

Korsakoff's Syndrome and Modern German Literature: Alfred Döblin's Medical Dissertation

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I

Even a cursory view of German literature since the late eighteenth century will notice a close affinity between the spheres of medicine and literature. German writers have not only produced a great number of texts dealing with the representation of illness and the changing social status of physicians. Many of them have also studied medicine and/ or lived a kind of double existence as *homme de lettres* and physician: Albrecht Haller, Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, Friedrich Schiller in the eighteenth century; Justus Kerner, Carl-Gustav Carus, and Georg Büchner in the nineteenth century; and, to mention only the most well-known, Arthur Schnitzler, Hans Carossa, Ernst Weiß, and Gottfried Benn as representatives of literary modernism. One of the most prolific of these "writer-physicians" was the German-Jewish novelist Alfred Döblin (1878-1957). He studied medicine and philosophy at the universities of Berlin and Freiburg, where in 1905 he received his doctorate with a dissertation on *Gedächtnisstörungen bei der Korsakoffschen Psychose* (*Amnesic Disorders in Korsakoff's Psychosis*).¹ After finishing his higher education, Döblin began to work as psychiatrist in an insane asylum in Regensburg before transferring to the psychiatric hospital in Buch near Berlin. From 1908 to 1911 he practiced internal medicine in a Berlin hospital, but for financial reasons decided to become a general practitioner in a worker's district, specializing in neurology and psychiatry. Döblin continued to write essays on mental pathologies for leading psychiatry journals but also published some twenty short articles on internal medicine in various newspapers.² After World War I, during which Döblin served volun-

tarily as an army doctor in Lorraine, he resumed his work as general practitioner in Berlin. While establishing his reputation as one of the leading and most innovative German novelists in the 1920s, Döblin never questioned his commitment to earning his living as physician—"I am a physician and have a great antipathy to literature," he wrote in 1921 (*Leben* 24)—until the great success of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) made it possible for him to devote his time to writing.³ But the time of financial security was short-lived. When Döblin was forced to take up exile in Paris in 1933 he bitterly complained about being forced to quit his work as physician because the French government did not recognize his medical certifications. The burden of exile had reduced his multifaceted professional life to the existence of a writer.

While working on his best-known novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Döblin published a short autobiographical essay for *Die literarische Welt*, one of the leading cultural journals in the Weimar Republic. "Arzt und Dichter" ("Physician and Writer") was his contribution to a series of articles for which prominent authors were asked to reflect on their nonliterary interests and occupations. After confessing that he would rather give up writing than his medical profession if the circumstances of life should force him to make a decision between the two, Döblin gives his readers a hint as to why he became a psychiatrist in pre-World War I Berlin:

When I was done with medical school, I was in my mid-twenties and nothing was as urgent to me as withdrawing myself from the so-called struggle for life. I went to several insane asylums as an assistant. I always felt good among these ill people. At this time I noticed that besides plants, animals, and stones I am able to tolerate only two categories of people: that is to say, children and lunatics. These I have always really loved. And if someone asks me to which nation I belong I shall say: neither to the Germans nor to the Jews, but to the children and lunatics. (*Leben* 92)

Döblin's linking together of children and the mentally ill as two different kinds of "pre-conscious," "natural" beings is of course not very original. This association, to which the female psyche was often added, has accompanied the literary discourse of the insane since the late eighteenth century and was particularly popular in German Romanticism.⁴ But in 1927 there existed a more personal rea-

son for Döblin's identification with the insane. As his statement indicates, identifying with the insane allows him to reject both "Germans" and "Jews." Against the background of rising anti-Semitism in the 1920s, both his identification with one group of "outsiders" (the insane) and his rebuff of another group of "outsiders" to which he belonged by birth (the Jews) can be read as Döblin's preventive strike against the possible anti-Semitic charge that he would align himself with other Jews. Some twenty years earlier, however, when Döblin was beginning his career as both writer and psychiatrist, his sympathy for the insane had its origin in his generation's multilayered interest in the figure of the mentally ill and, one should add, the non-European "uncivilized primitive" that entered the cultural sphere in Germany through the "discovery" of exotic, primitive art as a result of German colonialism.⁵ The image of the insane offered this group of young expressionist writers a welcome opportunity to differentiate itself from a much-despised bourgeois, "healthy" norm and to express its self-understanding as literary avant garde. In numerous poems, stories, and programmatic essays their literary fantasies about madness, the insane, and psychiatric institutions allowed the avant garde not only to present their critique of Wilhelminian society, whose norms and social institutions had become too repressive, but also to voice their cultural anxieties about an increasingly threatening existential alienation.⁶ Döblin's story "Die Ermordung einer Butterblume" ("The Murder of a Buttercup") (written 1904; published 1910) is an excellent example for the expressionists' instrumentalization of madness. By depicting the paranoid delusions of a young gentleman, whose veneer of bourgeois behavior can barely conceal the eruption of madness, Döblin makes his readers aware of both his protagonist's suppressed irrational impulses and the subconscious causes of his actions. More importantly, Döblin's story, written only several months before his dissertation, makes use of a pathology that he studied quite thoroughly in his work on Korsakoff's syndrome: amnesia.

The man dressed in black had first counted his steps, one, two, three, to a hundred and back, as he climbed the wide path through the firs to St. Ottilien, and with each movement he rocked with his hips to the right and left, so that he sometimes stumbled; *then he forgot it.* ("Ermordung" 102; emphasis added)

While the motive of amnesia is admittedly only a marginal one in Döblin's expressionist story about a character who is suffering from

paranoia, amnesic disorders, and more generally the mechanisms and failures of human memory, occupy a central space in Döblin's dissertation. I will argue in this essay that it was the "discovery" of human memory and amnesic disorders in late nineteenth-century psychiatry, together with a more general cultural interest in the relationship between structures of human consciousness and literary forms, that attracted Döblin to his dissertation topic. Moreover, I would like to show that by writing on Korsakoff's syndrome Döblin was able to merge his literary and psychiatric interests at a time when it was important for him not to make a decision in favor of one over the other. In other words, I will read his medical dissertation less as the contribution of an ambitious psychiatrist to his discipline but rather as an historical text that challenges us to see where some of the medical and aesthetic concerns of early twentieth-century German culture meet.

II

In order to understand why Alfred Döblin decided to receive his approbation as physician with a dissertation on Korsakoff's syndrome at a time when he made his first tentative steps toward becoming a writer—prior to 1905, Döblin had already written two unpublished novels and some novellas—it is necessary not only to shed some light on the discovery of this amnesic disorder itself, but also to understand the possible links that Döblin may have seen between his medical interest in human memory and his literary ambitions. In other words, it is necessary to identify those overlapping discursive fields within late nineteenth-century psychiatry and literary modernism that Döblin brought into close proximity in his dissertation.

The beginnings of the experimental study of memory date back to the late nineteenth century. Of course, philosophers throughout the centuries have produced a large body of literature on memory and mnemotechnics, and most of the metaphors with which psychologists have tried to form an image of the invisible processes in our memory are variations of these earlier hypotheses about memory. Plato, for example, gave us the most influential metaphors of memory as "storehouse" and "wax tablet" on which the scholar can draw or write, and these two forms of notation were later taken over into the "library model" that made it possible to distinguish between different types of stacking arrangements for two types of material, the verbal and visuo-spatial. And in the first major work on memory,

Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscentia*, we find not only the distinction between "memory" as a consequence of the "stamping" of individual perceptions into a "receiving surface" and "recollection" as a process based on association, contrast, and similarity, but also an early allusion to what was later called "interference."⁷ However, modern experimental psychology traces many of its more immediate roots to the pioneering efforts of German philosophers, physiologists, and physicists working in the middle and late nineteenth century. Although Gustav Fechner, Hermann von Helmholtz, Wilhelm Wundt, Ewald Hering, and Franz Brentano, to mention only a few, all contributed to the scientific status of psychology by applying "scientific methods" to problems of sensation, perception, and their physiological foundations in the human organism, they still refrained from investigating human memory directly and experimentally. Despite the existence of the first psychological experiments in the 1860s, "the philosophers," according to a historian of experimental psychology,

owned psychology; they believed that philosophy and thus psychology must depend upon scientific method, but for all this conviction they could not make themselves into experimentalists. They could, however, be good empiricists; they could use the results of science when the results were available, and they could emphasize experience at the expense of pure reason. Thus the path from philosophy to experimental psychology lay through empirical psychology. (Boring 372-73)

The first systematic experimental analysis of human memory is found in Hermann Ebbinghaus's (1850-1909) epoch-making study *Über das Gedächtnis* (*Memory*, 1885), which shaped the subsequent course of the new research on memory. Ebbinghaus began his experiments on memory in 1879 after he had allegedly browsed through Fechner's treatise on psychophysics in the late 1870s and recognized that he was interested in a territory that had not previously been subject to the same kind of scientific rigor as other phenomena in the natural sciences. Conscious of his efforts to widen the scope of experimental research to psychological areas such as memory that were thought to be "too complex," he admonished his readers "who are not already convinced a priori of the impossibility of such an attempt to postpone their decision about its practicality" (qtd. in Postman 150). Using himself as his subject for several years while he was

a *Dozent* at the University of Berlin, where he set up one of the first research laboratories, Ebbinghaus tried to answer some of the basic questions concerning human memory by measuring numerically the mental processes that define our mnemonic abilities. How much information can we store? How fast can we acquire it? And how long can we keep it? In order to obtain quantifiable data which in the future could be compared to similar data gained from different persons, Ebbinghaus would invent a string of nonsense syllables (two consonants with a vowel in between), learn it, note the time required for the task, relearn it at some later time, again note the time, and determine the amount of saved time, which would allow him to make some observations about the way *his* memory functioned (hoping, of course, that some general “laws” governing human memory could eventually be established). His famous “forgetting curve,” for example, showed that we forget very rapidly immediately after an event and then more slowly as time passes. He also found that “savings” steadily increased with large numbers of repetitions, that fatigue affected memory, in short, that there are quantifiable relations between the number of repetitions, the length of the word lists, and the time elapsed between the tests. Some of these results may strike us today as trivial. And experimental psychologists following Ebbinghaus were quick to point out some of the shortcomings and misguided assumptions in Ebbinghaus’s methodology and conception of human memory. His critics noticed, for example, that what Ebbinghaus was studying was verbal learning without arousal, i.e., factual memory for events that have no relation to emotions or other associations that make the retention of learned material much easier. Ebbinghaus’s concern for scientific “objectivity,” his effort to cleanse the recollected verbal material of all “subjective” dimensions (hence his use of nonsensical syllables) limited his understanding of memory. Memory for him was just a storage bin for objective items that could either be retrieved or not. But his experiments had an immediate and far-reaching (international) impact on the study of memory and memory disorders in the years surrounding the publication of Döblin’s dissertation on Korsakoff’s syndrome. Indeed, the new field of experimental psychology of memory developed into such a booming and successful enterprise between 1885, the date of publication of Ebbinghaus’s *Memory*, and the first decade of the twentieth century that psychologists were beginning to look back on their short history and review their increased knowledge about memory and proper ways to test it. The American psychologist Robert

Morris Ogden was thus able to address a convention of psychologists in 1904 with great enthusiasm: "Since the appearance of Ebbinghaus's work the number of investigations in this field has been so great, the problems attempted and solved have been so manifold, it begins to seem worthwhile to pause a moment on the way and 'take stock'." ⁸ Most of this literature was concerned with philosophical discussions concerning memory, physiological and medical reports on cases of amnesia, aphasia, and other memory disturbances, and pedagogical writings on how one could apply these new findings on memory most effectively in the classroom. Amnesias generally were recognized as being either psychogenic (for example, the amnesic aspects of multiple personality were known) or organic in origin. In his classic study *Les maladies de la mémoire*, the French psychologist Théodule Ribot, who lectured on mental abnormalities at the Sorbonne from 1872 to 1885 and then held a chair of experimental and comparative psychology at the Collège de France, divided amnesia into two categories: "general amnesia," resulting from cases of hysterical and multiple personality, dementia, and congenital or progressive brain damage; and "partial amnesia," the forgetting of special material such as proper names, melodies, or linguistic signs as illustrated in aphasia and related disorders. ⁹ Ribot also discovered a "law of forgetting" for cases of general dissolution of the memory, which describes how forgetting moves along a path from new to old materials and from ideas to feelings and acts. With this distinction between a memory for recent and one for remote events, the effects of Korsakoff's psychosis on human memory could now be explored in more detail. The Russian psychologist Korsakoff (1853-1900) is believed to have been the first to recognize that amnesia does not necessarily have to be associated with dementia. He noted a severe but specific amnesia for recent and current events among alcoholics and published his findings in two essays in the *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Psychiatrie* in 1890 and 1891. ¹⁰ When Döblin began to work on Korsakoff's syndrome there was more or less general agreement about its symptoms. He lists the high degree of retrograde amnesia and affective anomalies as its primary symptoms and, reviewing the medical literature on Korsakoff's syndrome of his time, separates two stages of the pathology. In the first stage, the so-called Wernicke encephalopathy, the patient usually develops symptoms such as delirious hallucinations, together with abnormal eye movements, problems in coordinating body movements, slowness, and confusion. ¹¹ During the sec-

ond stage these hallucinations recede, bringing the chronic amnesic disorder of Korsakoff's syndrome to the attention of the physician. In order to gain further insight into this illness, Döblin attempts "to achieve a general understanding of memory, to point out its individual factors and components that contribute to the phenomenon of memory, and to analyze the amnesic complex from there" (*Gedächtnisstörungen* 10). The theoretical first part of his dissertation then turns quickly into a speculative analysis about the nature of human memory. And it is obvious that Döblin's philosophical inclinations—"I occupy myself with psychiatry. Of course, it is not an easy terrain, one rambles on and on, I am glad to have some philosophical knowledge," he wrote to his friend Herwarth Walden in 1906 (*Briefe* 42)—gain the upper hand in his investigation. Döblin's interest revolves around the psycho-physical problem of how something immaterial like perceptions can be transformed into material "traces," physically stored, and recalled at some later time. After rejecting earlier nineteenth-century models of memory as "physics of the soul" (*Gedächtnisstörungen* 13) because they erroneously conceived of memory as a kind of mechanical storage bin where *all* our experiences supposedly co-exist next to each other, as well as physiological theories of the "trace" that locate memory traces in the brain without telling us how some of our past experiences reenter our present mental life and others do not, Döblin summarizes his review of the existing literature with a slightly melancholic tone: "We can only deduce that something physical remains which later explains our recollection" (16). And since the relationship between the physical and psychological aspects of memory presents itself as an "astonishing secret" (14), Döblin limits his further speculations to an investigation of the psychological processes that structure recollection. As we shall see, Döblin's comments on the nature of these psychological operations show some striking similarities to his ideas about a new prose literature that he began to develop at the same time. The characteristic symptoms of Korsakoff's syndrome—amnesia for recent events and the inability to learn new material—lead him to conjecture about human memory and formulate some general observations about the "essence" of psychological processes. And it is the latter for which the expressionist writer Döblin seeks adequate aesthetic forms. His interest in the psychology of remembering and forgetting and his desire to create innova-

According to Döblin, psychological and physical processes ("das Psychische und das Physische") are fundamentally different: whereas the immaterial psychological "happens" in a kind of "timeless present" ("unzeitliche Gegenwart"), physical processes can leave traces in the organism and thus have their "past." Since psychological acts do not take place within a temporal structure, the scientific model of cause and effect is irrelevant for them:

As we have already said: the psychological arrives from nothing [kommt aus dem Nichts]. Hence, there is no psychological causality; the continuity of our internal representations [Vorstellungen] may be logical. Nevertheless, the psychological is its own kind of actuality insofar as it presents itself at every moment as something new, it exists as a kind of explosion [explosionsartig da ist], and nobody is able to say or predict that it will still be there at the next moment. No law of conservation prevents its complete disappearance. Thus the psychological is an event [So ist das Psychische selbst Geschehen]. (17)

Döblin's rejection of the principle of causality and the notion of the dissociated nature of our psychological life soon became the cornerstones of his theory for a new novelistic form. In his programmatic essay from 1913 "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker"¹² ("To Novelists and Their Critics"), Döblin offered his own version of the expressionists' critique of rationality and psychologism that were associated with a reified nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. Playing out psychiatry against psychology as the better model of scientific investigation the modern writer should turn to, Döblin repudiates psychology in the novel as a "purely abstract phantasmagoria" because "analyses and attempts to differentiate have nothing to do with the issue of a real psyche." Psychology has become "the most pampered rationalism" and "rationalism has always been the death of art" (120). Instead of musing on the possible motives for his protagonist's actions, the prose writer should, for example, avoid empty linguistic signs such as "rage," "love," or "contempt" and—in the name of a more authentic realism—focus on their exterior appearance, "changes of behavior and effects" (121). A few years later, in an essay entitled "Reform des Romans," Döblin repeated in a typically expressionist fashion his claim that both modern art and literature aim at the destruction of rational structures:

If one wanted—of course only at a distance—to imitate the painters, one would have to . . . break to pieces syntax and logic, to penetrate into each separate word to [the point of] alogicality, and we have [already in fact] such efforts in literature; here is clarity. (*Schriften zu Ästhetik* 139)¹³

Döblin's ideal prose eliminates the psychological realism of the nineteenth-century novel and replaces it with a notion of the psychological originating from his dissertation on Korsakoff's syndrome. If psychological life is discontinuous and characterized by temporal gaps, it follows that the modern prose writer should no longer emulate the traditional development of plot in nineteenth-century Realism. The new narrative style must supplant teleological development with the construction of autonomous units that pay tribute to the highly fragmented way in which both exterior and interior reality are registered. Calling this formal innovation "the epic renewal of the novel" or "cinematic style," Döblin describes its characteristics as:

Terseness, frugality with words . . .; fresh turns of phrase. Periodic sentences are to be used more widely that allow the rapid comprehension of both the juxtaposition and subordination of complex material. Rapid sequences, a chaos of simple actions. (*Schriften zu Ästhetik* 132)¹⁴

In works such as *The Three Leaps of Wang Lung* (1915), *Wadzek's Battle with the Steam Turbine* (1918), *Wallenstein* (1920), *Mountains, Oceans, and Giants* (1924), and his masterpiece *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), Döblin carried out these experiments and introduced the narrative technique of parataxis, the discontinuous arrangement of word and sentence without the syntactic depth of subordination, to the modern German novel.

After these comments on the discontinuous nature of psychological processes in general, Döblin proceeds to an investigation of the failures of memory in Korsakoff's patients. For a long time psychologists have tried to explain why our memory sometimes fails and have generated a full range of answers: some have argued that memory may fail because the perception or idea never got into the store in the first place; others have claimed that it did get in but disappeared, either through decay or by some other object or stimulus that replaced it; or it got in and is still there but for some reason we can no longer find it or get access to it. Döblin's solution to this

problem shows his indebtedness to the classical laws of association theory that were intended to provide details of storage arrangements and retrieval strategies. A sequence of association has since Aristotle's time been considered a "Road, which leads to Memory thro' a series of Ideas, however connected whether rationally or casually, this is Recollection" (J. Harris, *Hermes* [1751], qtd. in Marshall and Fryer 13). Agreeing with the nineteenth-century psychologist Wundt that our recollections are always already a combination of the impressions we form through perception and pre-existing recollections already stored in our memory, Döblin rejects the notion that forgetting is a failure of the storing process ("Haftstörung") and views it as a problem concerning the combination of new perceptions with previously stored memory material ("Verbindungsstörung"). Absolute forgetting is thus not possible, or at least we cannot prove it. For Döblin, all amnesic disorders are the result of an impediment that blocks access to previous recollections that we use in order to make sense of new impressions. Of course, there are different degrees of stability among these associations, depending on how firmly they are tied to each other. A typical Korsakoff's patient does not usually suffer from an inability to recognize objects ("Auffassungsstörung"), because his capacity to associate objects with their linguistic signs is still intact. Countless repetitions have produced such a strong connection between object and sign that only the most severe memory disturbance can break it apart. The fact that it is primarily the short-term memory that fails the Korsakoff's patient points to his enormous difficulty in associating *new* information with recollections already stored ("Merkfähigkeitsstörung"). Due to excessive consumption of alcohol, the glue between them has somehow lost its adhesiveness. In severe cases of Korsakoff's syndrome the connection between recollections and new perceptions may be severed to the point of complete dissociation:

The present impediment in someone's ability to form representations [Vorstellungshemmung] was characterized by the fact that no or too few recollections were brought into association. The recollections that [normally] belong together do not occur together when their connection is loosened; this loosening of the connection among the recollections occurs when only a few or possibly just one can be recalled. However, there is a total dissociation of representations if, for example, with the imagin-

ing of the date of a year no recollection can be brought into association with it. Then we have a complete malfunction of memory, for example dealing with one's own experiences and their sequence of time. If such dissociated recollections emerge, i.e., are associated with any sort of perception, in that case no connection of recollections will allow a criticism of those recollections which emerge, since, to be sure, none is firmly brought into association with any other, especially with a recollection of time. Real experiences can be incorrectly attached or dislocated; that which has been dreamt, read, hallucinated about can be talked about as actually experienced, confused, and "exchanged." (*Gedächtnisstörungen* 29f)

For Döblin, the memory disorder in Korsakoff's syndrome is a result of the dissociation of the recollections in our memory. In other words, there is a plethora of free-floating images whose "historical" contexts the patient has lost. Mnemonic fragments of completely different origins lose their temporal sequence that enables a normally functioning memory to bind them together and begin to form new relations over which Korsakoff's patient has no rational control.

Without blurring the difference between the mental "products" of patients suffering from amnesic disorders and the rational construction of works of art, I would like to suggest here a distant affinity between Döblin's description of the dissociation of recollections in a Korsakoff's patient and some formal characteristics of modern literature. The inability of the patient to distinguish between reality fragments, dreams, previously read texts, and hallucinations, and correctly determine their original contexts bears some structural resemblance to the widespread use of the form of montage as expression of modern life, particularly the experience of a new sense of time. From the Dadaist text montages to the penchant of the expressionist writers for the so-called "serial style" to the automatic texts of the Surrealists to the high-modernist novels of Proust, Joyce, and Döblin, the montage was used to represent the simultaneity of perception by breaking up temporal sequence. The depiction of a continuously and teleologically evolving time, as we know it from nineteenth-century Realism, was gradually replaced by what Joseph Frank in his classic essay has termed "the spatial form" in modern literature. Both modern art and literature have, each in its own way, attempted to overcome the time elements involved in their structures. According to Frank, modern poetry and prose desire to "un-

determine the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem [or novel] as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time" (*Spatial Form* 12). Moreover, in a literary montage, the various parts emancipate themselves from a superordinate whole and sometimes lack necessity. For example, in many expressionist poems that string images together in a "serial style," some could be missing or added, yet the meaning of the text would not be fundamentally affected. The different parts of a montage are therefore not linked by significant temporal or causal relationships. Alfred Lichtenstein's poem "Morning" (1913), illustrating the expressionist writers' fascination with madness and physical decay, serves as a representative example for their highly dissociated perception of reality that is presented to us as a chain of unconnected images:

And all the streets lie snug there, clean and regular.
Only at times some brawny fellow hurries by.
A very smart young girl fights fiercely with Papa.
A baker, for a change, looks at the lovely sky.
The dead sun hangs on houses, broad as it is sick.
Four bulging women shrilly squeak outside a bar.
The driver of a cab falls down and breaks his neck.
And all is boringly bright, salubrious and clear.

A wise-eyed gentleman floats madly, full of night,
An ailing god . . . within this scene, which he forgot
Or failed to notice—Mutters something. Dies. And laughs.
Dreams of a cerebral stroke, paralysis, bone-rot.
(Reprinted in *Hamburger* 131)

I am suggesting here that we understand the dissociation of the perception of reality in modern literature and the dissociation of memory material in a Korsakoff's patient as parallel and structurally similar "discoveries." Obviously, there are fundamental differences between a writer's conscious effort to represent what he experiences as the disintegration of his cultural environment and the Korsakoff's patient's futile search for the correct recollections in his shattered memory. But the idea of dissociation provided Döblin, who during the first decade of the twentieth century was equally familiar with psychiatric and literary discourses, with an excellent

conceptual tool to write about a particular memory disorder and some formal aspects of modern literature.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Döblin devotes the last part of his dissertation to a discussion of a symptom that allows him to draw a direct line between his psychiatric interest and the creative act of writing. Particularly in the early days of the disease, most Korsakoff's patients tend to answer their doctor's questions with "confabulations" that seem to have no basis in the patient's life. According to Döblin, these confabulations are caused by the patient's weak memory and involve that part of his life for which only dissociated recollections exist:

The dislocated recollections and the obvious phantasms have a common root: in the final analysis, the stories about robbers and the encounters with wild animals must also be explained by an impediment of the formation of associations [Verbindungsstörung]; no further recollection of their origin, such as "I read it in this or that book," "in my dreams," "I hallucinated," is tied to these recollections, from wherever they may originate. These phantasms are thus also the products of dissociation, they are caused by the chaotic memory; for the patient lacks any means to somehow correct a new representation on the basis of fixed recollections. (*Gedächtnisstörungen* 33)

When asked to answer questions about recent events that Korsakoff's patient could not store properly in his memory, he finds a number of heterogeneous "texts" in his "library" and constructs "stories" from them, often systematically and with great skill. To further explain the characteristics of the patient's confabulations, Döblin compares them with "poetic fabulations": "In both cases we are dealing with an impediment of the formations of associations [Verbindungsstörungen]: what was experienced as real gets dislocated; that which has been dreamt, read, thought, and hallucinated about gets mixed up with [and] exchanged" (35). Like the Korsakoff's patient, the writer, too, "frees" his linguistic material from its original context, dissolves any temporal and causal relations that might have existed between its various elements, and reassembles them into a new "text." By pointing out, however, some major differences between the Korsakoff's patient and the writer and their respective products, Döblin avoids the danger of seeing the writer as an "ill" person and thereby contributing to the widespread discourse throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that drew

numerous analogies between creative individuals and the ill, above all the insane.¹⁵ The first difference concerns the moment of "production"; whereas the writer supposedly creates his works in a state of excitement, the patient puts forth his confabulations "in complete calmness" and in a "somber voice" (35). The second difference pertains to the "realism" of their "stories." Unlike the Korsakoff's patient who suffers from the illusion that his "stories" are the products of real experience, the writer remains aware of the fictional character of his texts. And the third and most important distinction touches upon their different ways of combining the dissociated elements that constitute the products of their imagination. Whereas the writer is able to organize his heterogenous recollections by means of a guiding idea ["Zielvorstellung"] that lends even the most fragmented literary texts aesthetic coherence, the person afflicted with memory loss completely lacks such unifying principles. Döblin's discussion of the creative act of writing was inspired by his reading of one of the first books that specifically deals with the psychology of creative imagination. In his *Essai sur l'imagination creatrice* (*Essay on the Creative Imagination*, 1900), Theodule Ribot, who earlier in his career had contributed the concept of retrograde amnesia to the study of memory loss, explored the constitutive factors of constructive imagination, its historical development "from the dimmest to the most complex forms," and "the principal types of imagination" (ix). In a passage pointing out the similarities between "mechanical imagination" and "aesthetic imagination," Ribot mentions not only the notion of a guiding idea that unifies the various internal images arising during the creative process but also the concept of dissociation by virtue of which Döblin was able to associate literature with a Korsakoff's patient's confabulations:

The mechanical imagination thus has like the other [the aesthetic] its ideal, i.e., a perfection conceived and put forward as capable, little by little, of being realized. The idea is at first hidden; it is . . . the principle of unity, center of attraction, that suggests, excites, and groups appropriate associations of images, in which it is enwrapped and organized into a structure, an *ensemble* of means converging toward a common end. It thus presupposes a dissociation of experience. The inventor undoes, decomposes, breaks up into thought, or makes of experience a tool, an instrument, a machine, an agency for building anew with the débris. (268)

What Ribot was describing here is not just some general form of aesthetic imagination but the creative principle of modern literature (and art) itself. Anticipating constructivist rhetoric, Ribot left behind the classical notions of the organic work of art and the writer producing his works according to the laws of nature. Similarly, Döblin emphatically states in "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker" that "the routine of narrating has no place in the novel; one does not narrate, one constructs" (*Schriften zu Ästhetik* 121f). The often proclaimed end of storytelling in modern literature, it seems, is the aesthetic response to the fragmented perception of exterior reality and the dissociation of one's inner experience. Döblin's dissertation on Korsakoff's syndrome, accentuating the dissociation of memory, reflects this quintessentially modern preoccupation with the disintegration of culture and consciousness.

III

Indeed, the notion of a dissociated consciousness as a reflex of a rapidly changing culture became so prominent at the beginning of the twentieth century that cultural critics, psychiatrists, and writers were all able to employ it, albeit for different purposes. In an essay for the expressionist journal *Die Aktion*, the writer Franz Werfel could complain in 1914 about a terrible cultural confusion leading to "despair and madness." "It seems," he continued, "the *And* between things has become rebellious, everything lies on a pile, independent of anything else" (qtd. in Anz 156). Eugen Bleuler's description of the dissociation of thoughts in patients suffering from schizophrenia, put forth in his *Lehrbuch für Psychiatrie* (1916) two years later, seems to characterize the stylistic features of expressionist prose as well:

The normal associations of ideas lose their stability; any other [associations] can replace them. Consecutive parts can do without a connection to one another with the result that thinking becomes unconnected. (qtd. in Anz 157)

And in Gottfried Benn's novella cycle *Gehirne* (*Brains* 1916) the theme of dissociation ties the five novellas together. In the first novella, "Brains," we see the protagonist Rönne, like Benn himself a physician, on his way to a hospital where he is to replace a doctor. But Rönne himself needs help. He had fallen into a state of apathy and become unable to connect his present experience with his past.

His world has dissolved into discrete phenomena that he cannot integrate into a whole experience. His physical senses register new images, but every single one of them seems to penetrate him like a chock-experience, indicating that his perception simply dissolves the world into parts without reconnecting them: "Then in many tunnels his eyes stood poised to catch the light; men worked in the hay; bridges of stone; a town and a wagon over mountains before a house" (*Gesammelte Werke* 13).¹⁶ Rönne's dissociated consciousness also affects his memory. Unable to form associations between his perceptions and previous experiences, his consciousness is without depth. Memory and his senses only produce images that cannot be integrated into a coherent self: "He tried to recall when it had begun, but he didn't know any longer: I walk down a street and see a house and remember a castle that was similar in Florence, but they [recollections and impressions] only fleetingly touch appearances and fade" (16).¹⁷

One could analyze numerous other literary works from early twentieth-century German literature dealing with the dissociation of mental life and/or the failure of memory. In order to shed some light on the question of why "dissociation" began to occupy such a dominant position in modern literature at the end of the nineteenth century, I briefly turn to an essay by Walter Benjamin, whose interest in the transformation that human consciousness and memory have gone through in the course of the nineteenth century has seldom been recognized.¹⁸ While working in his Paris exile on the "Arcades project" to reconstruct the history of European capitalism, Benjamin published his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1939. Benjamin's essay is so useful for our purposes here because dealing with the literary works of two modern writers, Baudelaire and Proust, Benjamin noticed their sensibility for those cultural changes that exerted a lasting effect on memory.

The story Benjamin tells us is one of loss. He contends that "experience is . . . a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory (*Erinnerung*) than of a convergence in memory (*Gedächtnis*) of accumulated and frequently unconscious data" (*Illuminations* 157-202). Whereas traditional and genuine memory (*Gedächtnis*) enables the individual to "form an image of himself" (160), i.e., to assimilate his life experience in such a way that a meaningful and coherent life-story may result, modern societies produce a different kind of memory

(*Erinnerung*) that deprives us of any way of assimilating our sensations and perceptions and transforming them into a lasting personal experience. Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* was written at a time when this gradual loss of a genuinely assimilated experience had already begun to make literary projects such as Proust's more and more difficult. His narrator's desire to construct a story of his childhood in order to gain knowledge about himself could only be realized with enormous difficulties and, moreover, the entire project was subject to mere chance. Although Benjamin does not speak of the *Bildungsroman* in this context, one could argue that he relegates teleological storytelling to an irretrievable past. The subjective past of one's childhood for Proust is "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it" (160). Proust's famous term for the agency that can provide us with access to the unconscious material buried within ourselves, *mémoire involontaire*, is of course based on his reading of Henri Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* (1896), another influential work on memory written at the end of the nineteenth century, where Bergson approaches the problem of human memory from a biological perspective. Despite giving Bergson much credit for his early work on memory, Benjamin levels his criticism against Bergson's ahistorical approach. What Bergson failed to do is to examine the historical and social situation "from which his own philosophy evolved, or, rather, in reaction to which it arose" (159), i.e., to investigate those historical changes that brought about the loss of experience. Benjamin's chief witness for this loss and the emergence of a different kind of registering and absorbing stimuli is Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (1857). According to Benjamin, Baudelaire's poetry should be read as an historical document showing how modern society, on account of the increasing number of shocks to which the organism is now subjected, strengthened human consciousness as a mental defense mechanism against these shocks, protecting us perhaps against an increasing bombardment of shock-like stimuli from our environment, yet simultaneously preventing us from absorbing these sensations, assimilating them to our previous life-experience, and making them part of our own. Benjamin uses Freud's distinction between unconscious memory and the conscious act of recollection (similar to Proust's distinction between *mémoire involontaire* and *mémoire*

volontaire) in order to show why a modern culture, despite and on account of an increase in shocks and other stimuli, leaves so few traces behind and makes it so difficult for modern subjects to construct a coherent image of themselves. For Freud, "becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other within one and the same system" (162). And the more efficient our consciousness functions as a screen against stimuli, the less these impressions enter experience and tend to remain on the "surface" of one's consciousness, waiting to be quickly forgotten or, perhaps even more importantly, entering our memory, but only in a highly dissociated form. Benjamin thought of the vast amount of unassimilated information people were exposed to while reading a newspaper (today the plethora of television images or computer images might serve as better examples); of the multitude of new, unconnected stimuli a nineteenth-century city dweller was confronted with; but also of new technological inventions like the conveyor belt that replaced an older and slower form of manufacturing objects with highly fragmented, repeated movements that the factory worker could no longer make an integral part of his experience. Benjamin, in other words, chronicled the social and technological changes during the nineteenth century that gradually generated an increasingly dissociated perception of the modern world and sparked a new cultural interest in memory. As we have seen, modern experimental research in memory and its disorders gained institutional momentum at a time when remembering and forgetting, together with a heightened awareness of the dissociated nature of psychological processes, also became issues for modern literature. Döblin's dissertation on Korsakoff's syndrome reflects the confluence of these various discourses and challenges us to read both the symptoms of an illness and aesthetic innovations as parallel manifestations of a particular culture.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the entire library staff at Sarah Lawrence College, especially Janet Alexander and Eti Leetma, for their always friendly and most effective help.
2. In 1909 Döblin published an essay on attention disorder, "Aufmerksamkeitsstörungen bei Hysterie," in the *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*; one year later, the same journal accepted his ar-

title "Zur Wahnbildung im Senium" that explores the formation of certain forms of psychosis in old age. Both essays are reprinted in Paul Lüth, *Alfred Döblin als Arzt und Patient*.

3. All translations from Döblin's texts, if not noted otherwise, are mine. I would like to thank Richard Rogan for his generous help.

4. See Sander L. Gilman, *Wahnsinn, Text und Kontext* and more recently Georg Reuchlein, *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft, Psychiatrie und Literatur*.

5. See Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, especially 217-38.

6. Thomas Anz, in *Phantasien über den Wahnsinn*, provides a representative selection of expressionist texts dealing with madness, the insane, and psychiatric institutions.

7. See J.C. Marshall and D.M. Fryer, "Speak, Memory!" W.H. Burnham's "Memory, Historically, and Experimentally Considered," is still interesting because it can be read as a historical commentary accompanying the late nineteenth-century interest in memory; in my account on nineteenth-century contributions to the study of memory I draw on D.J. Murray, "Research on Human Memory in the Nineteenth Century."

8. Cited Schacter 159.

9. See Murray 204.

10. See "Eine psychische Störung, kombiniert mit multipler Neuritis" and "Erinnerungstäuschungen (Pseudoreminiscenzen) bei polyneuritischer Psychose." Of course, there are numerous more recent studies on Korsakoff's syndrome. I am relying on Howard Gardner's very readable account in his *The Shattered Mind* (176-219) and Richard Noll and Carol Turkington, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Memory and Memory Disorders*.

11. Carl Wernicke (1848-1905) was a German neurologist who related nerve diseases to specific areas of the brain and also investigated the localization of memory. In 1891 he published his influential *Lehrbuch der Gehirnkrankheiten (Textbook of Brain Pathologies)* with which Döblin was familiar.

12. *Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur* 119-23.

13. The translation is from Neil H. Donahue, *Forms of Disruption* 132.

14. The translation is from Donahue, *Forms of Disruption* 130.

15. See Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* 217-38.

16. The translation is from Donahue, *Forms of Disruption* 169. Donahue provides also an excellent reading of Benn's novella.

17. Translated by Donahue, *Forms of Disruption* 172.

18. A noticeable exception is Fredric Jameson's essay on "Walter Benjamin; Or, Nostalgia" in his *Marxism and Form* (60-83). I draw here on Jameson's essay which discusses Benjamin's preoccupation with the loss of experience, memory, and storytelling in nineteenth-century Europe as important components of his unorthodox Marxist hermeneutics.

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