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Learning from Psychiatry? Gottfried Benn, Alfred Döblin, and the Limits of 'Narrative Medicine'

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In critical dialogue with contemporary 'narrative medicine', a concept popularised by Rita Charon, this article re-examines representations of mental illness in the short prose of the German Expressionist writers and doctors Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) and Gottfried Benn (1886–1956). Taking as my focus Döblin's story, 'The Murder of a Buttercup' ['Die Ermordung einer Butterblume'] (1912), and Benn's cycle of 'Rönne novellas' (1916), I argue that their protagonists embody a form of 'narrative modality': a futile attempt to fashion entangled and chaotic mind-body relationships into self-controlled and socially sanctioned subjectivities. Michael Fischer's hallucinations have often been read as the symptom of nature's mythic revenge on the alienated modern subject, and they have also been associated with various specific psychopathologies. By considering the story's resonances with contemporary biopolitical discourses, Döblin's own psychiatric research, and Oliver Sacks' neurological case studies, I read our inability to 'pin Fischer down' both as the mirror image of his inability to control a wayward body and mind, and as the marker of his broken yet irreducible humanness. Benn's autobiographically inflected 'novellas'—as he termed his experimental pieces—trace the repeated collapse of Dr Werff Rönne's attempts to re-establish a stable sense of self. This collapse sounds the death knell for those endeavours and, at the same time, it opens radically new possibilities for both thinking and being. My article shows how these authors probe the very limits of literary narrative in its capacity for doing justice to the strange and singular lived experiences of mental illness.

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‘Narrative’ is now a concept as malleable as it is ubiquitous, having long since migrated far beyond its traditional literary territories. We might even be forgiven for forming the impression that the word occasionally serves as a short cut for deep and difficult thinking. But it has also done a great deal, in recent decades, to bridge cultural divisions between scientific and humanistic perspectives on the world and our place in it; and it has found one of its most congenial homes—from-home at the forefront of contemporary medical care. ‘Narrative medicine’, in the words of the term’s originator Rita Charon, is a medicine ‘practiced with the narrative competence to recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness’ (Charon, 2006: vii). Narrative sits at the core of our self-understanding and our interactions with others. Therefore, a medical practice grounded in narrative competence will be better equipped to ‘recognize patients and diseases ... and accompany patients and their families through the ordeals of illness’ (vii). To extend the powers of telling and listening to medical cases that potentially resist both telling and listening is a humanistic and a *human* ideal.

In her pioneering study of 2006, subtitled *Honoring the Stories of Illness*, Charon located narrative’s therapeutic value for the clinical encounter in its combination of ‘temporality, singularity, causality/contingency, intersubjectivity, and ethicality’ (2006: 39). Central to ‘narrative’, as opposed to strictly ‘clinical’ knowledge, is its ‘ability to capture the singular, irreplicable, or incommensurable’ in the face of the systematising tendencies of the modern medical gaze (Charon, 2006: 45). Yet its ethical value for the medical humanities has also been critically re-examined in recent years. In this article, I take that re-examination as a starting point for the reappraisal of two representations of mental illness in the early prose of Alfred Döblin and Gottfried Benn, and I close with the suggestion that the literature of experimental modernism might further nuance the critique.

In his medical-ethical reassessment of 2008, Jeffrey Bishop argued that the ‘narrativization’ of medicine paradoxically threatens to reinforce the primacy of the medical gaze (2008: 19–24). It does this by perpetuating a dualistic division in the clinical encounter between the patient *qua* sick body, legible to the clinician as a biomedical script, and the patient *qua* narrative subject. Angela Woods also critiqued the normative precepts of ‘narrative medicine’ in her 2011 article:

[P]romoting (particular forms of) narrative as *the* mode of human self-expression, in turn promotes a specific model of the self—as an agentic, authentic, autonomous storyteller; as someone with unique insight into an essentially private and emotionally rich inner world; as someone who possesses a drive for storytelling, and whose stories reflect and (re)affirm a sense of enduring, individual identity. (2011: 74)

Woods suggests that an ability to ‘tell one’s story’ as a patient is often all too uncritically equated with recovery, or with a healthy recalibration of the embodied self, and that in turn is tied up with the implicit and normative devaluation of modes of embodied life that do not lend themselves easily to narrative. This (often unwitting) avoidance is mirrored in the medical humanities’ long-standing tendency to smooth down or even bracket out some of the characteristic ambiguity and polysemy in modernist texts on mental and physical pathology. As Sarah Pett points out in her recent discussion of Virginia Woolf’s brief 1926 phenomenology of illness, ‘On Being Ill’, forms of literary realism, especially those centred on the patient-doctor encounter and that are susceptible to relatively linear and sympathetic interpretations, still predominate in the teaching and practice of narrative medicine (2019: 54–56).

The prose of German Expressionism is remarkably fruitful in this connection insofar as it fiercely resists that kind of hermeneutic, and so poses profound challenges to the way we think about the narrativisation of bodies and forms of embodiment, both healthy and pathological. Expressionism’s preoccupations with mental and physical illnesses intersect with its simultaneously creative and deconstructive portrayals of individual and social attempts to discipline and normalise the embodied subject. As Thomas Anz has justly argued, both Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) and Gottfried Benn (1886–1956) figured the mentally ill individual as a flesh-and-blood critique of the increasingly alienated lived experiences of the deeply patriarchal and militaristic socio-cultural landscape of Wilhelmine Germany (1977: 11, 39–45). Through an intensification of the Romantic (re)validation of madness, mental illness came to represent an extreme contrast to the ‘normality’ of the upright and healthy citizen, while exposing and illuminating the mechanisms through which the ‘irrational’ and ‘aberrant’ were to be marginalised or excluded (Anz, 2010: 83–90). As a counterpoint to this critique, Anz highlights the post-Romantic proximity of madness and genius in the discourses and motifs of Expressionism, casting psychopathology—particularly after Friedrich Nietzsche’s affirmation of the non-rational—as the embodiment of an anarchic yet marginally epiphanic freedom, untethered from the constraints of social acceptability (2010: 86–87).

My focus here is on the early Döblin and Benn: two particularly valuable interlocutors in light of their self-consciously dual identities as writers and practising medics. Their stories of psychopathology open experimental spaces for the imitation, exposure, and critique of the latently violent forces of normalisation inherent in linear (and, I suggest, *narrative*) fashionings of the self. At the same time, I want to move beyond Anz’s potentially reductive reading of Expressionist ‘psychopathographies’—literary inscriptions of madness—as forms of ‘socio-pathography’ (1977: 11; 2010: 84–85).

Benn's and Döblin's portrayals should not be reduced to cyphers for the mechanisms of dehumanisation within Wilhelmine society or, conversely, for a liberation from them.

The first half of my essay centres upon Döblin's most celebrated short story, 'The Murder of a Buttercup' ['Die Ermordung einer Butterblume'] (1912), whose gestation in 1905 aligns it chronologically with the completion of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Freiburg in that year, titled *Memory Disturbances in Korsakoff Psychosis* [*Gedächtnisstörungen bei der Korsakoffschen Psychose*].¹ His engagements with psychiatry as a medical student laid the ground for a poetics oriented towards the minute observation of material things and concrete occurrences, as well as facial expressions, physical gestures, sounds, smells, and movements. In his famous manifesto of 1913, 'To Novelists and their Critics' ['An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker'], better known as the 'Berliner Programm', he called on contemporary authors to 'learn from psychiatry, the only science that concerns itself with the human being in its psychical entirety' (Döblin, 2013 [1913]: 119).² The sensory immediacy of lived experience must be liberated from the 'hegemony' ['Hegemonie'] of the author in guiding and shaping interpretations of their own work not to mention the logical 'why' and 'how' of linear narrative (121, 120). Although it is an imperfect anticipation of the manifesto, 'Die Ermordung', published as the title story of a collection of 1912, embodies something of this indeterminacy. Its protagonist, Michael Fischer, remains irreducible to any one interpretative or diagnostic schema throughout, while also unwittingly enacting a critique of normative and constitutively 'narrative' constructions of the modern masculine subject. Döblin himself was to become an early practitioner of a form of narrative medicine *avant la lettre*. He adopted an increasingly psychological (and less physiological) approach to psychiatry from 1906 onwards. By 1909, he had largely turned away from clinical psychiatry under the influence of Emil Kraepelin's pioneering symptom-descriptive approach, and he opened a general practice primarily for working-class patients in eastern Berlin in 1911. His conviction of the therapeutic significance of patients' self-accounts, however internally contradictory they might be, reflected his growing sense of the intertwining of psychosomatic, physiological, and social factors in shaping an illness. This in turn informed his qualified orientation towards psychoanalysis in the 1920s, as adumbrated in such essays as 'The Practice of Psychoanalysis' ['Praxis der Psychoanalyse'] (1923) and 'A Public Doctor's Surgery'

¹ While all translations are my own (unless otherwise indicated), this does not necessarily imply any criticism of the published alternatives. For an English translation of a selection of Döblin's short stories, including 'Die Ermordung einer Butterblume', see Döblin (2016). For an English translation of a selection from the 'Rönne' novellas, see Benn (2013).

² 'Man lerne von der Psychiatrie, der einzigen Wissenschaft, die sich mit dem seelischen ganzen Menschen befaßt'.

['Eine kassenärztliche Sprechstunde'] (1928) (Fuechtner, 2004: 115–20; Döblin, 1986 [1928]: 98–102).

While 'Die Ermordung' precedes the adoption of narrative techniques in his day-to-day Berlin consultations, this early case study-style story vividly reflects the myriad overlaps of body and mind, matter and signification, and psychological and psychosocial forces, that would profoundly shape his later prose. It also poses a challenge to Western biopolitical ideologies, both then *and* now, which rest implicitly on the dualisms that Bishop identifies in his critique (2008: 18). If Döblin's story plays out through the increasingly disoriented perspective of a would-be fictional patient, Michael Fischer, Benn's so-called 'Rönne novellas'—the subject of this essay's second half—offer something of a perspectival mirror image in the semi-autobiographical form of a doctor *qua* patient. Written between 1914 and 1916, they were published as a cycle of five under the title *Gehirne* [*Brains*] in October 1916. My reading aims to avoid three related pitfalls: a tendency to strait-jacket literary diagnosis that has traced in Dr Werff Rönne's aberrant traits a pathography of the author's own (localised and transient) schizothymic tendencies; the reduction of Rönne to an embodied critique of positivistic psychological and psychosocial dynamics; and the all-too-positive affirmation, by the end of the cycle, of a revived form of 'poetic' and 'self-poetising' existence as *one* avenue towards Benn's later elaboration of a so-called 'absolute' poetics, grounded in the autotelic energies of poetic language itself (Ray, 2003: 139).³ Rönne eludes the hermeneutic and diagnostic capture of the overlapping discourses and motifs that constitute him, while—similarly to Fischer—exposing the artifice of linear constructions of subjectivity.

Neither author's early prose directly suggests a particular ethics for thinking, writing, and reading psychopathology, and their disjointed protagonists are both socially and politically unsympathetic. Yet I argue that this aesthetic indeterminacy, characteristic of both writers, highlights the epistemological and clinical non-fixity of their subject matters, and that the highlighting itself performs a vital critical function. Döblin's and Benn's narratives of mental illness question their own underlying orders and structures, and in so doing, they also offer an immanent critique of normalising and *normative* (re-)fashionings of the modern subject. Those reconstitutions prove severely limiting in their attempts to regulate and discipline the knotty and involuted relationships of mind and body: relationships that play out at the ultimately indefinable interfaces between psychosomatic and corporeal 'normality' and 'pathology'.

³ One of the most prominent attempts at an associative-diagnostic reading of Rönne was made in 1966 by the medical doctor and editor of Benn's medical writings, Werner Rube (1966: esp. p. 17 and p. 20).

Michael Fischer: Taming Wild Horses?

Döblin's story is the twisted parable-cum-case-study of a bid for bodily (and, I suggest, narrative) control that has irreparably broken down. Michael Fischer is a *petit bourgeois* businessman whose seemingly obsessive-compulsive behaviour teeters perennially on the cusp of violence. His story opens with a walk to St Odile, a Black Forest sanctuary. His walking stick becomes caught in the undergrowth and he violently wrenches it free, which triggers (it is implied) an hallucination of himself as his own *Doppelgänger* murdering a buttercup. Matters quickly escalate as he succumbs to the fantasy of being found out and pursued as a buttercup murderer, which in turn metastasises into a paranoid attempt to track 'her' down and hide her remains. Fischer finds himself caught between incandescent fury at the dead flower (posthumously christened 'Ellen'), comical terror at the consequences of his crime, and momentary *frissons* of apparently sado-masochistic excitement. The notion of being hunted down by a supposedly vengeful forest fuels a compulsive need to atone for his clandestine guilt (Döblin, 2001 [1912]: 64).⁴ A business account is set up for the dead Ellen, and food and drink is offered to her at every mealtime. He then tries to void her right to sustenance by planting a surrogate daughter in a new pot, inscribed with the legal code's paragraph on debt compensation. Finally, though, both the contract and the curse are broken as his cleaner knocks the pot over and sweeps the remnants away. Fischer believes himself absolved of an unpayable debt and suggestively vanishes into the darkness of the Black Forest, free to murder buttercups at will.

Particularly striking from the story's outset are Fischer's erratic bids to regiment his ever more unruly body *and* mind: attempts which suggest an impulsive form of self-discipline, even a neurotic self-fashioning. On our first encounter, we learn that he has been counting his steps up to one hundred and back again, only to repeatedly stumble and start again. He checks to ensure he is clean-shaven (in one of the text's many moments of self-consciousness), and there is something of the automaton in the mechanistic description of how 'one foot stepped in front of the other, the arms swung from the shoulders' (Döblin, 2001 [1912]: 57).⁵ His bid for 'self-control' ['Selbstbeherrschung'] is filtered through the language of pettily tyrannical business management. His 'wayward thoughts' ['[d]ie eigenwilligen Gedanken'] are cast as maverick employees whom he must bring to heel (58). He wants to 'tame' ['kirren'] the 'little horses' ['Pferdchen'] of his feet, only to be reduced to impotently shouting 'Halt, halt!' at them as they wilfully press forward. His gesture of pushing his little

⁴ 'Er büßte, büßte für seine geheimnisvolle Schuld'. It is worth noting that 'Schuld' carries the dual meaning of both 'debt' and 'guilt'.

⁵ 'Fuß trat vor Fuß, die Arme schlenkerten an den Schultern'.

walking stick up his sleeve finds its visual parallel in the notion of healing the buttercup by tying the mutilated body and head to a wooden splint (59–60, 60). What we see is an attempt to assert the sovereignty of mind over renegade matter by co-opting and coercing the nervous energies of the body, which exposes a dualistic fantasy in the process.⁶

Fischer's yearning for control over an unruly body and, by extension, a recalcitrant 'nature', is an eccentric instance of what Michael Cowan has identified as a 'culture of the will' ['Willenskultur'] in the German social and cultural politics of the fin de siècle and the early 20th century (2008: 207–08). Against the backdrop of developments in German and French experimental psychology, he identifies a German Expressionist preoccupation with a restored hierarchy of 'spirit', 'mind', and 'soul' over the body. This attempt at self-mastery would be enacted through a self-centring exercise of willpower (2008: 3–4). For Cowan, this was part of a broader cultural and socio-medical orientation towards re-establishing a rigorous self-control over neurasthenic and abulic bodies and minds that were drained of physical and mental energy in the maelstrom of urban modernity.⁷ I suggest that Fischer's attempts at self-control represent what I call a 'narrative modality', which reflects a desire not merely to discipline the body in its entanglement with the mind, but also (as illustrated in his step-counting) to fashion that relationship into a normalised, disciplined, and linear—straightened-out—sense of subjectivity.

Fischer makes visible the internalised violence that both maintains that veneer of normality and repeatedly ruptures it. He overcompensates for his baby-faced, clean-shaven effeminacy by projecting an aggressive masculinity (Döblin, 2001 [1912]: 56–57). While the anthropomorphic hybrid of the buttercup's 'Pflanzenkopf' ['plant head'] embodies the inextricability of the mental and the corporeal, Fischer's hallucination of its decapitation—and the attempt to locate and hide the corpse—speaks both to the desire to repress the incommensurable agency of the body and an irrepressible attraction to it (57). A spurt of white 'blood' from the deflowered stalk finds its abject counterpart in a head which rots away into a 'stinking yellow sludge' ['[e]in gelber, stinkender Matsch'] (59). In the wake of wildly suggestive imagery of castration, ejaculation, and (implicitly) vaginal ejaculate, Fischer oscillates between a lustful fascination with Ellen, a violent defiance towards the forest, and a horrified sense of mythic justice closing in as the trees come together 'in judgement' ['zum

⁶ On this unhealthy attempt to subordinate body to mind, see Hoffmann (2009: 56–57 and 60–61).

⁷ Through the lens of Foucault's 'technologies of the self', Cowan finds an early 21st-century legacy of 'Willenskultur' in what he terms a contemporary 'motivational paradigm': a set of therapeutic ideologies geared towards 'galvanizing' the depleted and exhausted subject of contemporary life (2008: 260–62).

Gericht’] (62).⁸ His fantasy of murder escalates into the delusion of a crime against an innately female nature, which has been interpreted mythopoetically in the light of Döblin’s fascination with the mythic revenge of the female Furies against Orestes in *The Eumenides*, the final part of Aeschylus’ trilogy of tragedies from the 5th century BCE, the *Oresteia*.⁹ The ‘justice’ meted out by nature—at least as it unfolds in Fischer’s delusion—is the mythic retaliation for his act of violence against it in the first place.

If the traces of *Willenskultur* constitute one discursive strand to the story, and gendered nature myth another, the ambiguities of Fischer’s symptomatology make for a third. In a retrospective appraisal in his ‘Journal 1952/53’, Döblin would trace the story back to the thought experiment of an oversensitive and obsessive man saddled with neurotic guilt at lopping the heads off buttercups: an individual he conjured from his memories of seeing carefree young boys doing exactly this (1986 [1952–53]: 360). In 1997, Reiner Marx argued that Fischer’s agitation associated him more closely with male hysteria, or else a form of psychosis (59). A decade later, Yvonne Wübben wryly remarked that Fischer had somehow survived everything at his critics’ hands, from obsessive-compulsive disorder [‘Zwangserkrankung’], through delirium and delusions of guilt, to full-blown schizophrenia (Wübben, 2008: 83). But while she rightly cautioned against trying to precisely diagnose Fischer (88–91), I suggest that we may glimpse qualified *dynamic* affinities with the anonymous patient–subject of Döblin’s dissertation. Indeed, Fischer’s opening portrayal evokes an array of symptoms that might loosely associate him with Korsakoff’s psychosis, including polyneuritis (in his sensitivity to light) or cyanosis (in his pale blue lips) (Döblin, 2001 [1912]: 56, 59). Exhibiting a similar psychosocial profile to the Korsakoff patient, his hallucinatory fantasy unfurls from his own misremembered act of vegetal mutilation (see Wübben, 2008: 87–90).

In his dissertation Döblin attributes chronic memory loss among Korsakoff sufferers—often heavy alcoholics—to a radical dissociation of so-called ‘memory images’ [‘Erinnerungsbilder’] from their original contexts, which results in a tangled conflation of real experiences with what has been dreamed or hallucinated (2006 [1905]: 40). If writers and poets engage in ultimately controlled and discerning forms of fabulation, the patient is instead beholden to an alternate reality woven together from delusionary confabulations (47–49). Döblin describes how ‘real’ memories are jumbled together with all manner of unreal happenings such as cock-and-bull stories and encounters with wild animals (44–45). These strange yarns have their own internal consistency, and there are symptomatic resonances with Fischer’s hallucinations, which also have a mythic-tragic logic to them—even as that logic assumes, as for a

⁸ For the most striking psychoanalytic version of this interpretation, see Sheppard (1994: 155).

⁹ Christine Emig (2005: 202–06) dates Döblin’s first engagements with Aeschylus to around 1903.

diagnosed Korsakoff sufferer, a paranoid character (46). The sober statement that ‘[s]he was dead. By his hand’ is one anchoring point in Fischer’s spiralling logic of retribution, which feeds through guilty association into such seemingly masochistic fantasies as having his head lopped off, his ears torn off, and his hands plunged into glowing coals (2001 [1912]: 61–62).¹⁰

In turn, in one of his case studies of the syndrome in 1985, ‘A Matter of Identity’, the late neurologist Oliver Sacks delineated an inherently human drive to construct and live out an ‘inner narrative’ that comes to constitute our own identities, that is, who it is that ‘we’ are. A patient’s ‘proliferation of pseudo-narratives, in a pseudo-continuity, pseudo-worlds peopled by pseudo-people [and] phantoms’ reflects their frantic need to ‘*literally make [themselves and their worlds] up every moment*’ (2011: 116–17).¹¹ Developing Sacks’ insights, we might say that such pathological inner narratives as Fischer’s negatively reveal our own putatively ‘normal’ narrative impulses by pushing them to their distorted and fractured extremes. His fantasy is at once the symptom of an indeterminate mental disorder and, in inverse proportion, a perverse bid to reassert a sense of order and logic through fresh delusion. The ‘aberrant’ and ‘abnormal’ illuminate the broken narrative mechanisms of the ‘normal’ and the normative through their unsettling mutual proximity.

Narrative Confusion

This miniature montage of biopolitical, medical, and nature-mythical discourses unfolds through a kaleidoscope of narrative perspectives. Fischer’s loss of sovereignty over an entanglement of mind and body and, by extension, over his own narrative, is the correlate of *our* loss of readerly sovereignty: our futile search for a diagnostic or hermeneutic resolution.¹² We are tempted into providing a diagnosis for his tics from the start, as we read that his head twitches in response to the glinting sunlight and his hands make ‘rapid, indignant, defensive movements’ [‘entrüstete hastige Abwehrbewegungen’] (Döblin, 2001 [1912]: 56). An extradiegetic narrator introduces Fischer with a high degree of external focalisation, but this seemingly ‘objective’ observation is shot through with a fleeting psychological penetration of his thought processes.¹³ His increasingly paranoid logic insinuates itself through free indirect discourse. Why was he panting, we are asked after the original act of violence, only to

¹⁰ ‘Sie war tot. Von seiner Hand.’

¹¹ The emphasis is in the original.

¹² As Ursula Kocher has recently argued, drawing on Gérard Genette’s narrative theory, the text’s combination of internal and external focalisations serves to destabilise our perspective and undermine our confidence in the consistency and reliability of the narrative voice: see Kocher (2017: 99).

¹³ For nuanced discussions of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ focalisations, see Genette (1980: 189–98); and Bal (1997: 142–61).

see him smile abashedly as if in furtive gratification (57). Distilled in the text's myriad asides—'perhaps she was still alive; yes, how did he know she was dead? ... He didn't even know what she was called! Ellen? Perhaps she was called Ellen, yes, definitely Ellen' (60, 61)—is a cocktail of remorseless mythic logic, deepening psychosis, and a sardonically detached narrator seemingly bent on aggravating the case for (his and our) prurient pleasure.¹⁴ The slapstick of the hallucinations—a fir tree 'smacks him down with a raised fist' after he careens into it—is offset by minutely observational (proverbially 'psychiatric') prose, as in the matter-of-fact observation that 'the fat man stood motionless ... in his dishevelled mane there was black soil and pine needles, which he did not shake out of it' (62–63).¹⁵

In short, the narrative's mythopoetic figurations of nature's revenge find their clinical correlate in Fischer's escalating paranoia. This, in turn, is *formally* reflected in the narrative's shifts of focalisation and grammatical tense (notably between preterite and historic present, as we watch him try to escape the clutches of the forest) (62–63). Our momentary flashes of insight into this mental fragmentation, shot through as they are with his alienness to us, renders him a recalcitrant corporeal and mental presence: his irreducibility to our diagnostic or hermeneutic schemata is mirrored in his own inability to assert control over body, over mind, and over his unfolding fantasy. After being assaulted by the forest, and having lost his bowler hat (yet another marker of emasculation), he sits in his bedroom, petrified in his inchoate recognition that 'something had happened, something had happened' ['es war etwas geschehen, es war etwas geschehen'] (63):

With frantic zeal he repeated to himself that he must have dreamed everything; but the scratches on his forehead were real. So, there must be things truly beyond belief. The trees had lashed out at him, the forest had indeed howled at the buttercup's death. ... He was often seen pounding the table with his fists, puffing out his cheeks, shouting that he wanted to clean things up in the company and everywhere else. They'd see. No one was going to mess with him! (63–64)¹⁶

¹⁴ 'Vielleicht lebte sie überhaupt noch; ja, woher wußte er denn, daß sie schon tot war? ... Er wußte nicht einmal, wie sie hieß. Ellen? Sie hieß vielleicht Ellen, gewiß Ellen.'

¹⁵ 'Wieder rennt er hart gegen eine niedrige Tanne; die schlägt mit aufgehobenen Händen auf ihn nieder'; 'Regungslos stand der dicke Herr ... in seinem zerzausten Haarschopf war schwarze Erde und Tannennadeln, die er nicht abschüttelte.'

¹⁶ 'Mit krampfhaftem Eifer sprach er sich vor, daß alles wohl geträumt sein müsse; aber die Risse an seiner Stirn waren echt. Dann muß es Dinge geben, die unglaublich sind. Die Bäume hatten nach ihm geschlagen, ein Geheul war um die Tote gewesen. ... Man sah ihn oft, wie er mit der Faust auf den Tisch schlug, die Backen aufblies, schrie, er würde einmal aufräumen im Geschäft und überall. Man würde es sehen. Er lasse sich nicht auf der Nase herumtanzen, von niemandem.'

The story's various discursive strands intertwine at this turning-point into out-and-out delusion. There remains a tenuous connection to rationality in the attempt to convince himself that he was dreaming, even as the evidence seems to belie it. His wilful desire to 'clean things up', to stamp out the incommensurable, aligns this outburst of anger with a broader crisis of masculine identity in Wilhelmine culture.¹⁷ The violent trees and howling forest are the manifestations of a natural world furious at a crime through which, on a mythic and psychoanalytic logic, an impulsive attempt to wrench a phallic stick free of the undergrowth feeds into an enraged machismo that is bent on repressing a 'nature' that is gendered as female. We also glimpse suggestive flashes of schizothymic or schizophrenic behaviour. In the 'bursting and breaking of trees' ['ein Bersten und Brechen von Bäumen'], and his stroking of the blue veins in his hands with the aim of 'erasing' them ['wegstreichen'] (63), there is something of the extreme surrealness that Louis Sass, in his path-breaking book, *Madness and Modernism*, associated aesthetically with schizophrenia (2017: 30–32, 38–39). A hint of depersonalisation insinuates itself as Fischer is shown to observe his own *Doppelgänger* as 'a dumpy form' ['eine untersetzte Gestalt'] (2001 [1912]: 57), which is echoed in the later external observation of '[his] black, round form' ['[d]ie schwarze runde Gestalt'] (61). Nonetheless, the precise diagnostic contours remain unclear, as the detachment and alienation associated with depersonalisation intersects with an increasingly paranoid chain of hallucinations. As such, any attempt to disentangle symbolic from symptomatic significance is not only futile, but also somewhat beside the point. As a mental illness that remains 'a limit-case of human existence', without clinically determined causes or 'precise diagnostic boundaries' (Sass, 2017: 3, 1), and still today the subject of profound popular misunderstanding, 'schizophrenia' only emerged as a complex and diffuse diagnostic category of Eugen Bleuler's coinage in 1908: a development from the 'dementia praecox' label developed by Kraepelin between 1896 and 1899 (2017: 1–2; Friedland and Herrn, 2012: 208–09).¹⁸ Döblin's story playfully hints at different kinds of significance—be they medical, psychoanalytic, or mythic—while stymying any definitive attempt to join up the dots or reconcile the different perspectives.

Ursula Kocher argues that the narrative's shifting ground deliberately prevents us from arriving at a conclusion about where 'the border runs between normality and madness' (2017: 104). Quite apart from invoking a problematic biopolitical distinction between health and illness, though, this suggestion obscures the ultimately uncategorisable remnants of damaged humanness that lie beneath that border's repeated drawing and re-drawing. What is so disconcerting about this protagonist

¹⁷ On this crisis of masculinity and gender identity, see Fout (1992).

¹⁸ See Reiner Marx's carefully hedged ascription of elements of schizophrenia to Fischer (1997: 56).

is the sense in which his otherness is offset by fleeting moments of psychological recognisability. Caught in a spiral of paranoia, we learn that Fischer cried for the first time since his childhood, ‘until his heart almost broke’ [‘daß ihm fast das Herz brach’] (Döblin, 2001 [1912]: 64). His anger at the fact that Ellen has robbed him of all joy at the beauty of nature finds its flip side in the guilty recognition that she has been denied it as well (64). This reaction feels unsettlingly moving precisely because it hints at a lost (probably always non-existent and certainly irrecoverable) reconcilability of mind and body, and of nature and ‘the human’, that an aggressively buttoned-up modern subject has been socialised to repress. Insofar as the body remains crucial to the will’s mastery over it, corporeal matter shows itself to be complicit in the subject’s attempts to straighten it out, both in Fischer’s wilful attempts to control his runaway limbs and in his confabulated fantasies. As Döblin’s story shows, ‘normality’ is rooted ineradicably in ‘pathology’, and vice versa.

A mental illness narrative, then, doubles as the portrait of a profoundly unstable and insecure masculinity. However, Fischer himself can never quite be reduced to that illustrative function, much less to any diagnostic label. Our final glimpse is of him snorting with laughter and ‘vanishing in the dark of the forest’ [‘so verschwand er in dem Dunkel des Bergwaldes’] (67), a terse closing salvo through which nature-myth and psychopathology recombine yet refuse to cancel each other out. This is a mediation of identity through non-identity, and presence through a final image of literal and mental absence. Fischer is neither sympathetic nor particularly relatable; but our disoriented reading experience reflects his evasion of mythic, psychoanalytic, and psychiatric categories. Döblin’s literary case study illuminates the limit points of linear narrative by exposing its own sub-linguistic remainder, that is, the human presence-absence which it never quite succeeds in capturing or categorising.

Hands and Brains: Werff Rönne and the Dissolution of the Self

While Fischer’s tale is partially rooted in Döblin’s clinical experience, Benn’s so-called ‘novellas’ contain autobiographical elements, even if he later expressed his (rather performative) objections to the notion. Rönne’s mental and physical breakdown at the close of the first piece is the culmination of his failures to properly do his job as a substitute doctor at a sanatorium in North Germany. This plot line of mental deterioration draws upon an array of lived experiences, including Benn’s collapse of confidence in his ability to continue in the medical profession between 1910 and 1911, and the incapacitating effects of what now appear to have been recurrent bouts of severe depression throughout 1912. While the first novella reworks his experience as a substitute doctor in a rehabilitation clinic near Bayreuth before the First World War, the

wanderings through Brussels later in the cycle reimagine aspects of his posting there as a military doctor from 1914 onwards (Krause, 2016: 52–53; Reents, 2016: 130–31).

In his more explicitly autobiographical account of 1934, *Lebensweg eines Intellektualisten* [*The Journey of an Intellectualist*], Benn characterised his protagonist as paradigmatic for the modern self. Rönne was, he claimed, incapable of grasping or even tolerating the flow of everyday reality, knowing only the ‘rhythmical opening and closing of self and personality’ and ‘the constant brokenness of inner being’: a profound alienation between the world and the individual, which could be overcome only within the chthonic and poetic realm of myth (Benn, 1984 [1934]: 364).¹⁹ In that light, recent critics have tended to read Rönne as an instantiation of one of Benn’s favourite themes: the intractable contradictions inherent in both the idea *and* the reality of embodied subjectivity (Leistenschneider, 2015: 113, 384). He showed less inherent enthusiasm than Döblin for a profession he considered largely ancillary to his work as a poet (Masuhr, 2018: 146), but that does not make his personally, painfully inflected prose any less probing in a portrayal that continually draws into question dividing lines between ‘normality’ and ‘pathology’. The first novella in the cycle, ‘Gehirne’ [‘Brains’], opens with the protagonist travelling on the train through the Rhineland to take up his substitute post. Rönne is an apparently neurasthenic young pathologist whose energy has been ‘inexplicably’ exhausted by the passage of some two thousand corpses under his hands, and whose willpower is no longer strong enough in the face of the symptoms of dissociation and depersonalisation that emerge over the story’s course (Benn, 1984 [1916]: 19). The narrative quickly shifts into interior monologue as he resolves to

buy myself a book and a pencil, I want to write down as much as possible so that things don’t all flow away from me. I’ve lived so many years, and everything is now submerged. When I started, did things stay with me? I no longer know. (19)²⁰

The image of things ‘flowing away’ reflects a modernist trope of dissolution and non-fixity, and it resonates with the fragmentation of subjectivity and representation (the so-called ‘crises of language’, or ‘Sprachkrisen’) that also faced Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Lord Chandos and Rainer Maria Rilke’s Malte Laurids Brigge. From the outset, we see Rönne trying to reinscribe his sense of subjectivity through writing—and by extension, through narrative—and ‘Gehirne’ traces out the first failures of the

¹⁹ ‘... das rhythmische Sichöffnen und Sichverschließen des Ich und der Persönlichkeit ... das fortwährend Gebrochene des inneren Seins’.

²⁰ ‘Ich will mir ein Buch kaufen und einen Stift; ich will mir jetzt möglichst vieles aufschreiben, damit nicht alles so herunterfließt. So viele Jahre lebte ich, und alles ist versunken. Als ich anfing, blieb es bei mir? Ich weiß es nicht mehr’.

attempt. He muses speculatively on how the sight of him passing through the ward might be fragmentarily recombined in the memories of his patients with a beloved family home or the smell and taste of a piece of tanbark. But on asking himself what has actually become of *him*, the subject, he must concede that he is now nothing but ‘a little fluttering, a blowing away’; indeed, ‘I no longer have any support or substance behind my eyes. Space surges so endlessly; surely once it flowed towards one point. The bark that held me together has decomposed’ (Benn, 1984 [1916]: 21).²¹ There is a metaphoric-metonymic play here on ‘Rinde’, translatable as both ‘bark’ and, in abbreviation, the brain’s cerebral cortex [‘Großhirnrinde’]. This physical externalisation of mental processes criss-crosses the novella through the images of both brains and hands. The disintegration of Rönne’s sense of self is offset by a self-conscious form of distributed cognition *avant la lettre*. Albeit in a rather different vein to Fischer, he engages in a series of automaton-like motions, delighting in seeing his own medical practice ‘dissolved in a series of hand movements’ [‘in eine Reihe von Handgriffen aufgelöst’] (19). His hands are portrayed as prosthetic extensions of the sanatorium apparatus, the semi-autonomous moving parts of a techno-clinical machine of which Rönne has become a part. Hands and brains intertwine as he is spotted by the nurses imitating his own hand gestures in, a few days earlier, tearing apart the brain of a slaughtered animal (21–22).

While Benn himself had not been active in neurological research, he had studied brain physiology, psychiatry, and experimental psychology between 1905 and 1911 (Gailus, 2018: 12–13). On foundations laid by scientists such as the phrenologist Franz Josef Gall (1758–1828) and the pathologist David Paul von Hansemann (1858–1920), early 20th-century German neuroanatomy had developed the notion of capturing a person right down to their finest details through a brain autopsy: as Olaf Breidbach puts it, a thoroughgoing science of brain-reading had taken the place of chiromancy (2004: 321–28). Against that neurological backdrop, the figurative image of the doctor holding his own brain in his hands and speculating on ‘what is possible with me’ [‘was mit mir möglich sei’] suggests a moment of depersonalised self-observation (Benn, 1984 [1916]: 23). This resonates with what Sass calls the ‘unworlding of the world’ that is symptomatic of the alienated experiences of schizophrenic personalities, but it also suggests a disquieting estrangement of mind from body (Sass, 2017: 16–17, 53–56). The text’s invocation of other ‘possibilities’ evokes the brain’s acutely vulnerable plasticity. He reflects on the myriad brains that have passed through his hands: some hard, some soft, and all of them ultimately ‘dissolving’ into nothingness; and he considers how a slightly deeper impress of the delivery forceps might have produced

²¹ ‘Ein kleines Flattern, ein Verwehn. ... Ich habe keinen Halt mehr hinter den Augen. Der Raum wogt so endlos; einst floß er doch auf eine Stelle. Zerfallen ist die Rinde, die mich trug.’

a radically different Rönne (Benn, 1984 [1916]: 23). Mind is reduced to its constitutive matter, and the act of reflection itself becomes a mere epiphenomenon of the physical organ itself. Thought is a passive product rather than a shaping or determining force. Human individuality, such as it is, subsists only as the contingent product of folds of grey matter whose laws are not our own (22).

‘What is it about these brains’, he finally, wearily asks, before remarking enigmatically to himself that ‘I always wanted to fly up like a bird out of a ravine; now I live outside in the crystal’ (23).²² The connotations of clarity, hardness, and brittleness suggest a posture of clinical observation and self-alienation. But this crystalline image is, bizarrely, followed by a conflation of self-dissipation and self-transcendence in the closing evocation of ‘a nebulization of the forehead, a dissolving of the temples’ (23): both a dissolution of and emancipation from the constraints of mental process.²³ Crystals combine unity with non-linearity in patterns akin to a brain’s neural networks, and their geometrical structures often emerge from a saturated liquid. In her recent scientific and cultural history of liquid crystals, Esther Leslie considers how the crystal, as both a chemical entity and an iconic, dialectical figure of modernity, came to mediate flux through fixity and vice versa. She draws upon none other than Alfred Döblin’s consideration of crystalline formations in his later work of nature philosophy, *Unser Dasein [Our Existence]*, as being akin to the endless formations and re-formations—the dialectics of solidity and fluidity—that are characteristic of organic life (Leslie, 2016: 146–52; Döblin, 1964 [1933]: 112–21). In that retrospective light, I would argue that Benn’s crystal intimates the start of a fragile and precarious alternative for both thinking and being. It encapsulates a newly non-linear configuration for an existence that has reached its sterile limits within the exhausted and defunct dualisms of mind and matter.

Fluidity and Fixity

However, Rönne cannot stop trying to reassert and restabilise himself. His cyclical wanderings through Brussels in the subsequent novellas, ‘Die Eroberung’ [‘The Conquest’] and ‘Die Reise’ [‘The Journey’], trace out a series of failed attempts to re-establish a linear and regimented sense of self. He repeatedly attempts to fashion his sensations and thoughts into linear patterns in a bid to shore himself up against the sensory and psychological maelstrom of occupied Brussels, and Marcus Hahn has cogently shown how Rönne’s metonymic chains can be read as positivistic parodies of the neurologist Theodor Ziehen’s championing of associative psychology (Hahn, 2011: 151–

²² ‘Was ist es denn mit den Gehirnen? Ich wollte immer auffliegen wie ein Vogel aus der Schlucht; nun lebe ich außen im Kristall’.

²³ ‘Zerstäubungen der Stirne—Entschweifungen der Schläfe’.

67).²⁴ This self-imposition of ‘rationality’ [‘Vernunft’] is not a unifying and stabilising process, though; rather, it entails a concatenation of perceptions and thoughts that is at once mechanistic and chaotic. In a melding of interior monologue and free indirect discourse in ‘Die Eroberung’, we are told that Rönne ‘must’ be able to associatively link sensations to sensations, and sensations to earlier experiences, in order to form generalised ‘viewpoints’ [‘Gesichtspunkte’] (1984 [1916]: 28). One of many such chains of association in the final novella, ‘Der Geburtstag’ [‘The Birthday’], culminates in the militaristic images of ‘armouring and an eagle’s flight’ [‘etwas von Panzerung und Adlerflug’], followed by the similarly militaristic invocation of ‘a kind of Napoleonic desire’ [‘eine Art Napoleonischen Gelüstes’] (43). These miniature excursions embody yet another form of narrative modality in Rönne’s dualistic bid to fashion his wayward body and mind into a linear, rational, and socially acceptable sense of self.

This particular section of the final novella draws to a close with Rönne’s provisional re-anchoring of himself as ‘gefestigt, ein Arzt’ [‘established, a doctor’] (43). However, these rigid conceptions of rationality and respectability find that which both underpins and undermines them in *frissons* of violence, not least in the hardened masculine figures of his projections. Indeed, at the start of ‘Der Geburtstag’, as Rönne makes his way to work at the hospital, crocuses ‘throw themselves’ at him from the gardens en route: an eroticised, if hallucinatory, image of himself which tellingly resembles Fischer’s fantasies of buttercup murder (42). What we see here is both a discursive fusion and a mismatch: on one hand, the exuberant and seemingly spontaneous efflorescence of what Benn would, in numerous references from 1920 onwards, describe as the ‘southern word’ [‘südliches Wort’] of his Mediterranean visions (Benn, 1989 [1920]: 44–45); on the other, the automaton-esque compulsiveness of Rönne’s slide through the metonymic chain of ‘Maita [Cigarettes]—Malta—beaches—shining—ferry—harbour—mussel eaters—depravities’ to ‘the bright clear sound of a gentle splintering’ (Benn, 1984 [1916]: 42).²⁵ The semantic and syntactical structures of linear narrative are pushed to their points of fragmentation. But as the product of a perverse cross between poetic spontaneity and a positivistic drive towards association, that fragmentation cannot simply serve to recreate or re-invoke a mythic state of pre-conscious harmony between self and body, and self and nature. While this elusive state of wholeness

²⁴ Benn came under Ziehen’s formative influence while he was a medical student in Berlin, and Ziehen a professor at the psychiatric clinic of the Charité University Hospital. Of particular interest to him was Ziehen’s critique of the transcendental subject, under the influence of the philosopher and psychologist Ernst Mach, as little more than a sequence of perceptions and concepts (Ziehen, 1907: 40). For the most comprehensive treatment of Ziehen’s imprint on Benn, which Marcus Hahn considers to be ‘the decisive scientific context for almost all of Benn’s writings up until 1920’, see Hahn (2011: 151–67).

²⁵ ‘Und nun vollzog sich über Maita—Malta—Strände—leuchtend—Fähre—Hafen— Muschelfressen—Verkommenheiten—der helle klingende Ton einer leisen Zersplitterung’.

remains the object of Rönne's desire across the loose arc of the novellas, that yearning is repeatedly ironised and negated. His flights of fancy, especially towards the close of the cycle, combine mythopoetic motif with a psychophysical discourse of associative psychology that is stretched to *its* mechanistic limits.

In the hospital itself, we are privy to the gynaecological examination of a small group of prostitutes (another crossover with Benn's own posting to Brussels). After yet another flight of poetic association, the (recently widowed) Rönne realises, on another misogynistic whim, that he wants to 'love' one of them, 'ravishing' ['hinreißend'] and 'celestial' ['überirdisch'] as she apparently is (44). A predatory fantasy of sexual intercourse unfurls through a series of Orientalised associations with the luxuriant landscapes of Egypt, culminating in the pastoral scene of an imagined 'merging' with nature (45-47). The illusory moment of consummation, however, peters out into onanistic farce, followed by a curiously abstract excursus:

Upwards gazed the body: flesh, order, and conservation called. He smiled and closed himself up again; already passing away, he looked at the house: what had happened? What route had humanity taken up till now? It had wanted to create order in something that should have remained a game. But in the end, it had just been a game, for nothing was real. Was it real? No, everything was just possible, and so was he.

He burrowed his nape deeper into the woodruff, with its scent of thyrsus and Walpurgis Nights. Melting through noon, his head pebbled like a brook.

He surrendered it: the light, the beating sunlight, ran unstoppably between his brain [sic]. There it lay: hardly a molehill, override, the animal scratching inside. (47)²⁶

The invocation of 'the possible', and the reinscription of the subject in terms of possibility rather than actuality, injects a precarious sense of fictiveness and futurity in the suggestion of a liberation from both narrative and psychosocial constraints. But possibility also betokens a lack of solidity in this novella, and an ever-broken promise of meaning, presence, and identity. This is the fluid logic of metaphor, which has already been vaguely figured as an 'attempt at flight' ['ein Fluchtversuch'], a 'kind of vision'

²⁶ 'Aufsah der Leib: Fleisch, Ordnung und Erhaltung riefen. Er lächelte und schloß sich wieder; schon vergehend sah er auf das Haus: was war geschehen? Welches war der Weg der Menschheit gewesen bis hierher? Sie hatte Ordnung herstellen wollen in etwas, das hätte Spiel bleiben sollen. Aber schließlich war es doch Spiel geblieben, denn nichts war wirklich. War er wirklich? Nein; nur alles möglich, das war er.

Tiefer bettete er den Nacken in das Maikraut, das roch nach Thyrsos und Walpurgin. Schmelzend durch den Mittag kieselte bächern das Haupt.

Er bot es hin: das Licht, die starke Sonne rann unaufhaltsam zwischen das Hirn. Da lag es: kaum ein Maulwurfshügel, mürbe, darin scharrend das Tier'.

['eine Art Vision'] and 'a lack of fidelity' ['ein Mangel an Treue'] to concrete reality (42). 'Possibility' finds both its power and its very undermining in a semantic field of melting, flowing, and dissolving, which recalls the 'nebulization of the forehead' at the close of 'Gehirne'. Such visual and linguistic contortions as the image of Rönne's head 'pebbling like a brook' and the sunlight 'running unstopably between his brain' mark a virtual rational and syntactical collapse. Rönne is made intensely present to us in the bizarreness of these constructions, and he also remains impenetrable, unreadable, and endlessly flowing from our grasp. Linear prose strains at its own limits and yields to an enigmatic, perhaps even epiphanic, poetry.

The uncanny image of the 'animal' of human consciousness scratching away inside the 'molehill' of the head, in particular, recalls Rönne's separation of the hemispheres of the slaughtered animal brain in the first novella. But the disorienting proximity of mind and matter, and subject and object, also anticipates Foucault's famous suggestion of those labelled 'mad' as caught in 'the eternally recommenced dialectic of the *Same* and the *Other*', trapped in an oscillation between the 'objectivity of [their] truth'—their rivetedness to the body's objectifiable materiality—and the recurrent reminders of the truth of their alienation from themselves as *subjects* (Foucault, 2009: 527–28).

The cycle's sporadic hints of the schizophrenic give way to something resembling what we would today diagnose as mania, in the form of a series of exuberant mythopoetic excursions towards the collection's close.²⁷ Precisely the ambiguity of this apparent shift reminds us of the futility of trying to categorise Rönne: his divergence from a clinical 'norm' reveals itself in its undecidability. His periodic yearning for 'reconciliation' ['Versöhnung'] (34) with both himself and the external world fragments into a series of increasingly cryptic metonyms towards the close of the cycle. A flow of exotic associations, ranging from lotus rivers and Berber caravans to horned vipers, is suddenly arrested in the surreally passive statement that 'it [presumably the panorama of the vision itself] was still standing silent, the olive happened to him' (50).²⁸ Sumptuous yet nonsensical, this 'happening' hints at a non-alienated existence beyond the strictures of an associationism that has overshot its psychological uses and spun radically out of control.

For Theodor W Adorno, the truth of art lies in the illusory image it offers of a reconciliation with nature: the artwork's 'semblance of being non-artificial' consists in its crystallised 'longing [for] the reality of what is not' (2002: 130, 132). Its dialectical truth rests on its own compelling artifice; and a version of that paradox holds true here. Rönne's supposed liberation is bound to images of fragmentation and dissolution,

²⁷ On the distinction between the generally 'fluid, spontaneous, and exuberant' dynamics of the manic patient's shifting associations, and the more disjointed and alienated nature of schizophrenic 'vacillations', see Sass (2017: 101–02).

²⁸ 'Noch stand es schweigend, schon geschah ihm die Olive'.

and so it is too simplistic to read these final pages, as some have, as affirming a vital, proverbially Dionysiac force of poetic creativity and self-transcendence (Riedel, 2005: 165–66). The cycle's closing phrase, 'he, Rönne' ['er, Rönne'] is a powerfully understated case in point, mediating identity through non-identity, presence through absence, and stasis through flux (Benn, 1984 [1916]: 51). The apposition of his proper noun and personal pronoun reinscribes Rönne's presence in his own text. At the same time, 'Rönne' is also the German subjunctive form of 'rinnen' ['to flow'], a verb used of fluids, and translatable here in the English conditional as 'he would flow': Benn's subtle wordplay marks out Rönne's sheer elusiveness.²⁹ And in that light, we might finally recall the crystal at the end of 'Gehirne', as fluidity and fixity once again reveal their precarious interplay. Our final glance of Rönne is of him 'hurrying' ['enteilte'] out of our line of sight, just before the text's final turn back into the image of a confected pastoral idyll. The closing description of him as 'unabsehbar' ['unforeseeable, incalculable'] suggests a subject who is ultimately uncapturable in diagnostic categories, psychophysical and biopolitical frameworks, and mythic motifs (51). But at the same time, the bookending of the whole cycle with his name can be read as both a statement of singularity *and* the oblique hope-against-hope for a new picture of subjecthood beyond the binaries of 'normality' and 'pathology'. This is not yet the emergence of 'a new grammar' of identity, as Susan Ray has argued (2003: 158–59), rather its inarticulate—perhaps forever unrealisable—possibility.

Conclusion

Both Fischer and Rönne are broken mirrors: disturbed individuals in themselves, of course, but also the literary reflections of their society's underlying pathologies. The pressure for them to submit to demands for regimentation and normalisation finds expression in Fischer's attempts to 'tame' his runaway limbs, thoughts, and hallucinations, and in Rönne's repeated attempts to (re-)secure his sense of self. For all their differences in tone and outcome, I have suggested that both attempts enact a 'narrative modality', that is, a misguided tendency to construct a linear and continuous subjectivity. In their combinations of non-linear form and inter-discursive content, these texts deconstruct their own perverse projections of stabilisation. Both men are irreducible to the psychophysical discourses and mythic-symbolic coordinates that constitute them. The effect of Benn's and Döblin's experimental aesthetic is to bring those discourses into a form of agonistic play with each other, thus exposing their mutual limitations and dead ends. These are precisely the points at which the

²⁹ It is no coincidence that this particular form of the German subjunctive, the so-called 'Konjunktiv II', is used to express an unreal condition or state of affairs in relation to the present. 'Rönne' is a rarer variant of the (already unusual) 'ränne'.

protagonists re-emerge in their non-identity and assert their disconcerting presence to us as readers. By letting pathologised bodies and minds make themselves intrusively felt, both authors expose linear strategies of ‘narrativisation’—in its broadest sense—as normalising, regimenting, and de-individualising processes. It is here, in turn, that the narrative strategies of Expressionism might help us to think more critically about some of the normative impulses of contemporary narrative medicine.

In a relatively recent discussion of interpersonal approaches to the lived experiences of individuals at the extreme end of the autism spectrum, Rowan Williams challenges us to let ourselves be temporarily displaced from our own ‘normal’ narrative structures and systems in order better to understand and interact with those who do not, or cannot, share those systems. Williams describes an innovative therapeutic technique through which a therapist recognises, imitates, and repeats the apparently meaningless physical movements of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) sufferer, with a view to establishing a rudimentary form of communication with that individual. He argues that this process, if it is to be truly empathetic, must in some measure both reflect and embody the feelings of profound disorientation and discomfort experienced by people with ASD (Williams, 2014: 95–97). It is only through a refreshed, if uncomfortable and often uncomprehending, sense of alterity that we can be sure to avoid judging ‘the acceptability or normalcy of another bodily presence’ in terms of our ability to recognise or even understand it (115–17).³⁰

Neither Döblin’s nor Benn’s narratives present us with doctor–patient or carer–patient ‘clinical encounters’ in the sense that Williams discusses, and their protagonists hardly invite 21st-century sympathies. Nonetheless, their texts exhibit an indeterminacy and undecidability that resists conventional hermeneutic and clinical categories. In so doing, they offer a twofold aesthetic challenge, both to their protagonists’ self-fashionings, and to the very categories that we are tempted to apply to the men. Our readerly sense of disorientation, disempowerment, and even disgust, can prompt us to think more carefully about both the boundaries and potentialities of *narrative* itself. By questioning the constructions that we place on embodied subjectivity and hinting at incalculable and as yet inarticulable alternatives for thinking and being, the aesthetics of Expressionism can help to keep open the space for an ever-more reflexive medical ethics. This is an ethics which, if not entirely abandoning its own norms and normativities, might at least develop a far keener sense of their limits.

³⁰ Williams’ book, *The Edge of Words* (2014), is based on his six Gifford Lectures of 2013–14 at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. In his fourth lecture, titled ‘Material Words: Language as Physicality’ (2013), he discusses the so-called ‘Intensive Interaction’ approach to ASD. See References.

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