

Chapter 9

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

Telling the Tale of the Poisoners Ella Klein and Margarete Nebbe

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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.¹

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

Notes from this chapter begin on page 242.

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.³⁴ 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).³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ Czurda's novel leaves its reader with an empty and suicidal Else standing among "a ruin of words."⁴² 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.