, the authentic that defines their ‘pure’ community. In both instances, Bildung and multilingual competence prove powerless against such communal desire for unity.

There is an important difference between the lack of proper names as it occurs in Alle Tage and Werther, der Jude. In Mora’s case, it is part of a narrative attempt to suspend the mechanism of identification. In Werther, der Jude, nicknaming is all about identity fixation.\(^92\) Yet in the end the effect is the same: nicknaming and lack of proper names are symptoms of a generalized intolerance of difference or singularity. In Werther, der Jude, Leo encounters anti-Semitic prejudice in just about every domain of his social life: among his aristocratic friends, from the daughter of his school principal, from the middle class family of his girlfriend Helene, and from strangers in the streets of Berlin. That prejudice affects deeply the primary vehicles of Jewish assimilation: Bildung and university life. His father finances Leo’s university courses, but Leo is himself highly suspicious of the man’s financial dealings, since he works with an Eastern Jew, who represents the anti-Semitic swindler stereotype in the story. And Leo’s student league exhibits anti-Semitic traits of an unbearable “cleverness [Patentheit]” (WJ 77), which, as it turns out, forces Leo’s story into tragedy. His Couleurbrüder address each other by nickname—an innocent marker of camaraderie (WJ 8) that however prefigures the linguistic power that governs the fraternity. Nicknaming and stereotype here become instances of “determinant violence [festschreibende Gewalt].”\(^93\) As Steffen Herrmann argues in reference to Emmanuel Lévinas’ thoughts on linguistic violence, stereotypes are aimed at reifying difference and reducing a person’s singularity to a single feature. Insults and stereotypes are an “inversion of ‘greeting’ [Invertierung des ‘Grüßens’]:”\(^94\) whereas a salutation is a positive
gesture establishing proximity, the insult produces distance. The introduction of a new fraternity member Max von Horst illustrates the flipside of this at first companionable manner of speech. Scrutinizing the face of the anti-Semite Max Horst, nicknamed ‘Fuchs’, Leo concludes ‘that his face was unappealing to him. He was not quite sure why, was it his nasal speech, his arrogant, all too polished looks, as if ‘licked clean’? [daß ihm dessen Gesicht unsympathisch war. Er wußte nicht recht weshalb, ob die näselnde Sprache, ob das hochmütige, das allzu gewichste wie ‘abgeleckte’ Äußere.]’ (WJ 9) Conversely, Horst considers Leo “just a bit ‘very’ Jewish. […] The hair and well, you know, his whole manner… A little bit very Jewish. [ein bißchen ‘sehr’ Jude. […] Die Haare und na, wisst ihr, so die ganze Manier von ihm… Ein bißchen sehr Jude.]” (WJ 10) Lévinas’ phenomenology of the Antlitz posits that the Other’s countenance, its absolute singularity and otherness, elicits a fundamental Anspruch and thus a sense of connection in the beholder. “On the image of a face [Auf der Abbildung eines Gesichts],” to summarize Lévinas,

our gaze can rest unimpaired. It can absorb the eyes, their color, grain, tint and shade […] and glide along the contours of the eyes, nose, and cheek. […] In face-to-face situations, on the other hand, our gaze is unsettled—the other’s eyes refuse the observing gaze. […] It is difficult to stand up to the gaze of the other, for the other calls for and demands a gesture from me.

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guter Kerl],” they admit he is not a proficient duelist, reminding Horst of the anti-Semitic caricature of the weak, effeminate Jew who gives up immediately in the duel with a Christian. (WJ 10)

The persistence of such stereotype and prejudice inhibits Leo from realizing his journey of ethical improvement. As a single Jew in a fraternity exhibiting increasing German nationalist tendencies, he seems to have little interest in his Jewish heritage—the club is his community of choice. In fact, he actively resists any sense of collective Jewish identity, denouncing it as an “atavistic instinct [atavistische[r] Instinkt], “a Romantic sentiment, a sentiment of the old Jewish generation [...] that had to be overcome [ein romantisches Gefühl, als ein Gefühl der alten, jüdischen Generation [...] das überwunden werden mußte].” (WJ 35)

While Leo acknowledges an instinctive sense of Jewish identity, he refuses to heed the urge to turn inward. Instead, he seeks virtue in an Enlightened Jewish ethical reformation, which will present itself as a typically metropolitan experience of human connection and Verletzbarkeit.

In Alle Tage, it is not so much stereotype as imposed identity in which the ‘law of the proper’ manifests itself. Unlike Leo Wolff, whose name is a direct reference to the philosophical and ideological foundation of the novel, Abel Nema’s name literally signifies ‘nothing’ and is as such the opposite of a ‘proper’ name. His ethnic identity remains undecided—his father is said to be “one half Hungarian, other half unclear [[e]in halber Ungar, die andere Hälfte ungewiss],” since he claimed to carry in him “the blood of all the minorities in the region [das Blut sämtlicher Minderheiten in der Region].” (AT 61) Abel’s name is furthermore “related etymologically to the modern Slav word for German [verwandt mit dem slawischen Nemec],” which stands for “any non-Slav language or people, for the mute neighbours or, to put it differently, the barbarians [jede nichtslawische Zunge, für den Stummen also, oder anders ausgedrückt, den Barbaren].” (AT 14)

Significantly, it is not Abel himself who provides this etymology. An unspecified commenter, who seems to speak for the ‘common people’ and for ‘common sense’, demonstrates this logic of linguistic identification. He presumes an irrefutable connection between not speaking the local, ‘proper’ language and a ‘barbaric’, ‘improper’ nature.

Indeed, carrying Lacanian overtones, Abel’s faltering subjectivity—both its constitution and its destruction—are linguistic in nature. His multilingualism is of major symbolic significance. At first, his giftedness is associated with identity loss. Having been rejected by his childhood love, Abel roams the city streets and notices his reflection in a window. In a mushroom-induced psychosis—significantly the sole instance of Abel as a focalizer and as an I-narrator—he
explains how, at that moment, he disowned his history and origins. He remembers shattering his mirror image and, along with it, his self-awareness. When the gas accident robs him of “the swarm of memory and projection, of past and future [das Gewusel von Erinnerung und Projektion, Vergangenheit und Zukunft],” (AT 75) he is in exchange endowed with the gift of multilingualism. Abel’s untainted linguistic proficiency is what Nancy refers to as an “absolute idiolect,” which is “utterly deprived of relations and, therefore, of identity.”97 Because it remains purely conceptual, it fails to establish simple human connection: “[I]n fact he hardly says a word [[I]n der Praxis hört man kaum einen Satz von ihm],” and “everything he says is so [...] placeless, so uniquely clear—no accent, no dialect, nothing: he speaks like a person who comes from nowhere [ist alles, was er sagt, so [...] ohne Ort, so klar, wie man es noch nie gehört hat, kein Akzent, kein Dialekt, nichts—er spricht wie einer, der nirgends herkommt].” (AT 13–4) Abel’s linguistic genius, untainted and complete, thus correlates with what Jacques Derrida considers a linguistic “identity disorder.”98 His lack of “autobiographical amanessis” has led to a failure of his “identificatory modality,”99 and has robbed him from his capacity to speak as a singular subject.

Hypothetically, the absence of a personal history and his linguistic proficiency make Abel a perfectly assimilable, transcultural subject. However, his gift is really a curse. Indeed, the ambivalence of the gift is a central concept in discussions about linguistic violence and “symbolic vulnerability [symbolische Verletzbarkeit].”100 “The gift,” as Hannes Kuch summarizes,

A lack of amanessis and the gift of perfect idiom have indeed rendered Abel extremely vulnerable to imposed identification and linguistic violence. Once he arrives in the city B., he finds temporary refuge in several social circles. Abel's
Leerstelle there becomes a blank projection screen for their social identities. Yet he continually fails to conform to their expectations, thus becoming a Störfaktor to their communal sense of unity. Although he acquires an identity only as several subject positions are projected onto him, Abel is not considered a ‘proper’ refugee (because he has obtained a scholarship), nor a ‘proper’ husband (because he has divorced his pretend wife), and even his language professor questions his actual competence. Indeed, Abel remains at the mercy of communities that sustain themselves by defining their ‘proper’ identity. When a street gang struggles to identify Abel as nothing more than a “guy [Typ],” they beat him up so badly that it leaves him aphasic. ‘Typ’ here loses its benign, colloquial meaning, and becomes an instrument of “epistemic violence”\textsuperscript{102} that literally mutes the represented subject: Abel is forcefully reduced to the societal stereotype of the immigrant who barely knows the language and utters no more than an insufficient “It’s good [Es ist gut].” (AT 432)

Experiences of Verletzbarkeit

Yet despite the linguistic violence sustaining these metropolitan communities, the city also produces ephemeral moments of human connection, fragile states of ‘being singular plural’ which, however briefly, counteract the persistence of stereotype. In \textit{Werther, der Jude}, Berlin emerges simultaneously as an antagonistic force and as a site of dissolving antagonisms, enabling an “armistice on foreign Berlin soil [Waffenstillstand auf fremdem Berliner Boden].” (WJ 36) After Leo’s and Horst’s confrontation, the bustling city streets seem to overpower and resolve their conflict: “The others steadied the two, they were unsure of whose side they should take, and were glad when they had reached the road, where the hustle and bustle of the metropolis roared towards them like a wild hunt. [Die übrigen beruhigten die beiden, sie wußten nicht recht, wessen Partei sie nehmen sollten, und waren froh, als sie die Straße erreicht hatten, wo das Getöse der Weltstadt wie ein wilde Jagd ihnen entgegenbrauste.]” (WJ 12) More significantly, the city induces moments of vulnerability that support Leo’s moral reformation. Witnessing a scene of charity and “human interaction [menschliche Teilnahme]” (WJ 65), Leo refers to it as an adventure, a “city experience, coffee house poetry full of tears [Großstadterlebnis, Caféhauspoesie voll Tränen].” (WJ 69) The event enhances his determination to become a better Jew. Resisting the ‘atavistic instinct’ of a collective identity, he adopts an Enlightened approach, striving for “an ethical improvement of the single Jew [einer ethischen Besserung der einzelnen Juden].” (WJ 159–60) Yet his moral reformation is less a matter of
Bildung than a typically urban experience. The adoption of a Goethe quote as his life motto—“A Jew, noble, helpful, and good... Yes, that is what he wanted to be! [Ein Jude, edel, hilfreich und gut... Ja, das wollte er sein!]”\(^{103}\) (WJ 172)—may indicate the author’s support of a German-Jewish cultural ‘symbiosis’, but Leo’s character tells a different story. His experience of community does not involve at all the ‘restloses Aufgehen’ into German culture as advocated by the author—the ultimate dissolution into ‘German’ culture—his Wertherian suicide—is in fact quite ironic.

Instead, his turbulent love affair with Helene highlights an alternative experience of connection. A symbol of the modern city experience, their relationship deeply challenges Leo’s self-involvement. Their love exemplifies a connection that “is not [...] conceived on the basis of the [...] model of communion in one,” but rather “exposes [...] the incessant incompletion of community.”\(^{104}\) Helene’s character embodies the city’s ambivalence. She is inscribed into a discourse of stereotype and prejudice but undermines it at the same time. When Leo describes their relationship as a “Berlin-style affair [Verhältnis nach Berliner Art]” (WJ 88), and Helene as a “fair Berlin girl [helle Berlinerin]” (WJ 121), Leo at first hints at her presumed sexual promiscuity. Likewise, Leo is first associated with the stereotype of the effeminate Jew. His tendency to dream is designated by his father and even by himself as “a decidedly unmanly quality, a female weakness in him [eine entschieden unmännliche Eigenschaft, eine weibliche Schwäche an ihm].” (WJ 77–8). Encouraged by his fraternity members to disprove the anti-Semitic prejudice about Jewish effeminacy, Leo first approaches Helene from a comparably bigoted perspective: she must fulfill the stereotype of the loose Berlinerin. In line with his conviction that “love without full submission of the woman [Liebe ohne völlige Unterwerfung des Weibes]” is impossible (WJ 167), Leo is driven by the “thought to possess Helene completely [Gedanke, Helene ganz zu besitzen]” (WJ 96), that is, sexually and psychologically. Such appropriation denies her complexity and eventually leads to both her and Leo’s destruction. In the meantime, though, Leo grows annoyed at her ambivalence; that on the one hand “she had given up her whole ego, her whole spirit of contradiction to him [sie ihr ganzes Ich, ihren ganzen Widerspruchsgeist aufgegeben [...] habe an ihm]” (WJ 99), while, on the other, she does not quite fit the stereotype—“This eternal prudery, with a Berlin woman to boot, was unbearable! [Diese ewige Prüderei, und noch dazu bei einer Berlinerin, war ja unausstehlich!]” (WJ 120) Apparently, Helene defies the principles of stereotype and appropriation. Her ‘urban’ promiscuity is indeed a matter of being indiscriminate but not primarily in a sexual way. In defense of their ‘mixed’ relationship—“first one is human and
only then Christian or Jew [erst sei man Mensch und dann Christ oder Jude]” (WJ 289)—she emphasizes human relations over religious identity. Their ‘Berlin affair’ then does not symbolize a dreamed German-Jewish unison or a successful appropriation of German culture. It is simply a reminder of how simple human connection should not become the instrument of stereotype or of a communal desire for unity. Eventually, however, when Helene becomes pregnant, she sees herself compelled to commit suicide, thereby fueling anti-Semitic sentiment only further, due to her involvement with a Jewish swindler’s son. As the press relates the facts: “Another example of the corruption of our affairs by the Jews! The elders deceive the upright, decent, plain German, and the younger ones seduce his daughters! [Wieder ein neues Beispiel von der Korruption unserer Zustände durch die Juden! Die Alten betrügen den biederen, braven Michel, und die Jungen verführen seine Töchter!]” (WJ 355–6) Upon reading about Helene’s death, Leo loses all hope for a future, and, like Goethe’s Werther, commits suicide.

In Alle Tage, a comparable one-on-one relationship briefly redeems the protagonist from linguistic violence. Abel’s stepson Omar, who is partially blind, provides a crucial counterpoint to the attempts at fixation that Abel endures. Whereas Abel’s gift is in fact a curse, Omar’s stigma—a token of Verletzbarkeit—reveals itself as a gift of connection. His (im)perfection evens out Abel’s transparency and perfect idiom: “[E]verything about him—except for a minor deviation in the amber of the artificial iris in the right eye—was in perfect equilibrium. [A]lles an ihm—bis auf eine winzige Abweichung in der Bernsteinfarbe der künstlichen Iris rechts—war in perfekter Balance.” (AT 165) Omar literally sees things differently; his incomplete gaze refuses to focus, fixate, and thus to identify—“I have only one eye. [Ich habe nur ein Auge],” he explains, “I traded the other in for wisdom [[d]as andere habe ich hingegeben für Weisheit].” (AT 165) As a result, Omar’s and Abel’s relationship can unfold on the basis of communication and shared experience. Yet even when Abel finds a voice of his own—an accent, rather than flawless mastery—he remains at the mercy of collectivities that sustain themselves through identity fixation.

The city motif first articulates and underscores the protagonists’ ‘undivided selfhood’: the atomic individual in Werther, der Jude, and its inversion in Alle Tage. At the same time, the city also allows short-lived refuge from identity fixation. Real and fragile experiences of community, as these novels suggest, do not take place as the result of autonomous self-improvement or communal desire, of ‘integral absorption’ into a desired group, or of chameleon-like adaptation to existing collectives. Rather, community takes place as an act of “resistance to immanence,” “resistance to the communion of everyone or to the exclusive
passion of one or several: to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity.”

Such moments being short-lived, both novels also illustrate the fragility of ‘being singular plural’ when faced with destructive ‘law of the proper’. The eventual destruction of the subject in these novels demonstrates the violence of pure and ‘proper’ identity—“pure identity cancels itself out; it can no longer identify itself. Only what is identical to itself is identical to itself. As such, it turns in a circle and never makes it into existence.”

The irony that fully realized assimilation—Leo’s Wertherian death as a symbol of a full incorporation into ‘German’ culture—requires the death of the subject criticizes anti-Semitic prejudice and the ideal of assimilation as quite similar strategies of ‘proper’ identity. Alle Tage suggests that communication and community cannot be established in disregard of memory and origin, but it also implies that those elements are at permanent risk of becoming sources of violent identity reduction.

The protagonists thus fail to become exemplary figures. In Jacobowski’s novel, that failure has its roots in the incongruence between the author’s intent, the protagonist’s embodiment of an Enlightened ideal, and the tragic conclusion of the story: Leo’s optimistic self-cultivation cannot withstand the force of stereotype. In Mora’s text, the attempt at exemplarity is subverted from the onset. The protagonist may at first invite identification, albeit then revealed to be a principle of alienation. The exemplary stranger without a past, perfectly transcultural in theory, fails to establish human connection and is headed for destruction as well. Yet precisely by way of that interrupted exemplarity, these novels, as do many other literary texts, remind us “that singular beings are never founding, originary figures for one another, never places or powers of remainderless identification.”

3.3 Disoriented city dwellers—Figures of ‘distanced proximity’:

Franz Hessel’s Spazieren in Berlin (1929) versus Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s “Der Hof im Spiegel” (2001)

The protagonists in Werther, der Jude and Alle Tage are both condemned to an unviable state of ‘immanence’. They fall victim to a reification of difference through stereotype and linguistic violence, which undermines the liberating and connective potential of the urban experience. By way of contrast, I will discuss
two alternative approaches to the metropolitan experience of *Fremdheit*. In line with Simmel’s diagnosis that the ‘blasé’ city dweller navigates between defensive and socializing strategies, the narrative perspective in both Özdamar’s “Der Hof im Spiegel” and Hessel’s *Spazieren in Berlin* relies on a relational—rather than differential—distance between subject and objective world. Their first-person narrators assume a marginal, detached, or seemingly isolated position yet manage to observe and fashion a sense of connection that is not framed by a collective identity. Their *Fremdheit* enables a perceptual attitude, and reveals itself as neither absolute nor dissociative but as relative and affiliating. These city dwellers act on what Arjun Appadurai describes as a basic “human need for locality,” which he considers a social rather than a geographical principle. In a very subtle way, these metropolitans defend a notion of *Heimat* as a highly subjective sense of belonging that emerges on the “intersection of memory and space,” of perception and affect, and which thwarts instrumentalization by territorial narratives of collective identity. Instead, these texts reveal the socializing potential of the city from the perspective of individuals at the moment when they become ‘singular-plural’—or, in Simmel’s words, how “[m]an does not end with the limits of his body”.

**Reading the city**

In Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s short story collection *Der Hof im Spiegel*, the I-narrator makes an obvious yet essential observation: “Everyone in a city has their own personal city. [Jeder hat in einer Stadt seine persönliche Stadt.]” The statement aptly summarizes Özdamar’s narrative strategy in several stories featuring an I-narrator who relates her experiences in familiar and unfamiliar cities. With titles such as “Mein Berlin” and “Mein Istanbul,” Özdamar reveals a highly personalized perspective on the city, which also characterizes stories like “Der Hof im Spiegel” or “Fahrrad auf dem Eis” (which, as Liesbet Minnaard notes, might just as well have been titled “Mein Amsterdam”). Özdamar’s statement is reminiscent of the “mental map,” introduced by Kevin Lynch in his seminal *The Image of the City* (1960). Enabling individuals to orient themselves in the city, it is a mental image of the exterior world, composed of immediate sensations and past experiences, of both *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*.

Looking at cities can give a special pleasure, however commonplace the sight may be. [...] At every instant, there is more than the eye
can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences. [...] Every citizen has had long associations with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings.\textsuperscript{115}

Lynch’s diagnosis that the physical city can only ever be perceived partially, and is always a matter of subjectivity and experience, is reinforced by a large number of literary texts. The constellation of the individual in the city has been a rewarding motif in literary portrayals of human existence: as a struggle of life, as a way of life, but also as a way of living together. Whether as a ‘social imaginary,’\textsuperscript{116} or as a “spatialized symbol of a culture [verräumlichtes Sinnbild einer Kultur],”\textsuperscript{117} the literary metropolis is a mental-subjective and a sociocultural space at once, where issues of identity and community are very likely to be at stake. Lynch himself highlights why the city lends itself particularly well to narrative experiment. The mental map enables the “legibility”\textsuperscript{118} of an environment that otherwise remains hard to grasp. It coherently patterns the city dweller’s typically fragmented and ambivalent perspective, which alternates between participation and observation, between mobility and standstill:

Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all.\textsuperscript{119}

A device of legibility and coherence, the mental map has, aside from practical relevance, emotional importance as well: it prevents the “mishap of disorientation.”\textsuperscript{120} As Lynch indicates, “[t]he very word ‘lost’ [...] means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of utter disaster.”\textsuperscript{121} The mental picture of the city thus provides a frame of reference enabling orientation in the broadest sense of the term—“a possibility of choice and a starting-point for the acquisition of further information. A clear image of the surroundings is thus a useful basis for individual growth.”\textsuperscript{122}

While Lynch emphasizes the principle of legibility, the mental map as a wayfinding and hermeneutic device has particular literary potential as well—it
easily translates into aspects of style, narration, and story. Fragmented and partial impressions of the city find a suitable form in short prose, or the “kleine Form,”\textsuperscript{123} which favors the incompleteness of the particular over the clarity of the whole. Also, the city dweller’s ambivalence as both a spectator and a participant lends itself to experiment with first-person narration or unstable narrative authority, as the individual becomes the final reference point in a city that can only be grasped purely subjectively. And finally, the personal map tells the story of an individual who attempts to carve out a space, to establish a sense of belonging in an otherwise disorienting modern city.

Özdamar’s story “Der Hof im Spiegel” is, indeed, the literary counterpart of the mental map. The story, which contains fictionalized autobiographical elements typical of Özdamar’s writing,\textsuperscript{124} relates the experience of a seemingly isolated immigrant woman in a German city. The exploration of the I-narrator’s personal city takes place primarily inside her apartment building. Her fellow inhabitants make up a metropolitan microcosm that represents a culturally and socially heterogeneous composite of craftsmen, salesmen, nuns, and African immigrants—which, as they only have their residence in common, can hardly be defined as a community in a traditional sense. The typically partial and personalized aspect of the narrator’s mental map extends to the perception of her neighbors, whom she observes as individuals with a unique history. As Dirk Göttche notes, the apartment building reflects the narrator’s “partly already lived, partly only aspired sociality [teils bereits gelebten, teils erst erhofften Sozialität],”\textsuperscript{125} which is charted in a “personal city map [persönliche[r] Stadtplan]” (HS 21) that affords her a sense of emotional security, connection, and orientation.

The city as a textual metaphor—as a book to be opened, read, and interpreted by any one of its countless inhabitants who turn it into their own ‘persönliche Stadt’—has been a literary concept since the early twentieth century. Lynch’s approach is in fact remarkably reminiscent of Franz Hessel’s famous quote from \textit{Spazieren in Berlin}, a collection of impressions and \textit{Städtebilder} from an ever-transforming and vibrant Weimar Berlin:

The flaneur reads the street, and human faces, displays, window dressings, café terraces, trains, cars, and trees become letters that yield the words, sentences, and pages of a book that is always new.

[Flanieren ist eine Art Lektüre der Straße, wobei Menschengesichter, Auslagen, Schaufenster, Café-Terrassen, Bahnen, Autos, Bäume zu lauter gleichberechtigten Buchstaben werden, die zusammen Worte, Sätze und Seiten eines immer neuen Buches ergeben.] (SB 156)
His close friend and collaborator Walter Benjamin\textsuperscript{126} hailed Hessel’s observations as “the return of the flâneur [die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs].”\textsuperscript{127} and ever since, Hessel has been considered the German counterpart of the idle city stroller and detached observer who first emerged in nineteenth-century French culture.\textsuperscript{128} In Benjamin’s study of Baudelaire’s writings (1939),\textsuperscript{129} the flâneur emerges as the emblem of urbanism and modernity. Yet whereas Benjamin “merely reconstructs the flaneur retrospectively as an anachronistic type of nineteenth-century Paris streetlife,”\textsuperscript{130} Hessel introduces the type in 1920s Berlin, where he embodies the typical \textit{Blasiertheit} that Simmel diagnosed as a defense mechanism for the overstimulated city dweller. Hessel’s “picture book in words [Bilderbuch in Worten]” is the author’s account of “a few shy attempts to go walking in Berlin, round about and through the middle [ein paar schüchterne Versuche, in Berlin spazieren zu gehen, rund herum und mitten durch].” (SB 283) In the afterword addressed to his Berlin readers, Hessel considers himself to be a cartographer of the opposites that distinguish his beloved object of observation—“the thing that is Berlin, in its combination and chaos of luxury and meanness, solidity and spuriousness, peculiarity and respectability [das Ding Berlin in seinem Neben- und Durcheinander von Kostbarem und Garstigem, Solidem und Unechtem, Komischem und Respektablem] [...]” (SB 285) His strolling narration will reveal itself as a mental map much like Özdamar’s—highly individualized, but always with an eye to the aesthetics of sociality. At first, Hessel’s flânerie—his mobile, noncommittal observation of the urban spectacle—seems to have little in common with the imagery, immobility, and staging of perspective in “Der Hof im Spiegel.” Nevertheless, both narrators emerge as similarly active readers of their cities. Their observational detachment illustrates at once their sense of autonomy and their complex entanglement with their surroundings. A comparison of these texts will reveal a hermeneutic distance and \textit{Fremdheit} that enable the legibility of the urban space and, moreover, an existential relationality and fragile sense of community.

\textbf{From Istanbul to Berlin}

Özdamar belongs to a generation of German-Turkish authors who announced a second phase of ‘migrant writing,’\textsuperscript{131} those who shifted focus away from the everyday struggle to find solid ground in a foreign, often hostile environment—a common trope in ‘\textit{Gastarbeiterliteratur}’ of the preceding 1960s and 1970s. Özdamar has become one of the most ‘canonical’ voices in German ‘literature of migration’. She was the first non-German-born writer to have been awarded the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, and has been widely acclaimed for her
innovative use of language, combined with an engaged perspective on historical developments in postwar German and Turkish history. Berlin, and cities in general, have played a key role in both Özdamar’s life and writings. Born in 1946 in the eastern Turkish region Malatya, she came to Berlin in the 1960s as a factory worker, in pursuit of her dream of becoming an actress. She went to Istanbul to study theater but returned to East Berlin in the 1970s to work at the Volksbühne, with Bertolt Brecht’s disciple Benno Besson. Her affinity with the stage, and with Brechtian epic theatre specifically, is a distinctive characteristic of her writings. In Özdamar’s acclaimed semi-autobiographical novel Die Brücke vom goldenen Horn (1998), Berlin is shown to realize its emancipatory potential. Conceived as a kind of Entwicklungsroman, the novel describes the sexual, professional, and political coming-of-age of a young Turkish woman, the author’s alter ego Sevgi. As she moves between Istanbul, Paris, and Berlin, the city emerges as a site of experiment, providing a stage for her performance of various roles and identities. Indeed, the novel is “an ode to Berlin as a city that fulfills its promise to liberate and educate,” while securing a sense of home at the same time:

Berlin had been like a street to me. As a child, I had stayed in the street until midnight, in Berlin I had found my street again. From Berlin I had returned to my parents’ house, but now it was like a hotel, I wanted to go back on to the street again.

[Berlin war für mich wie eine Straße gewesen. Als Kind war ich bis Mitternacht auf der Straße geblieben, in Berlin hatte ich meine Straße wiedergefunden. Von Berlin war ich in mein Elternhaus zurückgekehrt, aber jetzt war es für mich wie ein Hotel, ich wollte wieder auf die Straße.]

In the condensed space of a short story, “Der Hof im Spiegel” elaborates aspects already present in Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn. As Monika Shafi observes about the latter, the protagonist “develops a kind of personal topography that helps not only navigate parts of her new environment but through which she crafts a kind of intimate, private space.” Similarly, the novel is constructed around the image of building and crossing bridges—a metaphor of connection present in “Der Hof im Spiegel” as well. In both texts, the subjectivized topography allows the crossing of boundaries and the bridging of differences. This is the reason why neither Berlin nor Istanbul emerge as the ‘divided cities’ they are usually perceived in geographical, political, or historical terms. As Shafi argues:
Neither Istanbul with its rich history as a meeting point between Europe and Asia, a location alternately “invoked in Western discourse either as a bridge between East and West or as a quintessentially Oriental city,” nor the divided city of Berlin are relegated to an exclusively Western or Eastern sphere.

In “Der Hof im Spiegel,” too, the strict focus on the narrator’s ‘personal city’ charts the narrator’s multiple attachments, which allow her to overcome the presumed divide between between Diesseits and Jenseits, between familiar and foreign, between East and West. Özdamar presents a picture of the city dweller as cosmopolitan, not in terms of an ideological conviction but in terms of the ability to produce a sense of belonging through various relations. The narrator’s personalized city map thus brings into view how “the original cultural imprint of a particular home, family and nation can be modified and remolded and superseded with new [...] affinities and communities.”

In Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn this renegotiation of Heimat takes place against the backdrop of both the German and the Turkish historical struggle to come to terms with the challenges of modernity. By juxtaposing the ‘divided’ cities of Berlin and Istanbul, Özdamar comments on “the ways Enlightenment concepts of normative humanism, equality, and progress have failed both in [her] homeland that embraced a belated modernity and in [her] adopted land where it turned [...] into an epochal betrayal of the masses.” In view of that failure, Berlin and Istanbul are more alike than an Orientalizing division between East and West would suggest. Both cities have witnessed the “different but equally problematic legacies of modernity that present generations of Germans, Turks, and Turkish Germans have inherited.” In Özdamar’s portrayal, the city is not merely the backdrop to the immigrant’s experience in terms of a predictable tension. Rather, the (modern) city posits a critical counterpoint to the modern nation-state, which “relies for its legitimacy on [...] its meaningful presence in a continuous body of bounded territory.” Although this political dimension remains implicit in “Der Hof im Spiegel,” the story is a kind of blueprint for the condensed, metaphorical way one’s individual map challenges the stereotypical concept of Heimat, the connotation of a determinate ‘cultural imprint’, and the illusion of a homogeneous, originary identity that underlies it it.

From Paris to Berlin

Just as Özdamar, whose writings reflect her divided attention to Berlin and Istanbul, so too Hessel can be considered a mediator between two metropolitan cultures—
City dwellers between difference and indifference

Paris and Berlin. For that reason, Hessel remained an “eternal outsider,” "regarded in Germany as a Jew and in France as a German." Hessel was born in 1888 in Stettin, the son of an assimilated and prosperous Jewish banker, but was baptized as a Lutheran. Hessel spent his childhood in Berlin and moved to München to study literature and philosophy. Drawn to the arts scene there, he became acquainted with the aestheticist circle around Stefan George. He moved to Paris in 1906, where he perfected the art of strolling that would become his literary trademark. His relationship with Helen Grund served as a model for his friend Henri-Pierre Roché’s novel *Jules et Jim* (1953), which in turn inspired François Truffaut’s famous film adaptation (1961). During the 1920s, Hessel contributed substantially to the literary culture of Weimar Berlin, working as a writer and an editor for the Rowohlt publishing house, and he even continued to edit and translate for the house after his own works had fallen under Nazi publication ban. Only briefly before the 1938 pogroms could he be convinced to go into Parisian exile.

Hessel’s Jewish descent was not a primary thematic concern of his writings, nor did it invite him onto a quest for identity. But in a social climate marked by intensifying anti-Semitism, it is not an insignificant aspect of his identity. For no matter how secondary it may have been to his self-understanding as a writer, the course of Hessel’s life was inavoidably influenced by his ‘ancestry’: neither his family’s conversion nor his marriage to a Christian woman would eventually shield him from anti-Semitic sentiment. His biographically inspired novel *Der Kramladen des Glücks* (1913) touches briefly on the Jewishness to which he felt uncommitted. From the perspective of the protagonist Gustav, the novel evokes the identity crisis of a Jewish generation born in the 1880s, which felt increasingly alienated from their parents’ liberal worldview. As Gustav notes: “My father loves Nathan the Wise, Uriel Acosta, the universally human. For all my love for him, that is just as repugnant to me as is Prussia’s compulsory education. [Mein Vater liebt Nathan den Weisen, Uriel Acosta, das allgemein Menschliche. Das ist mir—bei all meiner Liebe zu ihm—ebenso zuwider wie die Preußenpflicht der Schule.]” When a schoolmate taunts him as a Jew, he does not seem to understand why, yet he is acutely aware of being excluded. At the sixth Zionist Congress in Basel of 1903—which Hessel himself attended with Karl Wolfskehl—he feels like an outside observer. Gustav’s impressions may reflect Hessel’s own, as Robert Stam concludes:

Hessel was equally alienated from a wide variety of contemporaneous lifestyles and ideological currents, equally distant “from the progressive enlightened ideas of his Jewish father; from the Christianity that, for
sentimental reasons, he tried to adopt; from the Zionism in which he could not see himself; and from the bohemian life which seduced but did not convince him.”

His ideological, religious, and even artistic *Heimatlosigkeit* became the foundation of Hessel’s *Lebensphilosophie* and aesthetic program. His aimless flânerie involves “the greatest possible openness to the world and the utmost enjoyment [eine grösstmögliche Weltoffenheit und ein Höchstmaß an Genuß],” a hedonistic detachment that can be read as a critique of the materialistic fixation of his time. In *Spazieren in Berlin*, the most visible ‘shocks’ of the modern city—consumerism and exploitation of human labor—are countered by his particularly aesthetic subjectivity. His observations remain detached but never unaffected, which brings into focus again the connection, the humanity, and the memory of the modern city. At once a product and a critic of modernity, city-reader Hessel is a “liminal writer [Schwellenliterat],” a “border crosser between the spheres of traditional, humanistic, intellectually oriented culture, bound to language and writing, and the transitory ‘surface culture’ of the social sphere [Grenzgänger zwischen den Sphären der traditionellen, humanistischen, geistig orientierten, an Sprache und Schrift gebundenen Kultur und der transitorischen ‘Oberflächenkultur’ der sozialen Sphäre].” Yet perhaps more so than on the border, Hessel’s position was on the outside—raised according to the principles of an inclusive ideal of Enlightened humanism, but betrayed all the same, being forced into exile. His initial refusal to leave Berlin, despite the ever more violent persecution of Jews, was based on a new sense of shared fate and solidarity with the Jews; Hessel remarked “that he had not considered himself entitled to escape the fate of the Jews as a privileged one [daß er sich nicht dazu berechtigt gesehen habe, als ein Bevorzugter dem Schicksal der Juden zu entgehen].”

Hessel’s pre-exile residence in Paris was decisive for his artistic self-understanding. During his years in the city, Hessel combined his familiarity with German aestheticism—which largely ignored urban themes—with the particularly metropolitan character of the French avant-garde, which had enthusiastically rediscovered Charles Baudelaire as the literary pioneer of urbanism and flânerie. Hessel’s novel *Pariser Romanze* (1920), which he completed after returning to Berlin, already contains narrative features he would refine in his reading of Berlin. *Pariser Romanze* depicts the affair between a soldier and a young German woman, but focuses especially on the protagonist’s affection for the physical city. Hessel’s beloved Paris is not found in historic sites and landmarks but in the richness of the everyday, which reveals itself as in a “picture book [Bilderbuch].”
When Hessel returned to Berlin in the 1920s, he realized that his *Heimatstadt* could become an object of artistic observation as well. The first edition of *Spazieren in Berlin* was aptly subtitled “A textbook of the art of strolling in Berlin very close to the magic of the city she hardly knows about herself—A picture book in words [Ein Lehrbuch der Kunst in Berlin spazieren zu gehn ganz nah dem Zauber der Stadt von dem sie selbst kaum weiβ—Ein Bilderbuch in Worten].” As the title suggests, the text heeds the same principle as *Pariser Romanze*: to observe the city as an aesthetic object. To do so, Hessel approached the two cities from different perspectives. In Paris, Hessel was the stranger, who wanted to become more familiar; in Berlin, as a former inhabitant, he wanted to become a stranger again. By juxtaposing childhood memory and his immediate perception, his *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, Hessel’s focus is not exclusively on archiving his past. Instead, Hessel directs his attention to the metropolitan capacity for renewal—in terms of architecture, as well as people breaking free from their past.

In his 1929 review of *Spazieren in Berlin*, Walter Benjamin hails the improbable ‘return of the flâneur’, whom he believed to be a forgotten figure and, moreover, unknown to Berliners: “And now, here in Berlin, where it never flourished, it was to renew itself? [Und nun sollte es hier, in Berlin, wo es niemals in hoher Blüte stand, sich erneuern?]” But then he sums up a number of conditions favorable to the emergence of the flâneur in Berlin:

We must add that the Berliners have become other people. Gradually their problematic foundation pride in the capital begins to make way for Berlin as their hometown. At the same time, a sense of reality, a sense of chronicle, document, and detail has sharpened in Europe.

[Dazu muß man wissen, daß die Berliner andre geworden sind. Langsam beginnt ihr problematischer Gründerstolz auf die Hauptstadt der Neigung zu Berlin als Heimat Platz zu machen. Und zugleich hat in Europa der Wirklichkeitssinn, der Sinn für Chronik, Dokument, Detail sich geschärft.]\(^{154}\)

The city stroller’s anecdotal style indeed corresponded to an increasing interest in documentary representation. The *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the objective portrayal of metropolitan and economic life distinguished the arts of 1920s Berlin. Yet a change of mentality, especially, and an overall sense of regeneration enabled the flâneur to become a detached observer of his hometown. Interestingly, Benjamin differentiates between the pride in establishing a new, democratic republic after the First World War and, on the other hand, an increasing sense of belonging and attachment that the Berliners’ *Gründerstolz* did not necessarily
reflect. Hessel’s focus is on those attempts at creating a *Heimat*. By the time he strolls through Berlin, he has cultivated his own *Heimatlosigkeit* into a deliberate balancing act between future and past and between observer and participant. In his personal topography, he traces and narrates Berlin as a *Heimat* revealing itself in scattered memories and subtle everyday impressions, emerging in-between modern architecture and reminders of the Wilhelmine past. As someone who is equally detached and affected, the flâneur embodies the city dweller as Simmel defined him—drawn to the *Reiz* but keeping a distance at the same time.

**Disoriented/dis-Oriented city dwellers**

“Verschränkung von Heimwelt und Fremdwelt”

Over half a century, the catastrophe of the *Shoah* and the strained aftermath of the Second World War set Özdamar’s Berlin apart from Hessel’s. In Özdamar’s globalized Berlin, the immigrant city dweller is challenged to secure a sense of locality in a transnational context and to familiarize the unfamiliar. Hessel’s Berlin, by contrast, is the capital of a newly founded republic, which translates its new sense of nationhood into architectural renewal. For him, the challenge is not so much in finding a home in an unfamiliar city but in harmonizing the two stories the city represents—his personal memories of Wilhelmine Berlin, and the story of a modern city that asserts itself in grand architectural gestures.

In both texts, the image of the city emerges according to the principle of Lynch’s mental map. The mental image assuages the fear that comes with disorientation; it is a reminder “that the sweet sense of home is strongest when home is not only familiar but distinctive as well.” For Hessel, a distinctive and legible Berlin requires his defamiliarization and his deliberate effort “to regain the distance to the world of which he himself is very much a part [die Distanz zu der Welt zu gewinnen, der er selbst ganz angehört].” Özdamar’s narrator keeps her neighborhood at a reading distance, too, with the (implicit) purpose of charting and familiarizing her local connectedness. Their reading strategy engages them in what Appadurai describes as the “production of locality.” Writing about cultural global flows, Appadurai wonders “what locality might mean in a situation where the nation-state faces particular sorts of transnational destabilization” or, in Hessel’s context, where the nation-state has taken a new and still unstable form. Both *Spazieren in Berlin* and “Der Hof im Spiegel” illustrate several aspects of Appadurai’s view. He considers locality
as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. [He sees] it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts. This phenomenological quality, which expresses itself in certain kinds of agency, sociality, and reproducibility, is the main predicate of locality as a category.\textsuperscript{160}

That phenomenological quality becomes evident in the hermeneutic distance and \textit{Teilbetrachtung} adopted by both Özdamar and Hessel. The individualized perspective of the I-narrators corresponds with the key principle of phenomenology, i.e. that the meaning of phenomena—the city, here—is only ever known through subjective experience, and cannot be known objectively or outside of that perception. Rather than a given and knowable reality to which the subject reacts in a causal manner, the urban space is a \textit{phenomenon}: its meaning is shaped and conditioned only by and through a perceiving subject. Hessel’s and Özdamar’s anecdotal storytelling resists the illusion of a unified perspective; or of a reality that can be fully captured by linear, realistic, and progressive plot. Instead, they develop an aesthetics of disorientation, which, as I will illustrate, allows sociality to become aesthetic and meaningful—“a pattern of relations […] out of which an unexpected sense of belonging may be discerned.”\textsuperscript{161}

In a comparison of \textit{Spazieren in Berlin} and “Der Hof im Spiegel,” I will discuss how each ‘reading’ of the city revolves around \textit{Fremdheit} as at once a narrative, a subjective, and a socializing principle. As opposed to the figures of immanence which, in \textit{Alle Tage} and \textit{Werther der Jude}, inhabit cities determined almost entirely by stereotype and linguistic violence, the I-narrators here are witnesses of, and actors in, an urban network thriving on potential human encounter. As such, they actively produce a sense of locality and social immediacy that is not tied to known identities and communities.

\textit{Werther, der Jude} and \textit{Alle Tage} question the atomic notion of (cultural) selfhood that Nancy describes as a state of \textit{immanence}—the concept of an undivided self or community that requires protection from external influences, from which it differentiates and distances itself. The ‘self’ introduced in “Der Hof im Spiegel” and \textit{Spazieren in Berlin} is relational, depending on an external, unfamiliar, and unappropriated outside—not in terms of a ‘constitutive outside’, which implies a self that emerges \textit{ex negativo}, but in terms of a self that only comes into being by virtue of a pattern of relations. This self originates on the spot “where the transition from one’s self to the world and to the other occurs, where these paths intersect [wo der Übergang vom eigenen Selbst in die Welt und zum
Anderen geschieht, dort, wo die Wege sich kreuzen],” as Bernhard Waldenfels writes. The urban space substantiates such an “entanglement of home world and foreign world [Verschränkung von Heimwelt und Fremdwelt],” from which the self emerges.

The concept [of entanglement] resists the extreme opposition between complete coverage or complete fusion on the one hand and complete disparity on the other. If we apply it to the opposition of the self and the foreign, entanglement means, on the one hand, that the self and the foreign are more or less intertwined [...], and, on the other hand, that there exist only blurred boundaries between the self and the foreign [...]. The entanglement opposes every form of purity, be it the purity of a race, a culture, an idea [...].

As such, the entanglement, rather than disparity, of the familiar and the unfamiliar relies on a positive, relational understanding of difference and therefore counteracts any state of immanent selfhood. Özdamar’s and Hessel’s city dwellers embody this notion of Verschränkung in different yet comparable ways.

Permeability & Spiegelraum

“Der Hof im Spiegel” is, on the surface, a story of loss, displacement, and disorientation. The narrator, an actress, lives in an apartment in a German city that remains unspecified. She frequently makes emotional phone calls to her mother in Turkey—“My mother in Istanbul and I in front of the mirror were crying on the phone. [Meine Mutter in Istanbul und ich vor dem Spiegel weinten am Telefon.]” (HS 25)—and in the course of the story her parents die. She appears to live in isolation, as suggested by a conversation with a homeless man on the street. He remarks:
“The city itself is very nice, but the people are stupid.’ I said: ‘You know, maybe the city is not to blame. I used to work at the theater in other cities. In this city I have no theater, I have no friends, I only work at home.’

[“Die Stadt ist an sich sehr nett, aber die Menschen sind dumm.” Ich sagte: “Wissen Sie, vielleicht hat die Stadt keine Schuld. Ich habe früher in anderen Städten immer am Theater gearbeitet. In dieser Stadt habe ich kein Theater, ich habe keine Freunde, ich arbeite nur zu Hause.”] (HS 18)

It is significant that, unlike the man, she does not differentiate between the city and its inhabitants—to her, they are almost one and the same. Her “personal city map [persönliche[r] Stadtplan]” (HS 17), which takes up over seven pages, lists anecdotes of her encounters on the street and in shops—a pet shop with German-speaking parrots; a buxom baker who keeps her informed about her love affairs; the homeless man who has forgotten that she once gave him 300 marks; a bereaved butcher’s wife; a Moroccan shoemaker; and the like. (HS 17–24) The few physical landmarks she does include in her map are the train station and the bridges (HS 21). Although these are symbolic locations, their symbolism remains ambivalent. The train station may refer to the narrator’s unique memory of displacement and arrival as a newcomer in Germany; to the ubiquity of people in transit (in an existential or a migrational sense); or simply to a place of encounters and farewells. Likewise, her love of bridges may evoke nostalgia for Istanbul, or on the contrary signal her capacity for recognizing and constructing a home wherever there are bridges. These ambivalent landmarks represent neither Fremdheit nor complete familiarity with the city; they symbolize the way she bridges and connects those aspects. Instead of a displaced and alienated individual, her personal city map gradually brings into focus a person whose apparent isolation dissolves as she explores her city map.

An important motif illustrating this entanglement of Heimwelt and Fremdwelt is the architecture of her apartment overlooking a courtyard. Although the yard separates her from her neighbors, she has a rather intimate view into their lives. She observes them closely through a construction of mirrors positioned in such a way that they reflect outside images into each other, bringing her neighbors’ lives into her own home. Although the narrative transpires primarily inside her apartment, it becomes clear early on that the distinctions between inside and outside, between here and there, between Eigenes and Fremdes, have become meaningless:
In the stairwell, the lights went on, someone went down the stairs. Through the frosted window of my apartment door the light spread to the kitchen, and I saw my waiting face in the mirror. That must have been Mr. Volker going down the stairs. His steps used to be much louder than they are now. [...] The young man upstairs was sewing beautiful costumes for himself and for Mr. Volker on a sewing machine. The rattling of the machine made Mr. Volker’s wooden floor shudder, and my ceiling shuddered too. And because of the shuddering ceiling, the plates stacked in the kitchen cupboard also began to shudder.

The physical boundaries that apparently separate the narrator from her neighbors are actually permeable: a frosted glass door that carries light into her kitchen, which vibrates along with the rattling sewing machine of the upstairs neighbor. The wooden floor is a ceiling at the same time and transmits the sounds between seemingly separate spaces. These images highlight how the familiar and the unfamiliar meet. The central motif of the story—the mirror—illustrates that this permeability does not involve a crossing or overcoming of boundaries but is indeed an entanglement of seemingly separate spheres:

All the people who died dwelled in that mirror. [...] And now, I think, the old nun in the yard has died too. The dead in the mirror make room when a new dead person arrives. Sometimes a bee flies through the window and flies in the mirror among the dead. [...] Or a bird flies through the open window and flies around in the mirror. I take a shower in the bathtub, see myself naked among the dead people in the mirror.

[Alle Toten wohnten in diesem Spiegel. [...] Und jetzt, jetzt denke ich, die alte Nonne im Hof ist auch gestorben. Die Toten im Spiegel machen Platz, wenn ein neuer Tote kommt. Manchmal fliegt eine Biene durch das Fenster und...]


The mirror produces a virtual space, a Spiegelraum\textsuperscript{166} that not only unites distinct, physical details into a single image,\textsuperscript{167} but which also condenses physical and spiritual realms. As residence of the deceased, the mirror suspends the ultimate boundary between Diesseits and Jenseits. The mirror motif thus reveals the story’s overarching theme: death signifies loss and grief, but it is also the one thing, despite all differences, that all humans have in common. The mirror imbues the narrator’s observations with, in Nancian terms, a sense of finitude and as such establishes her self-image, enabling her to speak as a subject—“I loved the mirror hanging over the kitchen table. You could make the room speak. Only there did I hear my voice. [Ich liebte den Spiegel, der über dem Küchentisch hing. Man konnte den Raum zum Sprechen bringen. Ich hörte nur dort meine Stimme.]” (HS 27)

An outsider on the inside

In the case of the flâneur, the entanglement of familiar and unfamiliar spheres becomes evident in his aesthetic detachment. Hessel opens his reading of Berlin with what could be interpreted as the flâneur’s poetological statement. Under the first heading “The Suspect [Der Verdächtige],” Hessel introduces his ambivalent position in-between participation and observation, as well as his assumptions about his perception by the crowd:

Walking slowly down bustling streets is a particular pleasure. Awash in the haste of others, it’s a dip in the surf. [...] I attract wary glances whenever I try to play the flâneur among the industrious; I believe they take me for a pickpocket.

[Langsam durch belebte Straßen zu gehen, is ein besonderes Vergnügen. Man wird überspült von der Eile der andern, es ist ein Bad in der Brandung. [...] Ich bekomme immer mißtrauische Blicke ab, wenn ich versuche, zwischen den Geschäftigen zu flanieren. Ich glaube, man hält mich für einen Taschendieb.] (SB 23)

The flâneur enjoys being overwhelmed by the bustling streets, indicating that he is very much involved in the present moment; his Erlebnis is a sign of the narrator’s proximity to his surroundings. At the same time, he deliberately remains an
onlooker and outsider to the spectacle, in which he participates at the same time by being observed. The flâneur’s aesthetic detachment distinguishes him from the other emblematic street type that co-emerged with mass culture: the badaud. Unlike the flâneur, who is the urban equivalent of the artist-poet, the ‘gawker’ or ‘rubberneck’ loses his individuality in the street crowd, “that faceless mass that the flâneur” define[s] himself against.” The badaud carries connotations ranging from “idle curiosity” to more negative ones, such as “gullibility, simpleminded foolishness, and gaping ignorance.” In other words, the flâneur “is a man in the crowd, but not of the crowd […]” That preservation of his autonomy and his refusal to merge completely with the crowd elicit suspicion:

The swift, firm big-city girls with their insatiably open mouths become indignant when my gaze settles on their sailing shoulders and floating cheeks. That’s not to say they have anything against being looked at. But the slow-motion stare of the impassive observer unnerves them.


As in Jacobowski’s Werther, der Jude, the metropolitan experience is articulated by an image of femininity. In the former, Helene’s character represents and subverts the problematic stereotype of the promiscuous Berlinerin. Hessel portrays Berlin women as at once consumers and objects of consumption in the predominantly visual culture of 1920s Berlin. They share some aspects with the badaud, their gaping mouths a sign of curiosity and astonishment. Still, the flâneur recognizes them as individuals in a crowd, as they show their irritation and suspicion towards the Fremdkörper of the flâneur. The flâneur, here, is reminiscent of Simmel’s definition of ‘the stranger’. In his “Exkurs über den Fremden,” Simmel considers European Jews as exemplary of “the stranger [der Fremde]” as “an element of the group itself—an element that includes at once an outside and an opposite [ein Element der Gruppe selbst [...]—ein Element, [das] zugleich ein Außerhalb und Gegenüber einschließt.” Although Hessel does not explain his ambivalent position in terms of his Jewish ‘ancestry’ or his ideological Heimatlosigkeit, it resembles the position of Weimar Jews, who have been described as “outsiders on the inside.” Hessel recognizes that his Fremdheit—Jewish or not—allows him to recover “the first sight of the city [den Ersten Blick auf die Stadt]”
City dwellers between difference and indifference

(SB 23)—an unbiased view of Berlin that partially resembles the tourist’s gaze. In the chapter “A Tour [Rundfahrt],” Hessel illustrates how his perspective can be at once that of an inhabitant and that of a stranger. Embarking on a sightseeing bus tour, the flâneur comments:

So now I’m seated on a leather seat, surrounded by real foreigners. They all seem sure that they’ll finish the tour between eleven and one [...]. Red writing in English on the white flag in front of me: ‘Sightseeing’. What insistent redundancy!—All at once, the entire right half of our travel group rises, while I and the others on the left are commanded to remain seated and present our faces to the photographer, who is lifting the cap from his lens on the sidewalk, turning me into a permanent piece of tourism in his group photo. From out of the depths, a native hand reaches up with picture postcards. We lord over it all, we tourists, we foreigners!

[Da sitze ich nun auf Lederpolster, umgeben von echten Fremden. Die andern sehen alle so sicher aus, sie werden die Sache von 11 bis 1 erledigen [...]. Auf weißer Fahne vor mir steht in roter Schrift: Sight seeing. Welche eindringliche Pleonasmus!—Mit einmal erhebt sich die ganze rechte Hälfte meiner Fahrgenossen, und ich nebst allen andern Linken werde aufgefordert, sitzen zu bleiben und mein Gesicht dem Photographen preiszugeben, der dort auf dem Fahrdamm die Kappe vor der Linse lüftet und mich auf seinem Sammelbild nun endgültig zu einem Stückchen Fremdenverkehr macht. Fern aus der Tiefe streckt mir eine eingeborene Hand farbige Ansichtskarten herauf. Wie hoch wir thronen, wir Rundfahrer, wir Fremden!] (SB 67)

By joining a group of ‘real foreigners’ on the bus, the stroller seeks to reintroduce some distance into his perspective, as if he could then see the city through their unfamiliar eyes. The interesting word ‘native’ furthermore indicates that he now presents himself as a visitor looking at ‘the Other’. He willingly lets himself be identified with the sightseeing crowd, as a photographer permanently documents his participation. Merging with the anonymous Fremdenverkehr, the flâneur extends and alienates his familiar perspective, so that his proximity as a former Berlin inhabitant becomes entangled with the tourist’s distant perspective. At the same time, he feels that revealing his face for a picture feels like a disclosure (‘preisgeben’) of something he would rather keep to himself—his identity, his anonymity, his ambivalence as both outsider and insider. With his “mimicry with the stranger [Mimikry mit den Fremden]” the flâneur embodies the stranger as Simmel describes him—not as the sightseer or “the wanderer who arrives
today and leaves tomorrow [der Wandernde, der heute kommt und morgen geht],” but as someone “who arrives today and stays tomorrow—that is, the potential wanderer who, despite not having moved on, has not entirely overcome the detachment of coming and going [der heute kommt und morgen bleibt—sozusagen der potentiell Wandernde, der, obgleich er nicht weitergezogen ist, die Gelöstheit des Kommens und Gehens nicht ganz überwunden hat].” Indeed, the tourist’s perspective only suits him temporarily. Again, he refuses to merge with a crowd of sightseers, dismounts, and sees them off—“Drive on without me, you real foreigners! [Fahrt ohne mich weiter, ihr richtigen Fremden!]” (SB 149) Instead of going to see more of monumental Berlin, the flâneur continues on his very personal and social sightseeing tour; he now turns to the familiar again, meeting his friends in a café. His earlier remark about the pleonasm of ‘sightseeing’ indeed reveals a slightly defiant attitude: not only does he refuse to become a part of any crowd, he refuses to be told by a tourist guide which official ‘sights’ are worth being seen. Guided by his own map, the flâneur instead continues to read and narrate the fragmented story of the city. As Benjamin concludes: “The great remnants, the historical sights—to the true flâneur, they are rubbish, which he gladly leaves to the traveller. [Die großen Remineszenzen, die historischen Schauer—sie sind dem wahren Flaneur ja ein Bettel, den er gerne dem Reisenden überläßt].”

**Labyrinthine (dis)orientation & ‘distanced proximity’**

As a symbolic articulation of the entanglement of Heimwelt and Fremdwelt, Özdamar’s and Hessel’s texts both deploy a dynamics of orientation and disorientation—the image of the mental map is complemented, implicitly or explicitly, by the image of a labyrinth or a maze—which obviously has a lot with a city map in common. As in Beer-Hofmann’s Der Tod Georgs, the labyrinth is an ambivalent symbol. As an image of non-linear movement, it evokes a loss of direction and a sense of confusion. In Der Tod Georgs there is a coercive aspect to the labyrinth, as it steers the aesthete towards the exit. In Hessel’s and Özdamar’s texts, emphasis is not on the resolution provided by center or exit of the labyrinthine structure. Rather, the labyrinth or the maze symbolizes the phenomenological entanglement of Heimwelt and Fremdwelt; it represents a condensed space, where distance and nearness overlap. As opposed to the atomic city dwellers earlier, who are surrounded by isolating distance, these narrators embody a paradoxical experience that Nancy calls the “almost-there […] of distanced proximity.” Their distance and detachment not only enable the legibility of the city, they also allow the narrators to witness or produce a sense
of intimacy and relationality. In Özdamar’s text, the *mise-en-scène* of mirrors inside the narrator’s apartment produces a similar ‘distanced proximity’, while Hessel’s purposeless and associative movement reflects his antinormative and antirepresentational reading of the city.

In “Der Hof im Spiegel,” the labyrinthine experience first presents itself as a moment of apparent loss and disorientation. The narrator is waiting in fear that the nun who lives across the courtyard, and whom she has been observing attentively for years, has passed away:

I was standing in the kitchen, leaning my back against the radiator, waiting for the sad light in her room, in the building where she lived, across the courtyard, to appear in the large mirror attached to the wall above my kitchen table. Her light from the house on the other side of the courtyard had been my setting sun for years. When I saw her illuminated window in the kitchen mirror, only then did I turn on the light in the apartment.

The nun’s light has been her primary point of orientation, and apparently—perhaps surprisingly—it is not the East. As her ‘setting sun’, the signal of nightfall, the nun’s light conveys that this ‘Orient’ is not or no longer her frame of reference. Özdamar thus establishes from the beginning that the narrator inhabits a space that has overcome the presumed divide between West and East. It is furthermore an unconventional space, where distance is variable and adaptable, and, as Littler argues, that is deeply invested with affect. While the nun’s light is a point of ‘dis-Orientation’, her possible death is announced as the moment of actual disorientation. The duration of the narrator’s waiting—in a strung-out sentence—accentuates the distance between her and the nun’s residence; as she waits, she traces the path that the nun’s light would travel from across the courtyard to her mirror. As such, that distance becomes meaningful, since it represents not a disparity, nor an “interstice between two members of a relationship [Zwischenraum zwischen zwei Relationsgliedern],” but a significant affective relation.
The setup of mirrors reinforces the labyrinthine ‘distanced proximity’ established by the narrator. Their reflections of the courtyard and her neighbours’ lives into her apartment remind the narrator of “residential aesthetics of the East [die Wohnästhetik des Orients]”:

The people there extended their houses as far as creating alleys. Suddenly a window would be in front of the neighbors’ windows. The houses mingled with each other, almost building labyrinths. The neighbors woke up nose to nose. I, too, had extended this apartment with three mirrors to the courtyard building. In the kitchen one mirror, from the kitchen one could go left and right into two rooms. In the room on the right there was a large mirror in the corner, and in the room on the left there was also a very large mirror that hung above a painter’s cupboard, and which was suspended from the high ceiling. The three mirrors assembled all the windows and floors and the nunnery garden from three different perspectives. [...] We all lived together in three mirrors, nose to nose.

The narrator’s indirect and mediated observation, as well as her memory of a Middle Eastern aesthetics of dwelling, could be read in terms of alienation and displacement. However, it soon becomes evident that the Fremdheit of her distanced perspective is not framed in cultural terms but, rather, reveals her “idiosyncratic staging of her view [eigenwillige Inszenierung des Blicks]” — different from Hessel’s ‘first sight of the city’, yet comparable in their artificiality. Extending her view from the inside, while closing the distance between herself and the mirrors’ object of reflection, these mirrors produce a condensed and adaptable space where distance and nearness are closely entwined. The labyrinthine structure of the house of mirrors is not simply disorienting but
a deliberate redirection of her view, opening it towards potential community. According to Littler, this virtual mirror space suspends a Kantian dualistic notion of self that is “established in oppositional relationship to permanent, inert matter,” and which “fixes selfhood and otherness at a distance, precluding the notion of identities which gradually evolve, hybridise or transform.” Instead of a displaced and alienated individual, the mirrors bring into focus “a person whose passionate curiosity conveys a sense of community which is not actually there”—at least not yet. For the mirrors conjure an unexpected experience of connection: “I was happy in the mirror because like that I was in several places at the same time. My mother and six nuns and a priest, we all lived together. [Ich war glücklich im Spiegel, weil ich so an mehreren Orten zur gleichen Zeit war. Meine Mutter und sechs Nonnen und ein Pfarrer, alle wohnten wir zusammen.]” (HS 31)

In Spazieren in Berlin, the flâneur’s deliberate disorientation allows an antinormative reading of the city. His perspective resists the authority of ‘official’ history, enabling him to uncover an urban sociality that goes beyond familiar class distinctions. Particularly aware of the ambiguities of city life, he reveals unexpected associations between human and industrial spheres.

To recover an unbiased view, the flâneur requires a complete lack of direction and purpose—“To stroll properly, one must not have anything too specific in mind. [Um richtig zu flanieren, darf man nichts allzu Bestimmtes vorhaben.]” (SB 156; own translation)—as opposed to the street crowd—“Here, you don’t walk, you walk somewhere. [Hier geht man nicht wo, sondern wohin.]” (SB 26) Purposelessness and idleness indeed allow him to explore the distanced proximity of the city, which enforces a continuous change of perspective. In “Berlin’s Boulevard [Berlins Boulevard]” he writes:

Glass and artificial light are two great helps, the latter especially when it’s combined with a bit of remaining daylight and twilight. Then everything becomes multiple, new nearnesses and distances come into being, the happiest mixture “où l’indécis au précis se joint”. Incandescent advertisements light up and disappear, scroll away and return, altering the height, depth, or shape of their buildings.

[Zwei große Helfer sind Glas und künstliches Licht und dies letztere besonders im Wettstreit mit einem Rest Tageslicht und Dämmerung. Da wird alles vielfacher, es entstehen neue Näheen und Fernen, und die glückhafte Mischung, “où l’indécis au précis se joint.” Die aufleuchtenden und verschwindenden, wandernnden und wiederkehrenden Lichtreklamen ändern noch einmal Tiefe, Höhe und Umriß der Gebäude.] (SB 156; emphasis added)
As his quote from Paul Verlaine’s poem ‘Art Poétique’ accentuates,\(^{186}\) the actual “unforeseen adventures of the eyes [ungeahnten Abenteuer des Auges]” are those highly ambiguous places where one sphere becomes entangled in another. Glass, artificial lights, neon signs—all markers of the modern metropolis—generate an indeterminate yet ‘fortunate’ space where the night is never quite dark, and where the physical city takes on new dimensions, changing depth, height, and contours. This space where distance and proximity are interchangeable—as in a labyrinth—is the flâneur’s habitat; wandering and being lost are his primary mode of perception. On his sightseeing trip, he advises tourists emphatically to become lost in maze-like “Alt-Berlin,” a neighborhood that usually falls off the map:

But I advise you [...]: when you’re in the area again and have the time, get a little lost here. There are still real alleys here, still tiny houses huddled together with their gables thrust forward, completely unknown except to a few connoisseurs [...]. [...] There, into the inconspicuous you should go. That is an important Berlin landmark.

[Ich aber rate dir, [...] wenn du noch einmal in diese Gegend kommst und Zeit hast, dich hier ein wenig zu verirren. Hier gibt es noch richtige Gassen, noch Häuserchen, die sich aneinanderdrängen und mit ihren Giebeln vorlugen, gar nicht weiter berühmt außer bei ein paar Kennern [...]. [...] Dort in das unscheinbare mußt du gehn. Das ist eine wichtige Berliner Stätte.] (SB 79–80; author’s translation)

Seeking out the inconspicuous parts of Berlin, the places that have no historical landmark value, the flâneur once again evokes an aspect of the stranger described by Simmel—who is “by nature no landowner, whereby land is conceived not only in the physical sense, but also in the figurative sense of a substance of life, which is attached, if not to a spatial, then to an ideal place in the social sphere [seiner Natur nach kein Bodenbesitzer, wobei Boden nicht nur in dem physischen Sinne verstanden wird, sondern auch in dem übertragenen einer Lebenssubstanz, die, wenn nicht an einer räumlichen, so an einer ideellen Stelle des gesellschaftlichen Umkreises fixiert ist].”\(^{187}\) Indeed, Hessel translates his Boden- and Heimatlosigkeit into an aesthetic(ist) critical counterpoint to the territorial and official story of the city. Seeking out the private stories of the public, his strolls will teach him “new pasts of the city [immer neue Vergangenheiten der Stadt]” and to appreciate the past in the present, to enjoy “in what is still visible that which has disappeared [im noch Sichtbaren Verschwundenes] [...].” (SB 285) Flânerie thus reveals the true meaning of a city Heimat, which many Berliners have yet to discover—“We
Berliners must dwell in our city to a much greater degree. [Wir Berliner müssen unsere Stadt noch viel mehr—bewohnen.]” (SB 285) Benjamin praises Hessel for his exceptional understanding of Wohnen, which takes place not in houses, but on the streets, for the streets are “the home of the eternally restless, eternally moving being [die Wohnung des ewig unruhigen, ewig bewegten Wesens].” Whereas Özdamar’s notion of dwelling entails an extension of the interior, the flâneur seeks out the ‘private’ or unconventional side of the streetscape. His refusal to be guided or to take a deliberate direction renders his perspective typically antinormative:

[We] wanted to stay out in the city and on the street. For a short visit to the museums, Baedeker is excellent; its single and double stars inform us as to what the consensus gentium deems exceptionally beautiful and valuable, although this doesn’t prevent anyone from making their own discoveries.

[[Wir wollen in der Stadt und auf der Straße bleiben. Für einen kurzen Besuch der Museen unterrichtet der Baedeker ausgezeichnet, seine einfachen und Doppelsternchen orientieren über das, was eine Art consensus gentium letztthin für besonders schön und wertvoll hält, und das hindert niemanden, seine eigenen Entdeckungen zu machen.] (SB 108)

As opposed to the flâneur’s antinormative perspective, the Baedeker travel guide promotes a formalized and institutionalized experience of culture and is furthermore adapted to the generic expectations of mass tourism. The Baedeker and the sightseeing tour are typical nineteenth-century “media of urban appropriation [Medien der Stadtaneignung],” which not only ‘read’ the city in terms of highlights and landmarks, but also function as “signposts that standardize the movement of travellers in urban space [Wegweiser, die die Bewegung der Reisenden im Stadtraum [...] normieren].” The flâneur opposes that educational and normative intention, although in “I Learn a Thing or Two [Ich lerne],” he mentions, with irony, that he does care about his education:

I really must ‘culture’ myself. Just walking around won’t do it. I’ll have to educate myself in local history, take an interest in both the past and future of this city, a city that’s always on the go, always in the middle of becoming something else.

[[Ich muß etwas für meine Bildung tun. Mit dem Herumlaufen allein ist es nicht getan. Ich muss meine Art Heimatkunde treiben, mich um die Vergangenheit
Visiting an architect, however, who instructs him on the future development of the expanding city, the flâneur soon becomes aware that the man’s ideas will not convey its true character. Instead, looking out over a field, he realizes—in a vision of distanced proximity—that the architectural future and the implied notion of progress are meaningless when separated from the city past. The effect of grandiose modern architecture is only visible in relation to its complement:

I am shown at close range the giant’s tiny neighbor, a little house ‘so wind-worried’, standing far afield. [...] The juxtaposition of the towering halls and this hut is like an emblem of Berlin’s silhouette.

[[G]anz nah bekomme ich des Riesen winzigen Nachbar gezeigt, ein Häuschen, ‘so windenbang’, das da tief im Felde steht. [...] Das Nebeneinander der ragenden Hallen und dieser Hütte ist wie ein Wahrzeichen des Weichbildes von Berlin.] (SB 32; emphasis added; author’s translation)

From the flâneur’s individualized Stadtbilder, the modern metropolis first emerges as a non-unitary and fragmented space. Yet there is a cinematic aspect to his detachment that registers unexpected connections and relations. As in the fragment above, Hessel finds beauty in complementarity, rather than contrast. This allows him to perceive humanity in images that might otherwise be read as illustrations of modern exploitation. In the chapter “A Bit of Work [Etwas von der Arbeit],” the flâneur observes Berlin’s “particular and visible beauty, whenever and wherever it is at work [besondere und sichtbare Schönheit, wenn und wo es arbeitet].” (SB 35) In the Siemens factory, he notices alongside the mechanical a distinctly human aspect of factory work: “Just like the machine parts, so too do mugs and cups for the girls’ tea, coffee, and cocoa wander on the conveyor belt, returning from their circuit through the kitchen heated and ready.

[[W]ie die Maschinenteile, so wandern auf laufendem Bande auch Tassen und Becher, in welche die Mädchen ihren Tee, Kaffee und Kakao getan haben, und der kommt dann von seinem Rundgang durch die Küche gekocht und fertig zu ihnen zurück.]” (SB 37; author’s translation) Then, with a sensitive but camera-like eye, the flâneur switches effortlessly between descriptions of mechanical and architectural structures inside the factory, close-ups of human detail, and establishing shots of what their working hands accomplish (SB 38):
It’s so fantastic to look down into the hall, from the stairs or the gallery, at the whirring, gyrating machines; so gripping is the view of the necks and hands of those pottering about there, and when their upward-glancing eyes meet your own. The things these people make fill your little room with light—a light that wanders from house to house, illuminates, extols, advertises, and outlines.

So großartig es ist, im Saal, von der Treppe, von der Galerie auf die kreisenden und surrenden Maschinen zu seh, so ergreifend ist der Anblick der Nacken und Hände derer, die da werken, und die Begegnung des Auges mit ihren aufschauenden Augen. Aus dem, was diese Menschen schaffen, kommt Licht in dein kleines Zimmer und wandert Häuserfronten entlang, bestrahlt, preist an, wirbt, und baut um.] (SB 38)

Truly soulless and dehumanizing to the flâneur is not factory work but, rather, the new consumerism. Standing in front of a shop window, he notices a number of mannequins whose “cool mixture of insolence and distinction [kühle Mischung von Frechheit und Distinktion]” and “determined expression [dezidierte[r] Ausdruck]” (SB 44) at first remind him of the new type of woman he identifies with the metropolis. Yet when he notices single, decontextualized mannequin parts in the window—“individual legs [Beine einzeln],” “puzzling frameworks [rätselhafte Gestelle],” “a female torso ends in one stylized arm and one cut-off stump [eine Art Frauentorso, der in einen stilisierten Arm und einen abgeschnittenen Armstumpf endet],” they leave the observer in bewilderment. (SB 44–5) Reduced to their purpose in a new consumerist society, the mannequin parts lose any semblance of humanity, whereas the view of necks, hands, and eyes in the fragment above bespeaks a still distinctly human aspect of factory work: those body parts are connected to and contribute to a larger urban existence.

The flâneur’s ability to contextualize and connect seemingly separated spheres is particularly significant in his observations of urban social life. With a similar sensitivity to the complementarity rather than opposition of polarities, the flâneur—in line with Simmel’s diagnosis of modern city life—charts the emergence and disappearance of different forms of sociality. From his conversation with the urban planner, he has learned that the Scheunenviertel, which houses a large Jewish community, has to make way for the “big orderly settlements [planmäßige Großsiedlung]” that will thoroughly change “the old city body [den alten Stadtkörper].” (SB 28) In his detachment, there is no trace of affiliation with the old Jewish ghetto of the Jüdenstraße, which he describes as an anachronistic “idyll in the middle of the chaotic city [Idyll mitten in der lärmenden Stadt].”
Similarly, he detects “something similar to a ghetto [etwas Ghettoähnliches]” in the disintegrating Scheunenviertel of the Eastern Jewish community. While there is a hint of sympathy and appreciation in his description, the flâneur takes on an ethnographer’s perspective, which indicates that their community is to him as fremd as to any other Berliner:

These streets are still a world of their own, home to the eternal wanderers, who long ago were propelled out of the east in one great wave. Eventually, they will have so acclimated themselves to Berlin that they can be tempted to push farther into the west of the city and to discard the most evident signs of their peculiarity. And it’s too bad; the way they live in the Scheunenviertel is nicer than the way they may live later in the clothing factories or the stock exchange.

The Scheunenviertel exemplifies a different kind of Heimat than the one the flâneur seeks to uncover. In “Der Hof im Spiegel,” the narrator’s sense of locality lies in tentative relations, whereas Hessel’s Städtebilder reveal locality in terms of complementarity and context. The Scheunenviertel, as an isolated—not contextualized, and therefore anachronistic—neighborhood, gradually surrenders to the expanding metropolis, encouraging its inhabitants to explore new identities—no matter how little the flâneur may think of professions in factories or the stock exchange. It is interesting that Hessel describes this community as ‘eternal strangers’, given that his flânerie is constructed around his own (partially chosen) outsider position. While the flâneur is not inclined to frame his Heimatlosigkeit in terms of ancestry, he is himself an illustration of how modern city life encourages him to define himself independently from tradition and background. In the imminent dissolution of the ghetto, Hessel witnesses the early stages of an acculturation process that he himself has already completed.

Yet the disintegration of old neighborhoods and traditional community life is only one aspect of Berlin’s ever-changing image. Hessel describes Berlin society as “a concept that’s both hard to grasp and to define [([e]in schwer zu erfassender
City dwellers between difference and indifference

und zu begrenzender Begriff].” (SB 56) The flâneur witnesses the emergence of a new kind of sociality that gradually transcends the familiar class distinctions and is instead characterized by complementary oppositions:

Hospitable houses unify art and the haute bourgeoisie, and at the tables of great bank barons, socialist delegates meet with princes of former ruling houses. [...] With youthful enthusiasm, the ambitious Berliner plunges into this new conviviality [...].

[Gästliche Häuser vereinen Kunst und hohe Bourgeoisie, und am Tische großer Bankherren begegnen sich sozialistische Abgeordnete mit Prinzen aus dem früheren Herrscherhaus. [...] Mit jugendlichem Eifer stürzt sich der ehrgeizige Berliner in die neue Geselligkeit [...] ] (SB 56–7)

Berlin’s ‘neue Geselligkeit’ is, in the flâneur’s eyes, not representational or hierarchical, but relational. In this respect, the flâneur’s antinormative ‘erster Blick’ has more in common with Özdamar’s ‘inszenierter Blick’ than one might expect. By keeping the city at a reading distance, the narrators allow the city to reveal itself as a site of interconnection, context, and of myriad individualized stories at the same time. They register a sense of proximity that is not tied to known identities and communities, and which refuses to be incorporated into national and territorial narratives of Heimat. As opposed to the city dwellers discussed earlier, who due to dogmatic identity discourses of difference and stereotype fail to realize themselves as singular human beings, Özdamar’s and Hessel’s narrators read the city in relational rather than differential terms. By adopting a hermeneutic perspective, they can assert themselves in terms of social and contextual proximity.

Conclusion

Simmel captured the ambivalence of the modern metropolitan experience as early as 1903, but his views are still relevant in a transnational context. At both ends of the twentieth century, the city is not a silent backdrop but a catalyst. It encourages city dwellers to assert themselves beyond familiar differences and relations, thereby escaping the exigencies of traditional community life. At the same time, despite this detachment, the city dweller remains receptive
to new connections and does not retreat into isolation. The city becomes the locus of reshaping the modern individual beyond “[t]he most radical forms of solitude and of community, autonomous separateness and homogeneous unison.” The four city dwellers—even when they are a century apart—suggest that neither enlightened confidence in the individual nor dissolution into a collective will guarantee a sense of connection. And neither radical individualism nor absolute collectivism can lay claim to the city. Although images of the city can be used to emphasize difference—from Westjuden living in the cities as “paradigmatic agents of modernity,” to ghetto Jews as a distrusted urban Volk, to ‘integrationsunwillige’ residents of Germany’s ‘parallel societies’—the urban experience does not lend itself to such instrumentalization. Rather, the city is a site of recalibration. It enables tentative, fragile experiences of community, which are not the result of Enlightened, autonomous individuals seeking connection through self-development, nor of deconstructed individuals who are denied an origin, a history, or an identity. Instead, in the city, differences may become relations and proximities. As such, the urban experience constitutes an anti-essentializing moment—a fundamental ‘resistance to immanence’.