Döblin, Alfred (1878 - 1957)

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German novelist. His Berlin-Alexanderplatz (1929) owes much to James Joyce’s Ulysses in its minutely detailed depiction of the inner lives of a city’s inhabitants, scrutinizing the social and psychological pressures exerted by the city; it is considered by many to be the finest 20th-century German novel. Other works include November 1918: Eine deutsche Revolution/A German Revolution (1939–50; published in four parts) about the formation of the Weimar Republic.

Major works After Berlin-Alexanderplatz he produced Babylonische Wanderung/Babylonian Migration 1934 and Pardon wird nicht gegeben/Men without Mercy 1935. His last important work, Hamlet oder Die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende/Hamlet or The Long Night Never Ends 1956, powerfully observes the inner decay of a family and its relationship to a world of multilayered reality. The whole question of reality was of persistent concern to Döblin, accounting for the uneasy tension in his works between realistic rationalism and elements of mystical religion.

Life Döblin was born in Stettin (modern Szczecin, Poland) to a Yiddish-speaking family. He grew up in Berlin, where he practised as a doctor until 1933, when his books were banned and he was exiled; he moved first to France and from 1941 lived in the USA.

Minor works Döblin’s work is of crucial significance in the development of the modern German novel, a genre in which he displayed stylistic and thematic originality. He explored the diverse motivation of individuals caught in the restricting web of modern urban life, revealing remarkable psychological perception and a sharp eye for the nuances and telling moments of everyday life. His imagination and narrative skill first found expression in Die Ermordung einer Butterblume/The Murder of a Buttercup (1913), a collection of innovative short stories. Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lun/The Three Leaps of Wang-lun (1915), probably the first truly expressionistic novel of value in Germany, deals with the class struggle in China. Döblin was fascinated by the effects of power and collective movements, especially in technological societies, as in Berge, Meere und Giganten/Mountains, Oceans, and Giants 1924.

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