

*Chapter 9*

**CRIME AND LITERATURE IN THE  
WEIMAR REPUBLIC AND BEYOND**

Telling the Tale of the Poisoners Ella Klein and Margarete Nebbe

*Todd Herzog*



At the end of Don DeLillo's novel *Libra*, a fictional account of the case of Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination, Oswald's mother Marguerite testifies in court about her son, explaining why she cannot offer a straightforward account of the events leading up to the assassination:

Your honor, I cannot state the truth of this case with a simple yes and no. I have to tell a story. . . . There are stories within stories, judge. . . . I intend to research this case and present my findings. But I cannot pin it down to a simple statement. . . . It takes stories to fill out a life.<sup>1</sup>

Marguerite Oswald's testimony attests to an inherent conflict within the notion of the criminal case. On the one hand, whether the case is related in a court trial or a traditional detective novel, it needs to reach a conclusion—guilty or not guilty? Whodunit? On the other hand, both forms of the criminal case are typically structured as narratives. Cases are a narrative form of knowledge; they need to tell a story. And yet these stories can ultimately preclude precisely that which the case seeks to reach: a definitive answer, a concrete judgment. DeLillo's fictional narrative is able to weave this tension throughout the novel: Marguerite Oswald's testimony makes up one strand of DeLillo's historical novel; the other strand narrates the work of Nicholas Branch, a former CIA agent who is given access to all documents pertaining to the case and is charged with the task of writing an authoritative history of it. Eventually, the fact-based investigator Branch comes around to Marguerite Oswald's position, proclaiming that "it is premature

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to make a serious effort to turn these notes into coherent history. Maybe it will always be premature.”<sup>2</sup>

By the 1980s, when DeLillo was writing *Libra*, the concept of narrative uncertainty and the genre of true-crime fiction were both well established. In this chapter, I want to return to the period when these concepts were being developed. If narrative is a primary means to distinguish between types, reach judgments, and explain causes, what happens when the belief in narrative coherence goes into crisis, as it does in the early twentieth century? To address this question, I will examine a case from 1922–1923 that has attracted an enormous amount of attention to this day: the case of Ella Klein and Margarete Nebbe, who were convicted of the murder of one of their husbands and the attempted murder of the other.

I will first examine the events surrounding the case and then turn to a remarkable monograph on the case, Alfred Döblin’s *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (*The Two Girlfriends and their Murder by Poisoning*), which seeks to probe the issues at the center of the genre of the case study—the very conflicts addressed in *Libra*. I will conclude by briefly considering three post–World War II re-workings of the case. By examining several different accounts of the case spanning eight decades (from the 1920s to the 1990s) and four different media (press, literature, theater, and film), I hope to bring to light the complex relationship between crimes and crime stories—between events and actions and narrative accounts of these events and actions—and investigate the role that narrative plays in establishing notions of causality. To return to the language of Marguerite Oswald’s fictional testimony, I wish to delve into these “stories within stories” and examine how they work and what they do as they go about attempting to “fill out a life.”

### **“So Typical . . . That It Could Have Been Taken from a Scientific Treatise”: The Case of Ella Klein and Margarete Nebbe**

When, in 1922, two women were arrested in Berlin for the murder of one of their husbands and the attempted murder of the other, the ensuing trial, which revealed their lesbian relationship and contained all of the major traditional stereotypes of female criminality—hysteria, childlike behavior, hypersexuality—created quite a sensation.<sup>3</sup> The facts of the case were never much in dispute and are, on one level at least, fairly straightforward. In 1918, nineteen-year-old Ella Thieme, a hairdresser from Braunschweig, moved to Berlin; two years later, she married a carpenter named Klein. Klein, an alcoholic, brutally mistreated Ella, who continually rebuffed his sexual advances, leading her to leave him and seek a divorce after spending only a few weeks together. Her family, however, convinced her to return to her husband, and the mistreatment continued.

Ella soon met another unhappily married woman, Margarete Nebbe, a neighbor in the working-class district of Berlin-Lichterfeld. The two quickly developed

an intense emotional and sexual relationship. Over the next several months, they exchanged nearly six hundred letters in which they fantasized about liberating themselves from their husbands so that the two of them could be free to be together. To facilitate this liberation, they concocted a plan to poison their husbands by applying arsenic to their food. Ella began the process in February 1922; two months later, on 1 April, Klein was pronounced dead of alcohol poisoning in a Berlin hospital.

Klein's mother quickly grew suspicious of Ella's odd behavior and the mysterious circumstances surrounding her son's death. She launched an investigation into the cause of Klein's death, which an autopsy revealed to be arsenic poisoning. On 22 May 1922, Ella Klein was arrested and charged with the murder of her husband. One week later, Margarete Nebbe was also arrested on charges of aiding Ella in her murder and attempting to poison her own husband as well. Nebbe's mother, Marie Riemer, was also implicated in the plan, but was later pronounced innocent.

Over the course of the five-day trial, which began on 12 March 1923, the story of the two women became a topic of widespread public discussion. All six hundred letters that Klein and Nebbe had exchanged were read aloud in court, and their often racy content was reproduced in the press. A series of medical experts, including the noted sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, offered testimony in the case. Though the public was not admitted to the courtroom, the papers reported large crowds gathering outside each day to catch a glimpse of the participants and to hear the latest developments.<sup>4</sup> On 16 March, both women were found guilty by the jury and given jail sentences that most commentators on the trial found to be shockingly light.<sup>5</sup>

The guilt of the two women was never really in doubt. Yet the case clearly struck a nerve. Surely the sensational elements of the trial—especially the homosexual relationship between the defendants—had much to do with the grip it had on the public. But it was ultimately something else about the case that captured the attention of a number of interested observers: not its uniqueness, but rather its *typicality*. The typicality of the case was noted by two prominent writers who closely followed the proceedings, Joseph Roth and Robert Musil, both of whom wrote short pieces about it immediately following the trial. As Roth noted in an article that appeared in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* on the day following the decision: “As unusual as this ‘sensational trial’ is and as odd as these two women are—their marriages and their lives are typical for women of petty bourgeois circles, from which Nebbe and Klein come. It is through this typicality that the trial gains its special social and psychological significance.”<sup>6</sup> Though he does not retreat from his initial class-oriented observation, Roth does extend the implications of the case beyond the milieu of working-class women:

The murderers are psychologically interesting in that they supply evidence that in these primitive women, whom one thinks one knows so well because one encounters

them in the subway, on the streets and in stores, the most complicated processes are being played out: perversion and refinement, mysteries and inextricabilities are not only the consequences of a luxurious spiritual decadence. They are not the outcome of well-bred sensitive nerves, but rather natural-unnatural psychological storms whose preconditions are everywhere, in every person—in the “simple” souls of regular people and in the “refined” organisms of intellectuals.<sup>7</sup>

This universality was, for Roth, the real ground for interest in the case, though, he argued, this was precisely what was lost on the curious public, who were not “mature enough to ignore the excitement and lasciviousness of the events” and instead pay attention to the lesson of the case, which lay in the fact that the “unnatural predisposition” that came to light over the course of the trial was not limited to these two women, nor to others of their class or gender. It was, rather, perhaps present in all of us. Mentioning the widespread disapproval of divorce and homosexuality, Roth also pointed out that it was social strictures that were ultimately responsible for prompting these women’s actions.

Writing three days later, Robert Musil made an observation similar to Roth’s, pronouncing the case “so typical . . . that it could have been taken from a scientific treatise.”<sup>8</sup> For Musil, as for Roth, it was the case’s very typicality that made it interesting. He went a step further than Roth, however, in that he saw this typicality as not explaining the events, but rather lending an air of uncertainty and mystery to the case.<sup>9</sup> The difficulty of the case, for Musil, lay in the uncertainty as to where to locate guilt: “One should ask in crimes of this type what portion of the blame should lie with society for allowing it to get so far. A resolute criminal has indeed more bad in him or her than a good, but weak, person, but also more seeds of goodness, says John Stuart Mill.”<sup>10</sup> For Musil, the murky cause of the crime was not to be found in feelings of hatred or revenge, but rather in the nature of love itself: “Not only do noble feelings of love transform themselves into crimes, but at the same time outwardly criminal thoughts are internally perceived as indistinguishable from a noble feeling of love.”<sup>11</sup> Musil seems to be pointing here not to asocial or antisocial behavior as the cause of the women’s crimes, but rather to an overidentification, an oversocialization—not distance, but closeness. I will return to this notion and discuss it further in my consideration of Döblin’s case study.

This uncertainty about where to locate the ultimate cause of the crime played itself out both among expert witnesses and public commentators in the Klein-Nebbe case. Whereas many argued, along with Roth and Musil, that the cause of the crime (and therefore at least part of the guilt) lay in social relations, others argued just as forcefully that the cause of the crime must be sought in the physical or psychological make-up of the defendants. For many commentators, the events had to be viewed primarily within the context of sexual perversity: “Everything in this trial breathed sexuality,” wrote Arthur Brandt, the defense attorney for Klein

and Nebbe, in the *BZ am Mittag*.<sup>12</sup> In this view, the crime therefore had to be seen as a “sex crime.”<sup>13</sup> The socialist *Vorwärts*, too, argued that “the decisive word in this case belongs not to the field of psychiatry, but to sexual pathology.”<sup>14</sup> “In any event,” the report continued, “the expert witnesses were in agreement that both of the defendants display[ed] congenital psychological defects” and Klein in particular suffered from “limitations in mental and physical development that extend even to the internal sexual organs.”<sup>15</sup> The experts were also in agreement about “the presence of a homosexual tendency in both defendants.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the medical experts called in to testify in the trial all agreed that the women suffered from a sexual pathology that lay in their physical constitution and their sexual orientation. In this reading of the case, the cause of the crimes lay not in the social repression that Roth and Musil cited, but in the physical and psychological conditions of the individual women who were guilty of them. They had committed the crimes because they, unlike the rest of society, suffered from a sexual pathology.

Other commentators took a different stance, viewing the murder not as the manifestation of the two women’s sexual pathology, but of the perversity of social conditions. A commentator for *Vorwärts* summed up this position:

The artificially cultivated ignorance and mental complacency of women, the position of marital servitude that has been sanctified by tradition and law, the lack of understanding by the parents, the brutality of the “Lord of the creation,” the husband in married life, make up the social background of this drama. The women were thus “innocently guilty.”<sup>17</sup>

To prevent the further occurrence of such crimes, argued those who located guilt in Weimar society, one must concentrate not on curing or incarcerating the individual criminals but on altering social conditions. In contrast, those who located guilt in a psychological or physical abnormality in the two women argued in favor of treating the women.

The arguments that came to the fore in the case of Klein and Nebbe were not, of course, new or particular to the crime under question here. Rather, they revolved around an ongoing debate in criminology since its beginnings: the question of what produces criminal behavior. The development of the modern science of criminology since the end of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of three competing schools of thought on what makes a criminal. The anthropological school, which argued that the source of criminality lay in biological factors; the sociological school, which argued in favor of social factors in determining criminality; and the psychological school, which sought to tie criminality to psychic factors.<sup>18</sup> The debates among (and within) these three general schools as to whether criminality was ultimately inner-determined (psychological or physical) or outer-determined (sociological) was still heated in the 1920s and, indeed,

continues to this day.<sup>19</sup> This debate, which, as we have seen, played itself out in the Klein-Nebbe case, also figured prominently in Alfred Döblin's investigation into the case. Indeed, his investigation of the case was, in fact, primarily an investigation into the arguments about where to locate the cause of criminality. Is criminality primarily inner-determined or outer-determined? Do these distinctions make sense in this case—or in any case? In answering these questions, Döblin incorporated the various voices—expert and otherwise—that surrounded the case, not to decide on which was most compelling, but rather to figure out how they went about reaching their conclusions—to analyze what it meant to have “stories within stories” and figure out how to narrate this condition.

**“We Understand It, on a Certain Level”:  
Alfred Döblin's *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord***

In his re-telling of the story of Klein and Nebbe published in 1924, just a year after the trial had ended, Döblin changed the characters' names to Elli Link and Grete Bende, but otherwise made no attempt to obscure the connection to the real case, which had attracted considerable attention throughout Germany and would have been obvious to any informed contemporary reader. Indeed, the links and breaks between the real case and Döblin's re-telling of it stand at the center of his investigation, which sought to address the genre of the case study and the ways in which it serves to placate its audience by locating guilt in an individual and thus preserve the social order.

That Döblin saw his case study as an intervention in the traditional form of the genre becomes quite clear in his remarkable epilogue to the volume, in which he argued that the reasons behind this crime could never be known: “I wanted to demonstrate the difficulty of the case, to question the impression that one could understand everything or even most things about such a large chunk of life. We understand it, on a certain level.”<sup>20</sup> Döblin had already exhibited this narrative skepticism a decade earlier in his programmatic essay “An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker” (“To Novelists and their Critics”), in which he argued that the psychological novel is “a purely abstract phantasmagoria” and that “the analyses and attempts at differentiation have nothing to do with the process of an actual psyche.”<sup>21</sup> To avoid such myths of causality and individuality, Döblin advocated a turn away from psychology and toward psychiatry as the basis of literary production:

We can learn from psychiatry, the one science that captures the whole psychic life of the individual. It has long recognized the naïveté of psychology and confines itself to noting the products and movements of the psyche—and shrugs its shoulders at anything further, the “whys” and “hows.”<sup>22</sup>

Döblin's position in this early essay is certainly consistent with the epilogue of *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord*, in which he seeks to question not just the notion of causality implied by a coherent narrative of a life, but also the effects of its imposition in turning a person and an event into a case:

We know nothing about psychic continuity, causality, the psyche and its concentrations of elements. We must accept the facts of this case, the letters and actions, and programmatically refuse to truly explain them. Not even if we were to delve here and there more deeply into events, would anything have happened (112).

As a theoretician, Döblin was remarkably consistent. Yet, these musings on the nature of the case study in the epilogue come as a shock to the reader because they follow a story of over one hundred pages in which this complex case is related as a crisp, exciting, and smoothly flowing narrative. In retrospect, it becomes clear that this narrative could be kept intact only because the narrator's presence was elided throughout the entire story. In the first line of the epilogue the narrator made his first, sudden appearance: "When I attempt an overview of the entire course of events, it is just like in the story: 'a wind came and uprooted the tree'" (112). The introduction of the first person coincides with the mention of a story. Clearly the initial semblance of narrative order functioned as a necessary step in Döblin's argument. Indeed, Döblin admitted his own need to establish the very narrative order about which he would, in the epilogue, exhibit such skepticism—his need to understand the mysteries of the case:

When I reflected on the three, four people involved in this affair, I had the impulse to travel the streets that they routinely traveled. I also sat in the pubs in which the two women got to know one another, I visited the apartment of one of them, spoke with her personally, spoke with others involved and observed them (114).

The story Döblin tells, which incorporates newspaper reports, trial records, medical testimony, and statements from those involved in the case, is, in fact, full of "whys" and "hows." Indeed, the question of *whether* Elli was guilty of murdering her husband (along with the question of whether Bende served as her accomplice) was never really an issue either in the case or in Döblin's re-telling of it.<sup>23</sup> What was at stake in the courtroom, as Döblin points out, was something that took the jury well beyond questions of guilt and innocence. The question concerned not the crime itself, but rather the constitutions of the criminals that led them to the crime:

A small group of learned men studied the physical and mental constitutions of the women and attempted to form an image on the basis of extensive experience. The prosecuting and defending attorneys both shed light on the lives of these women. In every case it was not the act that stood in the center, the poisoning itself, but rather practically

the opposite of an act: namely how this course of events came to be, how it was possible. Indeed, they set out to demonstrate how this event was unavoidable (100).

These various expert voices were incorporated into Döblin's account of the case and the trial. Döblin's case history devoted the bulk of its attention to detailing the arguments and positions presented at the trial, which, as we have seen, broke into two main schools: those experts who saw the crimes as arising from certain physical or psychological abnormalities in the two women (childhood trauma, malformed organs, and an innate homosexual "drive") and those experts who argued that the causes lay in social conditions (abusive spouses, economic hardship, and a society unaccepting of homosexuality).

Döblin ultimately did not, of course, decide between these competing explanations. Indeed, at times he seemed to take sides with each. Elli's "female organs," he tells us, "were not properly developed," thus presenting the jury with the task of "pronouncing a uterus guilty" (100–101). But, at the same time, Döblin argued, the jury ought to have, but could not, consider other possible locations of guilt, such as her father, who forced Elli to return to her abusive husband.<sup>24</sup> At one moment the source of Elli's criminality seemed to lie in her body; at another moment, it seemed to lie in her society. What Döblin offers us is not a mystery that lacks a coherent explanation, as the epilogue seems to announce, but rather an abundance of explanations—plenty of "whys" and "hows."

The first part of the story and the epilogue, in short, simply do not hold together. Nor, I would argue, did Döblin intend them to. His experiment with the narrative form of the case study attempts to overcome the fixation on guilt and the artificial separation of the criminal from noncriminal society by allowing the different parts of his text to come into conflict with one another. In other words, not only does he detail a battle among representations in the trial, he also sets up a battle among his own representations. His narrative thus not only exposes the conflicts and contradictions among various accounts of the case; it turns on itself and maps the conflicts and contradictions within itself. It is at once a record of the conflicts inherent in the criminal case study and a self-aware example of those conflicts.

In addition to the story and the epilogue, Döblin appended two sections to his study: the first is a series of charts that are supposed to serve as "a visual overview of the main phases of the case" (110). Though it initially seems that Döblin might have intended these charts to offer a final explanation of the case, they, too, fall short of describing the course of events. Döblin's various attempts to explain the "how" and "why" of the case are, by his own admission, inadequate; he remarks of the charts that the stress lies less on theoretical truth than on their vivid graphic quality: "The main thrust here lies not on theoretical truth, but rather on the graphic demonstration, the possibility of simply communicating at least the most important elements" (111). The second section appended to



the study is a series of handwriting samples, along with character analyses based on Elli's and Grete's writing styles. Even after the publication of the volume, Döblin continued to be interested in this graphological evidence, writing to the noted graphologist Ludwig Klages and asking his opinion on the case.<sup>25</sup> One sees clearly here that Döblin is not interested simply in throwing his hands up and declaring the ultimate truth behind the case to be unattainable. Rather, he wants to uncover that truth—by journalistic investigation, by interpreting the expert testimony, by analyzing the two women's handwriting and psychological states. But at the same time he is aware that this truth is indeed confused by the “stories within stories.”

The need to explain, situate, separate, and—at the same time—to avoid the reductions that come with this very act of explanation, situation, separation are simultaneously present in Döblin's study. He summarized his presentation thus:

The whole thing is a tapestry made up of many individual scraps—cloth, silk, even pieces of metal and clumps of clay. It is stuffed with straw, wire and yarn and in many places the pieces are not bound together. Many tears are bound together with glue or glass. Then everything is seamless and bears the stamp of the truth. It has been thrust into our customary processes of thinking and feeling. It happened that way—even the participants believe that. But it also didn't happen that way (112).

It happened that way, and it did not happen that way. What Döblin emphasizes here is the mythical nature of the criminal case history: a crime cannot adequately be explained and hence contained by giving it narrative form, for the narrative necessarily becomes a myth. But Döblin also recognizes the need to construct such myths: A crime must be explained and irrational behavior must be given a cause to keep our worlds in order. Even as he insists on—and demonstrates—the impossibility of narrating a life, he insists just as forcefully on the need to tell stories, the need for narrative rescue from uncertainty.

Indeed, one of the few moments in which Elli seems to find a way out of her tormented life is when she is able to tell her own story: “Then Elli narrated what she was able to—spasmodically, abruptly. . . . Elli achieved something. . . . It was a formal change, a liberation” (23). The narrator and his subject here are both driven by the need to tell a story, and there is a certain pathos around this drive for a narrative that is at once impossible and necessary. And the narrative in each of these cases revolves around the same questions of causality, questions for which Döblin insists there are ultimately no clear answers.

Refusing to believe in causality, Döblin adopts instead the notion of mysterious motors that drive events beyond the logic of causality: “Zoology has uncovered actual motors of our actions. The greatest mass of our psyches is driven by instincts. The uncovering and dissection of these instincts brings to light quite decisive motors of our actions” (117). Throughout his study, Döblin turns to various figures to represent these motors, and he never seems able to settle upon

one appropriate metaphor. In the passage quoted above, for example, it is the wind ripping out a tree. Most notably, the motor figures as a bullet: “Invisible bullets come out of nowhere and strike us, they change us and we notice only the change, not the actual motor, the agent, the bullet. Everything then proceeds within us in a causal manner” (117).

This wind, this bullet, can hit anybody, and hence we cannot be assured that “I am not a criminal because I am not like her” and prove this through a case study that shows *her* to be different from *me* and shows *them* to be different from *us*. Döblin’s study of this borderline case puts this very border—that between criminal and noncriminal, sane and insane, those violently struck by the bullet and those not struck by the bullet—into question. “We were no longer on the terrain of ‘guilt and innocence,’” Döblin writes, “but rather on another, terribly uncertain terrain—that of connections, recognition, insight” (100). The legal system, of course, does not permit the judge or the jury to enter into this uncertain territory, and the traditional case history also avoids such considerations. But Döblin’s case study, which takes the modernist crisis of narrative as its starting point to depict a larger crisis of faith in the legal and social order, insists that we must venture into this territory, that in the seeming aberration of criminal conduct the otherwise hidden, normal workings of society suddenly become evident. Criminality, Döblin argues, cannot be traced to an understandable cause—neither in the individual nor in society. The criminal justice system, like the criminal case study, seeks to construct a narrative that traces an event back to such a cause. And in so doing, both fall into mythologizing and thereby lose sight of—indeed, even work to obscure—the uncertain motors and bullets that prompt our actions.

Not only can experts not point to a cause of criminality, criminals themselves are deceived about the cause of their own actions. In the opening sentences of his narrative, Döblin plays with this uncertainty of agency: “The pretty blond Elli Link arrived in Berlin in 1918. She was 19 years old. She had previously worked as a beautician in Braunschweig, where her parents were carpenters. A minor act of juvenile delinquency happened to her: She took five Marks from the wallet of a customer.” After beginning what seems like a straightforward story about a young woman, Döblin inserts a structurally odd sentence that plays a trick on the reader: Elli initially seems to be the victim of a crime (it “happened to her”), but in fact the elaboration of this statement after the colon reveals Elli to have *committed* the crime (“she took five Marks”). Döblin’s narrative thus takes the reader by surprise, and in so doing clouds the notion of agency.<sup>26</sup>

In a traditional crime narrative, this small juvenile delinquency would foreshadow and to some extent foreordain and serve to explain the later, larger crime. But Döblin subtly turns this process on its head. At work here is an interesting notion of trauma that provides an alternative to the more common location of trauma in individual (usually childhood) experiences. As Mark Seltzer notes in his study of serial killers, our tendency to locate trauma in childhood amounts

to a privatization of trauma.<sup>27</sup> Döblin's language of an anonymous, impersonal violence hitting one like a bullet from the outside amounts to a publicization of criminality. "Insofar as we react to this blow in our own way," he writes, "we believe that we are in touch with 'ourselves'" (117). What Döblin tries to show here can be characterized by paraphrasing a Monty Python sketch: "This trauma that I have—that is to say, which is mine—is mine."<sup>28</sup> But, in Döblin's view, one cannot claim possession of one's own trauma or even one's own crimes—you don't commit them; they happen to you. It is, of course, a commonplace in criminology that there are imitative types who suffer from a breakdown of boundaries and overly identify with others. However, Döblin argues that it is not simply imitative types who are susceptible to a breakdown of borders between self and society; rather, this dissolution of borders is precisely the normal condition of the individual in modernity—the individual in a state of shock.

The implications for the very notion of individuality that lies at the center of the notion of the case study are enormous. In *Elli Link*, we are no longer dealing with an individual, with a subject, but much more with the breakdown of the border between the individual and society, between public and private, between inside and outside. This study of what Döblin repeatedly refers to as a "borderline case" (*Grenzfall*), which constantly attempts to locate and transgress borders, turns out to be about the very permeability of borders in modernity—especially the border between self and society. Döblin insists that *Elli Link* is not antisocial or even asocial, but rather *overly* socialized. Döblin writes of *Elli's* time alone in jail—a situation of the most intense isolation—as precisely a moment in which social forces seem to do battle within her:

While in prison, *Elli* was often confronted in dreams and day-dreams with people and events blown up to violent proportions. . . . *Elli* was deeply impacted by the events, the imprisonment, the interrogations. . . . From this source now flowed overly-large masses of social impulses. While she seemed happy during the day and behaved calmly, at night and in her dreams she was the object of bourgeois impulses that were fiercely flaming up (80–82).

*Elli* becomes here nothing more than an object under attack by social impulses. The language clearly does not depict an individual, but rather a site of conflicting drives. The charts appended to the end of the volume, which purport to present a "Spatial Presentation of the Psychic Developments," similarly depict *Elli* as an object under attack, as circles representing differing impulses move in and out of the permeable borders that make up the site called "*Elli*."

The traditional case history—like the psychological novel—fails to explain the cause of criminality precisely because its emphasis on the individual fails to look beyond the borders of individuality. Döblin's crucial point is that if one follows the general modernist tendency to view shock as the individual's normal experience of modernity, then it is no longer accurate to argue about psychological

versus sociological motivations and determinations. Rather, as Seltzer has noted in a different context, “it’s not a matter either of equating inside and outside (the ‘psychological’ and the ‘sociological’) or a matter of choosing between them, since it’s precisely the boundaries between inside and outside that are violently transgressed, renegotiated, reaffirmed in these cases.”<sup>29</sup> Döblin’s case study attempts to find a way to write this nonborder, to think both individual and society—and the violent exchanges between the two—together at the same time:

I didn’t set out to write a cheap milieu study. The only thing that was clear to me was that the life—or a portion of the life—of an individual cannot be understood in itself. People stand in a symbiotic relationship with other people and other things. . . . This is in itself a reality: the symbiosis with others and with apartments, houses, streets, places. This is a certain, if murky, truth. If I pull out an individual person, it is as if I were to look at a leaf or a thumb and attempt thereby to describe nature and development. But they cannot be described in that way; the branch, the tree and the animal must also be described (114).

Döblin clearly states here that his narrative stands in opposition to more traditional case studies: he wishes to avoid both writing a “cheap milieu study” and following individual clues in the manner of a detective. Indeed, the reference to thumbs is not incidental—recall how important body parts are to Sherlock Holmes’s investigations, most notably in “The Adventure of the Engineer’s Thumb.”<sup>30</sup> Against such narratives, Döblin opposes his own innovative form of crime story that seeks to narrate individuals and their society at the same time and detail the mysterious and traumatic forces of causality that traditional crime narratives obscure. Prompted by a difficult case that seemed to defy explanation, Döblin found himself confronted with the problems and uncertainties of narrating a life. His experimental narrative attempts to tell “stories within stories” and allow stories to stand in conflict with one another. He refuses to settle upon a single explanation or to tell a coherent story, but at the same time insists on the need to tell stories. He thus found in this narrative crisis a productive position from which to write. Later authors and filmmakers would also turn to this case as a source for their stories. I will now turn to these later versions of the story of these two women and their crime, each of which views the case primarily through Döblin’s account of it and wrestles with the issues that he raises. Each of these later narratives, however, also takes the case in a different direction and offers a different version of the story.

### **Postwar Re-Tellings of the Case of Klein and Nebbe**

The case of Klein and Nebbe and Döblin’s account of it received little attention throughout the middle of the twentieth century. However, the republication of

*Die beiden Freundinnen* in the 1970s sparked a resurgence of interest in both the text and the case it depicts. The *Bild-Zeitung* ran a series devoted to the original case, and new critical examinations of Döblin's work arose, as well as a number of literary and cinematic re-workings of the text. In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on three adaptations of *Die beiden Freundinnen*, produced in three different media— theater, film, and literature—to examine how they go about narrating the case and wrestling with the issues that it prompts.

During the 1976–1977 theatrical season, Döblin's tale was adapted for the stage by Peer Raben and produced for the *Kammerspiele* in Bochum. Issues of authority and freedom come to the fore in this stage version, and the murder is presented as an emancipatory gesture carried out against a repressive patriarchal order. The heavy-handed staging cast one area of the stage in darkness, featuring sparse and oppressive surroundings, contrasting starkly with a second area bathed in light and set with flowers and a gurgling fountain. The former area was occupied by despotic fathers and husbands, while the paradisiacal setting of the second was reserved for Grete and her mother.

The production was received poorly in the press and frequently compared unfavorably to the Döblin text. One reviewer had high praise for the extraordinarily rich material of Döblin's work, pronouncing it “differentiated, complex and psychologically and sociologically illuminating.”<sup>31</sup> The reviewer lamented, however, that the stage production effected an oversimplification of the work that rendered it “noticeably flat, simplified, indeed uninteresting.”<sup>32</sup> Döblin's nuanced psychological portrait appears to have been sacrificed in the production's politicization of the text. Contemporary reviewers did credit the play with an interesting innovation in the addition of a character called “the Stettiner” (Döblin's birthplace), cast as a reporter figure who reads from Döblin's theoretical works. This device gave expression to Döblin's psychological analysis, even as the play centered primarily on issues of gender. This production illustrates the difficulty of offering a multiperspective, yet coherent narrative. Although it tries to preserve the conflict between story and theory in the dramatization of Döblin as a character, it is unable to preserve the psychological ambiguity of the characters and their actions. Instead, the case is understood within the discourse of patriarchy and feminism—a valid interpretation, and one buttressed by parts of Döblin's account, but only one of the many nested stories that need to be considered.

In the following year, Axel Corti directed a film version of the work for television, in a joint Austrian-German production. *Die beiden Freundinnen: Ein Plädoyer* (*The Two Girlfriends: A Plea*) aired on 10 April 1978 on the German television network ZDF, receiving a significant 33 percent share of television viewership. The film does not depict the sensational murder trial—which forms the center of Döblin's text—opting instead for a more subtle treatment of the relationship between the social environment in which the principal figures lived and the psychological developments leading up to the murder. Corti was intent

on presenting the social relations of working-class Berlin in the 1920s, which appears without the glamour of more recent filmic depictions of the Weimar era.

As in the Bochum stage production, space is the primary metaphor of the film. As the actors move through the dark, cramped spaces of the urban working class, this environment appears to circumscribe not only their movements and actions, but their thoughts as well. Corti favors tight shots, providing no overview or distance from the actors and sets in front of the camera. Objects and set design assume a leading role in the film, sharing more or less equal billing with the actors. In adopting this interesting dual focus, Corti followed a theoretical tenet important to Döblin's work, for Döblin sought to explain the relationship between people and objects as a means of exploring human psychology. In the cinematic medium, Corti availed himself of a form better equipped to depict this symbiosis than the written word. As Matthias Prangel has suggested, on film Corti was able to express visually what Döblin had to explain, giving the viewer an immediate and direct experience of Elli's psychological immobility. Döblin's program is thus taken further in Corti's cinematic reading than in the original work.<sup>33</sup>

Whereas the stage adaptation viewed the case through the lens of gender, Corti clearly assigned primary importance to the role of class. If the Bochum production staged the two women's lesbian relationship as a means of escape from a repressive patriarchal society, the Corti film relegated the relationship to a space of less significance. In Grete's apartment, Elli finds a welcome respite from life with Karl and his mother, turning to Grete for safety and comfort, as well as joy in an otherwise difficult life. This, however, is not the paradise removed from the pressures of daily existence as in the stage version, for Grete and her mother also belong to the working poor, and Corti does not depart from the realism of his portrayal of this milieu in depicting their lives. Moreover, it is not the relationship with Grete that dominates Elli's psyche, but her troubled and violent relationship with Karl. Karl and Elli are clearly at the center of this account, and it is through the development—and deterioration—of their relationship that Corti conveys the psychological damage that a meager, narrow existence may inflict.

Elfriede Czurda also delivers powerful psychological analysis in her novel *Die Giftmörderinnen* (*The Poisoners*), published in 1991 as the first work in a planned trilogy on the topic of violence and aggression titled *Three Double Lives*. Here it is not the narrowness of her life that drives Else to murder; rather, in turning to poison Else seeks to marshal a new weapon in a psychological battle that is gradually defeating her. In this reworking of the case, Else is simply overwhelmed by the more powerful people in her life. The two separate relationships of the stage and film versions, in which Else turns to Grete essentially to escape from Hans, are here replaced by a distinctly triangular relationship, in which Else is exploited from both sides, by her lover as well as her husband.

Czurda's novel reads like an extended prose poem, as she draws on a heavily stylized language to present the subjective experience of her characters. In

Czurda's writing, language is transformed through radical play, enacted through both the breaking down of compound words and the compression of series of words into new forms. Critics have differed in their interpretations of this use of language. Whereas Kristie Foell has emphasized the creative and playful, near musical quality of the language alongside Czurda's critical impulses, Geoffrey Howes and Kathleen Thorpe each emphasize its fragmented quality as a way of expressing the fragmented experience of the central character.<sup>34</sup> Thorpe insightfully discusses Czurda's concern with the relationship between language and violence, describing her dismembering of common compounds as an attempt to destroy the language of oppression: *Ehe Mann* (husband); *Einzel Zelle* (solitary cell); *Scheide Weg* (crossroads).<sup>35</sup> Thorpe does not elaborate, however, on the constructive use of language, in which Czurda creates single words from expected and unexpected series of words: constellations constructed sometimes by Hans, *Elespatzschönbiſtdu* (Elesparrowyouarebeautiful), and sometimes by Else, *Hansderwolf*, *Hanshyäne*, *Hannsderkanns* (Hansthewolf, Hanshyena, Hanshecanodoit) or her names for Erika (the Grete Bende character in the novel), such as *Austernlenkrad* (Oystersteeringwheel). These innovations are creative, rather than destructive, and we may ask whether they constitute an alternative to the language Czurda dismantles. Yet while they may represent an attempt at a new language, Else's nonsensical constructions in particular do not foster communication, as Erika repeatedly rejects them and tries to draw Else back into conventional speech.

Indeed, Else is continually cast in the novel as being at a linguistic disadvantage vis-à-vis Hans and Erika. Having power over language, Hans is the word and Else, wordless, is also powerless. She sees herself as he sees her: a mere receptacle, not only for Hans's poetics but also for the flood of sentiment that Erika unleashes as soon as their relationship begins. In this respect, she resembles Döblin's Elli under attack by people, things, and impulses—rendered in Czurda's account as an attack of words. Else's attraction to Erika, as to Hans, stems in part from admiration for Erika's mastery of the language.<sup>36</sup> The inequality in their communication becomes strikingly evident as they begin a daily correspondence (which also plays a significant role in Döblin's text), in which Erika writes a veritable flood of passionate, lyrical love letters and admonishes Else for the paucity of her replies. Later, alone in her prison cell, Else remembers the events that brought her there. Her isolation is now total. Hans is dead and Erika is no longer in her life, but both of them continue to occupy her mind. She laments that the thick prison walls offer her no protection against thoughts of them. Because they dominated her with language, their power over her persists as she is unable to forget the way they spoke and what they said to her.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas narrative is the crucial element in Döblin's story and objects are central to Corti's story, Czurda's Else is plagued by a combination of the two: words themselves become objects that attack Else from all sides. She returns again and

again to Hans's and Erika's language, perceiving it as a fresh assault each time that she remembers.<sup>38</sup> After the murder, Else bitterly reproaches herself for her vulnerability to Hans's and Erika's language. She is filled with fury at the *Wort Macher* (Word Makers) who sought to cut away the best part of her with their words. Her attempted suicide attests to the potency of the verbal attacks she experienced. At the conclusion, she finds herself surrounded by "a ruin of words," still struggling.<sup>39</sup>

Czurda's novel shares with the Corti film the central tenet that Else's individual unhappiness and psychological problems are symptomatic of wider societal dysfunction. For Corti, Else's difficulties are reflective of the repression of the working class as a whole. In contrast, Czurda is often seen as making an argument about gender. Kathleen Thorpe's exploration of the relationship between violence and language traces the roots of oppressive language to male-dominated society. Kristie Foell sees the novel as "a programmatically feminist work," taking aim at the patriarchal social structures that reinforce the oppression of women.<sup>40</sup> While these gender-based readings certainly address a significant aspect of the text, I would argue that this focus is not sufficiently broad to encompass Czurda's social criticism. Czurda may indeed provide an "uncompromisingly feminist analysis of marriage," as Foell suggests, but Else's marriage to Hans is far from her only troubled relationship. Foell's identification of patriarchal social structures as the central villain in the novel fails to account, for example, for the deeply problematic relations among women in the text. Here, too, Foell locates the source of conflict in a patriarchal system that pits women against one another. This may be helpful in interpreting Else's antagonistic relationship with her mother-in-law, as the two women are at war over Hans, but this argument is less satisfying as an explanation for Else's relationship to Erika, whose manipulation and exploitation is as devastating as Hans's abuse. Like Raben's stage version and (to a lesser extent) Corti's film version, such interpretations do what Döblin's text, and Czurda's rereading of it, attempt to explode: "solving the case" by locating a single, easily defined problem.

## Conclusion

Each of the writers and filmmakers considered here initially approach this case with a similar intent: to solve its mysteries and answer the seemingly straightforward question, What prompted Klein's decision to murder her husband? Yet, each author is ultimately led to a different question: (how) can I tell this story? This is the question that, in their most illuminating moments, these texts make the true object of their investigations. Taken as a whole, they attest to the paradox at the heart of the genre of the case study: the need to tell a story is countered by the retarding effect that narrative has on reaching a conclusion, rendering a



judgment, tracing an effect to a cause. Each text concludes not with the triumphal explanation that one expects from a detective in the final pages of a classic detective novel, but rather on a note of ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Döblin's study ends with the confession that "we understand it, on a certain level."<sup>41</sup> Czurda's novel leaves its reader with an empty and suicidal Else standing among "a ruin of words."<sup>42</sup> Corti's film freezes on a close-up of Elli following the murder and holds it for an uncomfortably extended period of time, inviting the viewer to attempt to read the inscrutable expression on her face: Is it an expression of liberation? Horror? Regret? Fear? We can never know. This uncertainty is precisely what the modernist and postmodernist crime narrative learns from the study of cases such as that of Klein and Nebbe. The case is not closed—indeed, the case is never closed. And in this crisis of narrative and impossibility of closure, these artists have found a productive position from which to write.

## Notes

Parts of this chapter, written especially for this volume, draw on material from the author's *Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany* (New York and Oxford, 2009).

1. Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York, 1988), 449–453. James Chandler discusses *Libra* and its interrogation of the form of the case in *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago, 1998), 209–211.
2. DeLillo, *Libra*, 301.
3. For a discussion of the trial and the attention it received in the daily press, see Isabella Claßen, *Darstellung von Kriminalität in der deutschen Literatur, Presse und Wissenschaft 1900–1930* (Frankfurt/Main, 1988), 158–198. See also Inge Weiler, *Giftmordwissen und Giftmörderinnen. Eine diskursgeschichtliche Studie* (Tübingen, 1998), 131–148.
4. See Claßen, *Darstellung von Kriminalität*, 177.
5. Klein was sentenced to four years of prison (*Gefängnis*); Nebbe was sentenced to one and a half years of hard labor (*Zuchthaus*).
6. Joseph Roth, "Die Frauen Nebbe und Klein," in *Werke*, Klaus Westermann, ed. (Köln, 1989), I: 952. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
7. Roth, "Die Frauen Nebbe und Klein," 952.
8. Robert Musil, "Das verbrecherische Liebespaar: Die Geschichte zweier unglücklicher Ehen," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Adolf Frisé, ed. (Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1978), II: 670.
9. Musil, "Das verbrecherische Liebespaar," 669.
10. Musil, "Das verbrecherische Liebespaar," 671.
11. Musil, "Das verbrecherische Liebespaar," 671.
12. Rechtsanwalt Dr. Arthur Brandt, "Das Urteil im Mordprozeß Klein," *BZ am Mittag* 46 (17 March 1923).
13. "Giftmörderinnen vor Gericht," *Berliner Tageblatt* 129 (12 March 1923).
14. "Der Prozess der Giftmischerinnen," *Vorwärts* 40 (15 March 1923, Morgenausgabe).
15. "Die Gutachten über die Giftmischerinnen," *Vorwärts* 40 (16 March 1923, Morgenausgabe).

16. "Die Gutachten über die Giftmischerinnen."
17. "Der Prozess der Giftmischerinnen."
18. For a history of criminology in Germany from the end of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II, see Richard F. Wetzell's *Inventing the Criminal: A History of German Criminology, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill, 2000). As Wetzell's history demonstrates, the relationships between the different schools are complex and the divisions quite permeable.
19. Over the course of the twentieth century, investigations into the causes of criminal behavior have become increasingly specific. However, they continue to break down into the same three main areas: biological, psychological, and sociological explanations—though most commentators tend to emphasize a so-called mixed bag of causes. For a biological approach, see James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York, 1985), in which even those old somatotype images pop up once again. A sociological theory of criminality can be found in Elliot Currie, "Confronting Crime: New Directions," in *Crime and Society*, Robert Crutchfield, George S. Bridges, and Joseph G. Weis, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1996). For a psychological approach, see Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up* (New York, 1995). For a recent attempt at an integrated theory of violent behavior in general, see *Biosocial Bases of Violence*, Adrian Raine, Patricia A. Brennan, and David P. Farrington, eds. (New York, 1997).
20. Alfred Döblin, *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord*, Außenseiter der Gesellschaft, vol. 1, Rudolf Leonhard, ed. (Berlin, 1924), 117. Page numbers given in parentheses in the main text refer to this work.
21. Alfred Döblin, "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker," *Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur*, Erich Kleinschmidt, ed. (Olten und Freiburg i.B., 1989), 120. See Georg Reuchlein's excellent study of the relationships among literature, psychology, and psychopathology in Döblin's early short story, "Die Ermordung einer Butterblume: 'Man lerne von der Psychiatrie,'" *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 23, 1 (1991), 10–68.
22. Döblin, "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker," 120–121.
23. For the sake of consistency, I will use Döblin's version of the characters' names.
24. "Sie sollten auch eigentlich Recht sprechen über den Vater, der Elli wieder ihrem Mann zugeführt hatte—und dieser Vater war der Inbegriff einwandfreier bürgerlicher Gesinnung . . . Das Gericht fragte nicht nach der Beteiligung, 'Schuld', Kleins, des Vaters, der Mutter Kleins" (101). It is interesting to note that for the first and only time in this study, Döblin here uses the victim's real name (Klein) rather than the name he is given elsewhere (Link). Though this error is corrected in a later edition (see Alfred Döblin, *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* [Olten, 1992], 95) it strikes me that this use of Klein rather than Link in precisely the paragraph where Döblin insists on looking beyond "was innerhalb des Kreises, der Grenzen geschah" is not coincidental.
25. Döblin wrote to Klages: "Der Fall selbst ist in einer bestimmten Hinsicht dunkel . . . Ich wollte Sie fragen: mögen Sie einmal das kleine Buch durchblättern, seine Fakten zur Kenntnis nehmen und alsdann mir sagen, wie Sie über die Handschriften denken oder: was sich, in dem gesamten festgestellten Ensemble, über die beiden Personen sagen läßt; wie sie graphologisch über den—psychiatrisch sehr verschiedenen beurteilten—Fall denken." The letter is dated 23 December 1924. (See *Alfred Döblin 1878–1978: Eine Ausstellung des Deutschen Literaturarchivs im Schiller-Nationalmuseum Marbach am Neckar*, Bernhard Zeller, ed. [München, 1978], 171–172).
26. I am grateful to Thomas Kovach for bringing this odd turn of phrase to my attention.
27. See Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York, 1998), 257–258. Interestingly, childhood plays an important role in few of the case studies in the *Außenseiter* series.
28. In the classic Monty Python sketch, a dinosaur expert is being interviewed about her latest theory concerning the brontosaurus. As she avoids presenting her theory, she continually claims it

- as her own: “Well, this theory that I have—that is to say, which is mine—is mine.” Her theory, incidentally, turns out to be that brontosaurus was thin at both ends and thick in the middle.
29. Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 100.
  30. See “The Adventure of the Engineer’s Thumb” in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories* (New York, 1986), vol. 1, 369–388.
  31. Hans Schwab-Felisch, “Mit Arsen gegen das Patriarchat: Döblin, ‘Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord’ in Bochum,” *Theater Heute* (1. Januar 1977), 55.
  32. Schwab-Felisch, 55.
  33. See Matthias Prangel, “Die Döblinisierung Döblins. Zur Adaptation von ‘Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord’ durch den Film,” *Internationales Alfred-Döblin-Kolloquium, Leipzig 1977*, Ira Lorf and Gabriele Sander, eds. (Berne, 1999), 80.
  34. See Kristie Foell, “Elfriede Czurda: Poison and Play,” in *Out From the Shadows: Essays on Contemporary Austrian Women Writers and Filmmakers*, Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger, ed. (Riverside, CA, 1997), 158–171; Geoffrey Howes, “Therapeutic Murder in Elfriede Czurda and Lilian Faschinger,” *Modern Austrian Literature* 32, 2 (1999), 79–93; Kathleen Thorpe, “Aggression and Self-Realization in Elfriede Czurda’s Novel *Die Giftmörderinnen*,” *Modern Austrian Literature* 31, 3/4 (1998), 175–187.
  35. Thorpe, 175, 180.
  36. Elfriede Czurda, *Die Giftmörderinnen* (Reinbek, 1991), 89.
  37. Czurda, 14.
  38. Czurda, 13.
  39. Czurda, 174.
  40. Foell, 159.
  41. Döblin, 117.
  42. Czurda, 174. Compare Thorpe, 184.