UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: 29 Sept. 2008

I, Wesley Todd Jackson Jr.,
hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:
Master of Arts

in:
The Department of German Studies

It is entitled:
Verwesung und Werden: Images of Violence and Conversion in Alfred Döblin’s Wallenstein

This work and its defense approved by:

Chair: Katharina Gerstenberger
Richard E. Schade
Verwesung und Werden: Images of Violence and Conversion in Alfred Döblin’s 
Wallenstein

A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School

of the University of Cincinnati

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Department of German Studies

of the College of Arts and Sciences

By

Wesley Todd Jackson Jr., B.A.

University of Cincinnati, Ohio, United States of America, September 29, 2008

Committee Chair: Dr. Katharina Gerstenberger
Abstract

This thesis treats the themes of decay and change as represented in Alfred Döblin’s historical novel, *Wallenstein*. The argument is drawn from the comparison of the verbal images in the text and Döblin’s larger philosophical oeuvre in answer to the question as to why the novel is primarily defined by portrayals of violence, death, and decay. Taking Döblin’s historical, cultural, political, aesthetic, and religious context into account, I demonstrate that Döblin’s use of disturbing images in the novel, complemented by his structurally challenging writing style, functions to challenge traditional views of history and morality, reflect an alternative framework for history and morality based on Döblin’s philosophical observations concerning humankind and its relationship to the natural world, raise awareness of social injustice among readers and, finally, provoke readers to greater social activism and engagement in their surrounding culture.
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I. Introduction

The primary focus of this work is the theme of *Verwesung und Werden*, decay and change, as revealed through the violent images within the Alfred Döblin’s historical novel, *Wallenstein* (1920), and an exploration of how those images relate to Döblin’s larger aesthetic as well as his philosophy of nature. The novel’s setting is the first several years of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), and in many ways it represents Döblin’s attempt to draw parallels between the international conflict of the seventeenth century and Germany’s circumstances during and after World War I. The genre of the historical novel certainly provided him with a vantage point capable of offering critiques for his own society while ostensibly writing about the past. Central to the constellation of events in the novel are the figures of Wallenstein, the leader of the Catholic armies of the Holy Roman Empire, and Ferdinand II, the head of the empire, which is divided religiously, politically, as well as inter-personally. Döblin writes in a montage-like style of disjointed images, which collectively communicate the power-struggles of the Early Modern politicians, religious authorities, and military leaders as they attempt to navigate the fragile social terrain of Europe at war. Various of these figures have their own strategies for maintaining the unity of the Holy Roman Empire while serving their own personal ends. The novel is also an examination of the consequences of these political or religious plans on the common people. It is a novel about war and a testimony to the inherently brutal nature of human existence.

The many disturbing scenes and images described in the text reflect Döblin’s belief in the principles of decay and change, *Verwesung und Werden*, as the underlying forces of natural existence. Döblin used these intense graphic war scenes, full of energy and action, to contend for an alternative view of life and history—one that differed from nineteenth-century Hegelian or Christian notions of a teleological trajectory. Döblin sought to describe a model for existence
which portrayed society as a meaningful organism made up of interdependent parts. Such a model acts in opposition to fatalistic, mechanical understandings of history and emphasizes instead the unique value and creative power of the individual parties to change and influence one another as they interact. The collective interaction, the collective effort to build a social organism from so many diverse smaller organisms (people) becomes the new focus in Döblin’s worldview as well as the philosophical stimulant for society. Despite the images of war, violence, and animal-like brutality, Döblin’s style works to buttress a philosophy which imparts value to individual actions and decisions as well as importance to the natural world and our interaction with it.

This rather optimistic perspective which examines the novel’s capacity for exploring redemptive or productive means of social change is unique and largely untreated in the existing scholarship concerning *Wallenstein*. Much of the research surrounding this novel focuses on Döblin’s stylistic experimentation and the implications of his *Kinostil*. Axel Hecker’s research has stirred greater considerations for how Döblin’s writing techniques emphasize the cognitive processes of the reader and the way in which the human mind creates subjective meaning from circumstances and events (Hecker). Neil H. Donahue has likewise brought attention to the connection between the fragmented language structure which Döblin incorporates and the absence of any sort of organizing principle for history. Though most scholars have generally agreed that *Wallenstein* represents a kind of aesthetic, political, philosophical, and historical anarchy—practically incapable of being categorized by any single governing rule or character—writers such as Dieter Mayer have nevertheless made herculean efforts in attempts to find the unifying thread which binds the disparate elements of the novel. Harro Müller meanwhile has been content to summarize the novel as representative of Döblin’s idea: “Die Unordnung ist ein
besseres Wissen als die Ordnung” (Donahue 87). Günter Grass, rather than trying to deal with 
Wallenstein in terms of encapsulating generalizations, has focused more on the economic factors to which Döblin draws significant attention and how those contribute to a mindset of war profiteering (Grass 244-246). Other critics such as David Midgley have helpfully viewed the novel in terms of the Weimar culture and the political and social turmoil following World War I as well as terms of the aesthetic movements of the time. In the midst of all of the research, there has been little effort to interpret the novel in terms of Döblin’s philosophical development. While Döblin’s philosophical writings have been treated, little has been done to trace the connections between his early formations of a Naturphilosophie based on a materialistic atheism and his later conversion to Catholicism. Friedrich Emde’s book Alfred Döblin: Sein Weg zum Christentum is actually a quite thorough treatment of Döblin’s philosophical development though he primarily focuses on how this development is reflected in his novels rather than in his philosophical works, such as Unser Dasein (1933). Emde is also interested in exploring the themes in Döblin’s work which reflect the transitions of his philosophy as they lead up to his conversion, similar to a series of intellectual and personal stepping stones. In this paper, I present an interpretation of Wallenstein primarily in light of Döblin’s larger Naturphilosophie and discuss Döblin’s Catholicism only secondarily in terms of its complimentary elements to his early concerns for social engagement and his philosophical speculations on the relationship between mankind and the natural world.

As in any biological organism, no member of a body acts independently or without consequence to the other members. In contrast to fatalistic, deterministic views of history where human actions and consequences can be justified as inevitable and unalterable and where ends justify means, Döblin’s gritty, visceral depiction of the world causes the reader to weigh the
details of life and consider carefully before making decisions, knowing that the future is not pre-
determined but depends upon the individual pieces like him and the decisions he makes,
regardless of how small he is in contrast to the whole. The vision of decay and the descriptions
of the violence function in the text of Wallenstein to remind the reader of the interrelated parts,
materials, influences, ideas, and people which make up society, culture, individuals, and even the
natural world. In witnessing the decay, the falling apart, of an organism we observe that
organisms consist of combined, yet separate, entities, and we are reminded of our own
connections and the individual obligations we have to our community. This is part of Döblin’s
goal in presenting the horrific images in Wallenstein—the reader is reminded that he belongs to a
larger organism; he does not merely belong to himself.

Such a portrayal of life has additional implications for an understanding of history—one
which does not emphasize the achievements of individuals so much as one traces the total effect
of the past upon the present. Rather than idealizing the past or viewing the past in terms of
progressive stages leading to an ultimate goal, Döblin treats the past as valuable material for
understanding the present. The events of the past contribute to the complexity of contemporary
social organisms just as individuals, natural phenomena, and political situations contribute as
factors which make up our existence. The past offers explanation for current circumstances, but
it is not prescriptive. We learn from the past just as a medical doctor knows from experience that
certain symptoms indicate certain diseases in a patient. History becomes a kind of medical
history for Döblin—a medical history which can scarcely be exhausted because of the
complexity of the factors involved, and because of the continuous complexity offered by ever
new developments in contemporary society.
Döblin’s style and his graphic portrayals of the decaying quality of our existence works to shift the focus away from otherworldly, “big-picture” definitions of life. Instead, his near-sighted view of unser dasein invests meaning in the dynamic interactions, the complex relationships, and the seemingly infinite variety of phenomena produced through the combinations and decompositions of the material and social world. In many ways the portrayal of the process of Verwesung und Werden functions to break readers out of selfish, individualistic interests, or narrow ideologies and re-focuses their attention—their active consciousness—instead on the importance of the larger social organism and the necessity of recognizing the interdependent nature of all of the parts of the body. The aesthetic of Wallenstein becomes a kind of remedy for the blindness caused by selfishness and a hyper-individualism which ignores obligations to the surrounding community. No organism can live and thrive in isolation; natural life is a continuous fluctuation of consumption and contribution. Döblin’s adaption of these ideas and his incorporation of them into a larger philosophy for life establish new perspectives for history as well as ethical systems based on the unique abilities of the human consciousness to perceive the inner workings of nature and the capacity to creatively contribute to the improvement of culture and one’s environment.
II. Döblin’s Refractory Writing Style: An Aesthetic of Endless Experimentation

Neil H. Donahue, in his article, “The Paradox of Epic Intensity in Wallenstein” argues that whatever the value of Döblin’s research into seventeenth-century culture and the abundance of random facts presented in the novel, Wallenstein is primarily an aesthetic project. It is a novel which has linguistic experimentation and style as its chief concern:

[…] Döblin severs the novel here from any historiographical obligations in favor of the “appearance of reality” in the fiction, which does however still derive from historical research and reading, however unsystematic, and capture the atmosphere of the period; but ultimately that historical content—period, personage, background and assorted documentation—remains merely an occasion for language, for the dynamic and artful linguistic limning at length of the matter at hand. (Donahue 79)

This aesthetic style for Wallenstein thus requires contextualization in order to fully grasp the implications of the images, which will be treated later. The style is as difficult as it is vibrant and visceral. Döblin’s language is one with disjointed grammatical structures and long, run-on sentences. Fragmentary commands from characters in the novel and rapidly reported facts give the impression of speed, immediacy, and energy. The style of the novel demands that the reader be awake and alert. Döblin rarely offers explanations or insights concerning the events in the text. There is no formal structure of a predictable narrative on which the reader can rely in order to understand the trajectory of the story. Technically there is no “story” with Wallenstein. The book includes information, and a narrative can be constructed if the reader so chooses, but the structure is far from the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel. There is no central figure whom the reader follows. The inner dialogue of characters is often superficial and one-dimensional, providing little character development. More than anything, Wallenstein is a series of energetic, montage-style events and images which readers are invited to interpret for themselves.
Döblin called his unique form of writing *Kinostil*—a style which expressed a kind of real-time experience of the events for the reader as well as an impartial selection of the events and objects described (Ribbat, 100-01). The author simply portrayed the things which the “lens” of his mind came across. This “Kinostil” was the result of a commitment to be objective and faithful to the “facts.” The objectivity required the „Entselbstung, Entäußerung des Autors, Depersonation“ (“An Romanautoren und Ihre Kritiker,” 18). The author, according to Döblin, was not to superimpose his own ideology on reality, but to mirror or reflect that reality as accurately as possible (“Der historische Roman und Wir” 182).

The filmic technique of description was an example of Döblin’s commitment to *Sachlichkeit* or *Dinglichkeit*, “referring to the materiality of the empirical world […] This amounts to a radical naturalism, to observing the phenomena of the natural world and seeking the words—nouns and verbs above all—that will let objects and events speak for themselves” (Midgley 213). *Sachlichkeit* and *Dinglichkeit* required the use of a style which appeared to be a kind of factual reporting, which Döblin called a “Berichtform” (“Der Bau des epischen Werks” 106). The result is that an epic like *Wallenstein* appears to be more a collection of random events than it does a real story. *Wallenstein* is not primarily about the figure of Wallenstein or of Kaiser Ferdinand II, although these are two significant characters in the book. The text is also not necessarily *about* the Thirty Years’ War, although the events take place within that time period and most all of the events relate directly to the Thirty Years’ War. In a text like *Wallenstein*, the importance is placed on *things*, giving rise to lengthy paragraphs describing random people, places, and objects. Early in the first book, the reader encounters such a passage, describing Vienna and Ferdinand’s palace:

It was passages like this which caused critics at the time of the publication to ask, “wozu soviel bloßer Stoff, soviel Beschreibung alltäglicher Kleinigkeiten, Äußerlichkeiten, soviel Anführung von Regimenternamen, Esswaren, Bekleidungsstücken, Details aller Art aufgenommen […]” (Knipperdolling 106). These lists seem merely additive; they are like pieces of information simply piled on top of one another with no relation to a narrative. There is no plot, and Döblin intentionally avoided a novel structured on standard conventions of a plot and character development: “Der Roman hat mit Handlung nichts zu tun; […] Vereinfachen, zurechtschlagen und –schneiden auf Handlung ist nicht Sache des Epikers. Im Roman heißt es schichten, häufen, wälzen, schieben” (“Bemerkungen zum Roman” 20). In a way, Döblin shaped the novel to become more of a probing for truth and searching for objective reality. His commitment to *Sachlichkeit* was a vehicle to finding the meaning of the starkly factual reality he portrayed. He wrote about random events, people, and things for the purpose of seeing things *as they are* in hopes that various attempts at describing the interactions of people in their environment would expose the purpose behind (or in) the natural world.

The motivations for Döblin’s raw, reportage style and his search for meaning in general, arose, at least in part, from the circumstances surrounding World War I, a time when many despairsed of any kind of purpose or destiny in the world. While I discuss Germany’s historical context in the early twentieth century to a greater degree in the next chapter, it is necessary here to understand something of the cultural influences of that time. The failure of the Great War
created not only a sense of anarchy among artists and intellectuals but also a simultaneous
demand for a new system of government or a new formation of society. Gordon A. Craig
remarks that the frustration among writers such as Heinrich Mann at the corruption in politics
and the lethargic, disengaged position of many intellectuals prior to the War was only
exacerbated after the devastation of Germany:

Before the outbreak of the war Heinrich Mann, whose first novels were savage portraits
of the death of the spirit and the growth of political folly in Wilhelmine Germany, had
written a trenchant denunciation of intellectual neutralism. There were, he said, too many
writers whose attitude seemed to be summed up in the couplet, ‘Ich danke Gott an jedem
Morgen, / Daß ich nicht brauch’ für’s heil’ge, römische Reich zu sorgen’. The Mann des
Geistes had for a generation now betrayed his proper function either by silence or by
explicit approbation of the forces of materialism that had debauched Germany. (50)
The result of this frustration concerning the intellectual forerunners who had abandoned their
political responsibilities was a flurry of activity on behalf of the Weimar artists during the war
and following it. They began urging German citizens to be engaged socially, politically, and
culturally. Writers such as Kurt Hiller, Ludwig Rubiner, and Rudolf Kayser began writing
literature as forms of serious social activism (Craig 51). Art was not an end to itself but had
rather a responsibility to make the public aware of social and political dangers, to call readers
and theater-goers to action. The citizen, and much more the artist, should not be content to view
life in terms of abstractions for contemplation. Engagement with current events was needed.

The problem with for the Weimar artists’ enthusiasm was that they had few practical,
positive solutions for the political crisis after the war. Having little experience in the political
realm, many writers—including Döblin—poured their energy into biting criticisms of policies
and politicians but generally advocated an anti-political creed, as if the existence of government
itself were society’s central flaw. Vague spiritual notions of the goodness of mankind and the
need to throw off science, technology, and capitalistic industry were all that the Expressionist activists had to offer (Craig 53).

Döblin exhibited a similar passion for social involvement and the reform of the arts as a means for cultural change. He wanted to use his writing to expose the hypocrisy within society and provoke his readers to confront their faults. The public, according to Döblin, had grown used to social “masks,” fronts, and pretenses in art. They were not interested in facing difficult truths, such as the idea that history may not demonstrate a positive evolutionary development of humankind. The public only wanted to be entertained with nice stories rather than a probing search of their lives and the issues in their community. They wanted to escape the problems caused by the war rather than face them.

Part of the issue Döblin dealt with was that of the inheritance of the previous generation’s intellectual isolationism. The poets of the past had been so concerned with spiritual ideas and ideals that many failed to recognize the culture and community around them. The larger public may not have had intellectual justifications for being socially or politically disengaged, but mere entertainment, Döblin was convinced, would not help them integrate into their surrounding communities. Entertainment would not help them be better citizens and neighbors. In light of this conviction, Döblin proposed that readers needed something which brought them face to face with
the hardships as well as the vitality of “real” life, with “bunte[m] oder einfarbige[m],
traurige[m], tiefe[m], flache[m] Lebensereignis” (21).

Döblin’s aesthetic approach to this kind of social activism went through two major
phases: writings which emphasized the collective nature of human existence and then writing
which focused more on the role of the individual. Döblin’s first major novels, Die Drei Sprünge
des Wang-lun (1915), Wallenstein (1920), and Berge Meere und Giganten (1924) are generally
considered by critics to reflect Döblin’s concerns for the collective nature of society and
mankind’s connection and dependence upon the natural environment (Emde 121, Koepke 119-
120). In this particular vein of writing, Döblin places less importance on individual characters as
forces of change in history and more emphasis on a social group as the key to cultural
transformation. Berge Meere und Giganten is something of an exception in that it is a transitional
book. Döblin presents a science-fiction story about the future and the fearful vision of machines
breaking free from human control and waging war against mankind. The novel is a warning
against the dangers of dependence on technology and humanity’s need to reconnect to the natural
world. It is also a book where individual figures become much more central to the plot. In the
course of the adventures to prevent the annihilation of humanity, Kylin, one of the main
characters, begins to think that the solution to the problems of the world may be in creating “the
new man” rather than a new kind of society (Koepke 117). Kylin begins to change into this “new
man” throughout the course of the novel through a series of romantic and sexual relationships,
suggesting that Döblin was beginning to shift his attentions away from collectivist solutions
during the Weimar period and consider more individualistic ideas of reform.

Döblin wrote his essay, “Der Geist des naturalistischen Zeitalters” (1924) around the
same time as Berge. In it he, ironically, defends the use of technology and the “progressive” and
collective quality of the modern city, but he ends the essay with vague references to “Die seelischen Konsequenzen” and the great “secret” of discovering something about the development of the new city: “Die Natur ist im ersten Abschnitt dieser Periode nur unbekannt und wird leidenschaftlich erforscht; später wird sie Geheimnis. Dies Geheimnis zu fühlen und auf ihre Weise auszusprechen, ist die große geistige Aufgabe dieser Periode” (83). Such an ending to an essay defending scientific research and the turning away from medieval and religious attitudes in favor of the technological revolution is a clear indication that Döblin felt himself in the midst of a philosophical transition. During the twenties he was attempting to formulate a worldview which justified social engagement while simultaneously recognizing the unique value of the individual consciousness and change. He was attempting to bridge a gap between two philosophical poles—the emphasis of the collective masses to the extinguishing of the social or political importance of the individual, or the celebration of the individual to the ignoring of social, cultural, political, as well as environmental concerns and obligations.

When Döblin returned to the questions of technology vs. nature, the individual vs. the masses of society a few years later after publishing Berge, it was with a more decisive conviction as to the importance of the individual. In his book, Das Ich über der Natur (1927), Döblin appears less certain both of the value of technology as well as a collective form of human existence which extinguishes the individual. This publication was the first time Döblin had attempted to systematically describe his philosophy of nature and mankind’s relationship to the world. He concludes with a paradoxical statement about the human as being both part of nature and yet separate from it. A person must rely on his material connections to the earth and yet his consciousness, his imagination set him apart from the rest of nature, causing him to rise above the merely material elements of the world (Dollinger 104-105). The publication of the Indian
epic Manas (1927) and the appearance of his travel log Reise in Polen (1925) build from the ideas in Berge and Das Ich über der Natur like stepping-stones for the more individualistic themes of the character-driven story of Franz Biberkopf in Berlin Alexanderplatz (1929).

According to several critics at the time, Döblin had, in writing Berlin Alexanderplatz, effectively turned his back on the collectivist political cause and aligned himself with bourgeoisie values (Midgley 222-223). Even if Berlin Alexanderplatz broke away from nineteenth-century narrative conventions, and with it, presumably, away from middle-class convictions, Döblin’s leftist contemporaries suspected that underneath the novel’s modern, provocative, avant-garde writing style and the visceral content of the story, the author himself was not fully aligned with the socialist cause. The montage techniques which Döblin employs, the vibrant, disjointed style, the scenes from locales distinctive to Berlin all supply the novel with an unquestioned modern flair and a prioritize the experience of the whole of city life. The book is about the city as much as it is about Biberkopf. Döblin was still concerned about an individual’s relationship to his whole environment—social, natural, and cultural. But the shift had been made, his collectivist concerns notwithstanding.

Wallenstein belongs to Döblin’s “collectivist” period of writing where meaning is found in the interaction of many people and entities rather than in an individual or any single social or political role, and yet the novel is tinged with themes concerning the individual consciousness and the dilemmas of how a person is to respond to the needs of a larger group to which he or she belongs. Even in writing about history as a series of collective events—the wars of nations, of social groups, of religious parties and political factions, not of world-historical figures—Döblin’s style in Wallenstein is one which places high demands on the individual consciousness and imagination of the readers as they seek to interpret the text. Both of these perspectives need to be
recognized when discussing *Wallenstein* since Döblin’s own commentary about aesthetic standards and the role of the epic show a duality or uncertainty in his beliefs concerning the novel’s meaning and significance.

During the writing of *Wallenstein*, Döblin wanted to use his objective *Kinostil* to avoid popular story-telling conventions. He was interested in the vitality and life which came from the interaction between two or more entities. These entities might be persons, social institutions, machines, or objects from the natural environment. Döblin called the emphasis on objects and their interactions, “Tatsachenphantasie”: “Los vom Menschen! Mut zur kinetischen Phantasie und zum Erkennen der unglaublichen realen Konturen! Tatsachenphantasie! Der Roman muß seine Wiedergeburt erleben als Kunstwerk und modernes Epos“ („Bemerkungen zum Roman“ 18-19). In an earlier essay from 1913, Döblin insisted: “der Gegenstand des Romans ist die entseelte Realität. Der Leser in voller Unabhängigkeit einem gestalteten, gewordenen Ablauf gegenübergestellt; er mag urteilen, nicht der Autor“ („An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker“ 17). He then follows this idea quickly with: „Die Dichtung schwingt im Ablauf wie die Musik zwischen den geformten Tönen.“ What it important for Döblin during this time of life is the interaction, the energy, the relationship between objects. His essay “Der Geist des naturalistischen Zeitalters” (1924) confirms the value of technical research and finding out how machines, biological organisms, and other parts of the natural world work. Döblin is much more interested in the questions of how the world functions rather than questions of why (“Der Geist des naturalistischen Zeitalters”64). The same applies to society. He writes of how people are learning what it is to live and work in the Großstadt. The spirit of the big city was creating a society that emphasized the “Kollektivcharakter” of the people and was forming a “Gesellschaftswesen” (83). Döblin could not say what this kind of society looked like, only that
it would reveal itself as people continued to explore the technical and structural side of life, and as they sought to understand how the world worked. Even though he writes that ethics are not negated by this worldview—a kind of scientific pragmatism—he is not eager to propose what sort of new morality the naturalistic spirit would bring. The meaning of life is to be found in the interactions of entities and organisms. All that Döblin is able to provide his readers from his speculations about this new age of technology and empirical research is a vague assurance that society will come to understand what is expected of it as the new culture develops. Döblin’s perhaps irritatingly naïve or simplistic belief in science and technology, as well as in humanity’s potential to evolve or simply “figure out” the implications of new trends and developments of the world, is important to understand when reading Wallenstein. Döblin did not write Wallenstein with a moral in mind or a programmatic plan for society’s improvement. As is demonstrated in the quote above, Döblin wrote from the perspective of: „Der Leser in voller Unabhängigkeit einem gestalteten, gewordenen Ablauf gegenübergestellt; er mag urteilen, nicht der Autor.” It is almost as if he hoped to simply provoke the minds of his readers. The stimulus alone arising from the conflicting passages and images in the book would be meaningful. The stimulus would, theoretically, encourage people’s creativity in building the new, modern society. The significance of the novel would come as readers saw the way the various, almost montage images and scenes were juxtaposed and how these scraps of information worked for or against each other. It was the energy and activity produced in trying to understand such an epic as Wallenstein that mattered.

Although critics have compared Döblin’s style to the Cubist art movement, it is better to think of a work such as Wallenstein as much more influenced by the Futurist aesthetic. Neil H. Donahue writes,
The phrases [in Wallenstein] appear in almost Cubist refraction for their own sake on the page as the immediate surface of language, occupying the visual field, without perspectival subordination to a larger pictorial composition. In reading, one has to step back as one would before an overlarge painting to find a point of imagistic integration. (Donahue 81)

The comparison to Cubism is helpful, especially when one considers Döblin’s oeuvre as a whole. He was ultimately interested in engaging the reader’s imagination and consciousness, in stirring up attempts to integrate disjointed pieces of information. The emphasis on the conscious assembling of images by a viewer is something which eventually moves Döblin toward the concerns of the “Ich” and away from collective existence, but during the 1910s he was primarily concerned with life’s dynamic aspects of interaction. Questions of how a mind makes sense of facts and associates them are not his objective. Döblin would have been more aligned with the Futurists’ program for art. David Midgley writes:

In the period before the First World War, Döblin was closely associated with the avant-garde periodical Der Sturm (The Storm), in which several of his early stories were published. The exhibition of Italian Futurist art that the Sturm circle, led by Herwarth Walden, organize in Berlin in 1912, indirectly prompted Döblin to issue his most important early programmatic statement. He enthusiastically welcomed the dynamism of these paintings—for example those of Umberto Boccioni, who is famous for his attempts to represent the bustling simultaneity of city streets on his canvasses—because he felt that they had broken decisively with the tradition of perspectival depiction and its assumption of a fixed viewpoint. (212)

Döblin’s fascination with pure Futurism was relatively short-lived. His opinions began to change after he read Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s novel Marfarka. Döblin wrote that Marinetti, the founder of the Futurism movement, was mistaken in his beliefs about the aims of art, that he was attempting to limit the portrayal of nature and humanity to the confines of technology. According to Marinetti the world should be described in terms of artificial, mechanical objects, replacing natural metaphors. The world was becoming more technologically advanced; the industrial age had arrived. It only made sense that the new art used images and language which
associated human and natural forms with those of machines. Döblin argued this was unnatural and confusing, that Marinetti was more loyal to an artificial theory of art rather than using art to portray the natural world in a creative way. He had limited the possibilities of artistic expression to a Futurist program or theory (“Futuristische Worttechnik: Offener Brief an F.T. Marinetti” 9-15).

Despite Döblin’s complaints concerning Marinetti’s aims, it is striking that the themes and character of Wallenstein should so closely echo the first manifesto of the Futurists:

The 1909 ‘Founding and First Manifest of Futurism’ is best known for its eleven principles which glorify action and violence and vilify tradition of every kind. ‘The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity, and revolt. We wish to exalt too aggressive movement, feverish insomnia, running, the perilous leap, the cuff, the blow.’ This cult of violence, the belief that ‘there is no more beauty except in struggle’ (axiom 7), culminated in the notorious axioms 9 and 10:

‘We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the Anarchist, the beautiful ideas that kill, contempt for woman.

‘We will destroy museums and libraries, and fight against moralism, feminism, and all utilitarian cowardice.’ […] The only value is action. Man may become whatever he wills. (Nash 178)

Döblin was not a Futurist. He made it clear to Marinetti that his priority during the 1910s was his own “Döblinismus,” his own sense of style and art, but the extreme violence exhibited in Wallenstein, the emphasis on action, movement, struggle and conflict between armies and individual characters, as well as the pessimistic, amoral perspective through which Döblin seems to describe the events of the Thirty Years’ War, bear testimony to the direct influence of the Futurists and the their philosophy on the novel (“Futuristische Worttechnik” 15).

What is also important to understand is that, as much as Döblin experimented with Futurist aesthetic concepts, his artistic value-system continued to change throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Döblin’s use and understanding of the Kinostil developed to the point where he saw it
not merely as a means to present raw information and demonstrate action and vitality but also as a way to search for the connection points, the relationships between objects, materials, and people. Working like a careful surgeon, he wanted, through his art, to peel back layers of skin and muscles of the natural world and of human culture in order to see the emotional and psychological ligaments which connected the tissues to the bones of society. He was interested in uncovering the material or substance which held the organism of a community or a state together, and he wanted his readers to uncover the same truths as well. Ultimately, Döblin’s interest in things in-and-of themselves and his concern with “facts” was motivated by a search for the stuff in between things.

Revealing the connections and the relational “glue” between his subject matter was the secret to bringing his readers closer to the Lebensereignis. Döblin later called this process of getting past the facts to the underlying reality, “breaking through” or Durchstoßen: “Der wirklich Produktive aber muß zwei Schritte tun: er muß ganz nahe an die Realität heran, an ihre Sachlichkeit, ihr Blut, ihren Geruch, und dann hat er die Sache zu durchstoßen, das ist seine spezifische Arbeit” („Der Bau des epischen Werks“ 107). Erwin Kobel describes Döblin’s aesthetic goal this way:

Der Dichter ist natürlich schon während seiner Vorarbeiten, beim Zusammentragen von Realien, damit beschäftigt, die Realität zu durchstoßen, und dann nimmt er keine Tatsachen wahr. Sein Werk besteht ja nicht aus Fakten, sondern aus dem Zusammenhang von Fakten. Der Zusammenhang ist das Gedichtete. Die Realität durchstoßen heißt durch die Faktizität hindurch in den Zusammenhang gelangen. (Kobel 194)

The attempt of this Durchstoßen can be seen in passages of Wallenstein, which describe the inner emotions of a character, their thoughts and reactions to a situation:

The passage shows the Bavarian Kurfürst Maximilian’s relationship to his cousin, Ferdinand, the Holy Roman Emperor. As the paragraph comes to an end, the reader is aware that Maximilian may not have screamed towards Vienna at all. He may not have even warned Ferdinand to be on guard. What is communicated is the emotional and political tension between emperor and prince. The theatrical exaggeration of Maximilian’s temper tantrum and the apparent clairvoyance between the two men provides a tangible image for the reader through which the relationship of Ferdinand and Maximilian is better understood, but the reader is, at first, jarred with confusion as to what is exactly happening. Are the actions described real or do they actually occur inside the minds of the characters? Further, what kind of objectivity can an author of historical events have when, instead of presenting only the facts, the author chooses to insert dialogue, characters’ emotions and thoughts which, for all the reader knows, are completely fictional? How does a fictional retelling of historically verifiable events represent the connective tissue or glue between social and natural entities?

It is at passages like these within the epic that Döblin’s stylistic approach to the historical novel betrays a deep interest in an individual’s subjective understanding of reality, despite whatever programmatic or theoretical claims he may have made at the time of writing Wallenstein. In addition to recording raw material and random lists, Döblin probes the points of connection between his subject matter. The connection points cannot always be historically or scientifically proven, but Döblin believed that an artist’s perception of how a society or an organism, natural or social, is integrated and constructed, how the different parts of society work
together—this perception can be taken as “true” and “objective.” Following a kind of aesthetic philosophy similar to that of Nietzsche’s in Die Geburt der Tragödie, Döblin would later state that he saw the role of the artist as a kind of messenger for the public. Just as Nietzsche understood the composer as having a special relationship to music, so, too, Döblin—himself an enthusiastic reader of both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer—saw the novelist or the epic poet as having a kind of special relationship to nature and the world (Bernhardt 20-21). The artist could interpret the code which nature presented to human society. For Nietzsche, music was supposed to be a kind of pure, unadulterated language of the world spirit or underlying life force which worked in all of nature and society. Nietzsche built on Schopenhauer’s ideas of music as “Ausdruck der Welt” and as “eine im höchsten Grad allgemeine Sprache, die sich sogar zur Allgemeinheit der Begriffe ungefähr verhält wie diese zu den einzelnen Dingen” (Nietzsche, 105). The intimate relationship “welches die Musik zum wahren Wesen aller Dinge hat” is that to which the poet or the composer has access. In Nietzsche’s philosophy, the artist allows himself to become a medium through which the underlying Apollonian and Dionysian forces express themselves, an idea Döblin later incorporates relating to his own artistic expressions. Nietzsche writes:

[…] da das Subject, das wollende und seine egoistischen Zwecke fördernde Individuum nur als Gegner, nicht als Ursprung der Kunst gedacht werden kann. Insofern aber das Subject Künstler ist, ist es bereits von seinem individuellen Willen erlöst und gleichsam Medium geworden, durch das hindurch das eine wahrhaft seierende Subject seine Erlösung im Scheine feiert. [...] Nur soweit der Genius im Actus der künstlerischen Zeugung mit jenem Urkünstler der Welt verschmilzt, weiss er etwas über das ewige Wesen der Kunst; denn in jenem Zustande ist er, wunderbarer Weise, dem unheimlichen Bild des Mährchens gleich, das die Augen drehn und sich selber anschauen kann; jetzt ist er zugleich Subject und Object, zugleich Dichter, Schauspieler und Zuschauer. (47-48)
The idea of the fairytale will be interesting to consider later, to see how Döblin weaves fairytale elements through his epic. For now it suffices to say that Döblin holds to a similar kind of philosophy (Bernhardt 20-21). He describes the ideal author as seeking a kind of identification or resonance with his subject material. Döblin later (1936) calls the author or poet “eine besondere Art Wissenschaftler” („Der historische Roman und Wir“ 178). The truth of the author or of the poet is one which “resonates” with the historical material or the raw material in the natural world:

Mit dem Begriff Resonanz kann man da einiges verstehen. Er [der Künstler] hat in sich einen besonders feinen und entwickelten Resonator. Und wenn bestimmte, ihm gut liegende historische Dinge (sie müssen ihm gut liegen) dicht genug an ihn herankommen, so schwingt in ihm der Resonator, und er, der Wissenschaftler, ist ein Schriftsteller oder Dichter, wenn er nun die Resonanz in Sprache und Bilder umsetzen kann. Nicht die Beherrschung einer neuen oder alten Form, sondern die Intimität mit der Realität macht den guten und bessern Autor, also sein Resonator. (“Der historische Roman und Wir” 179-80)

Döblin then explains the kind of “translating” process which an artist goes through in order to bring raw information into living, affective forms, relevant to the present audience. The more familiar an author is with his raw information, the more the substance, the spirit of the stuff will press its way through the author and into artistic expression. The artist may not always know why he must write about such an event or character or scene, but the material which he has studied and absorbed, material which he has read without preconceived ideas or ulterior motives, presses him to express the interpretation in a certain way: “[…] so wird er nicht getrieben von einem wahnhaften Objektivitätsdrang, sondern von der alleinigen Echtheit, die es für Individuen auf dieser Erde gibt: von der Parteilichkeit des Tätigen” (182).

Part of the “Echtheit” of which Döblin writes of, is a willingness to allow the people of the past, as in Wallenstein, to speak for themselves, just as the raw objects, political titles, battles,
and lists of possessions speak for themselves. Döblin sought to report not just the facts but the essence of his subject matter. Like a good journalist interviewing survivors of a tragedy or the participants in a significant event, Döblin wanted to hear what the people of the seventeenth century said and believed about their own times. The journalistic reporting style required that Döblin also include tales of the mystical and the fantastic, without explaining it away. He wrote that for the epic, the author must use a reportage style, and that the poets from the past who did this, included in their reports the wild dreams, fantasies, and superstitious beliefs along with the actual events. In writing about Homer’s time, Döblin said:

Es waren damals Realität und Traum und Phantasie viel weniger getrennt als heute, dazu ließ die Unklarheit, die Neugier und die Angst die Menschen beständig alles glauben, was gesagt, berichtet wurde. Auf diesen trüben Urzustand stoßen wir bei primitiven Menschen und Völkern noch jetzt, und wenn man bei Gerichten mit Eid oder Meineid zu tun hat, so trifft man noch heute bei einer Anzahl einfacher Menschen diesen kindlichen Urzustand der Vermischung von Traum, Phantasie und Realität. Ich möchte aber annehmen, zur Zeit, als Homer sang, besaßen die Dinge, die er berichtete, noch einen hohen Grad von Glaubwürdigkeit, Odysseus saß wirklich bei der Kalypso auf der Insel, die Sirenen sangen wirklich, und, unter uns gesagt, wir wissen ja neuerdings, daß wirklich viel mehr Wahrheit, sogar historische, an diesen Mythen und Sagen ist, als man früher vermutete. Bei uns heute aber liegt es so: es wird nicht geglaubt, Realität, Phantasie und Wunschbegehren werden scharf und nüchtern auseinandergehalten. („Bau des epischen Werks“ 108)

Döblin includes such fantastical episodes in Wallenstein. The events may not be “natural” or consistent with Döblin’s materialist worldview, but they do not have to be. Again, if we allow for Döblin’s later writings to shed light on his earlier novels, we can trace the evidence of his fascination with subjectivity and the role of the individual consciousness in interpreting reality. The fantastic, “supernatural” scenes are true to the world of the seventeenth century—a people who not only had a strong religious context, but whose lives were largely determined by the uncertainties and terrors of war. They saw their society through a supernatural lens, and Döblin is faithful to their interpretation, their subjective view. In one episode in the novel, Döblin
describes the villages around Prague as being attacked by devils. Two demons had recently broken their chains in Hell, escaped, and came wandering through a village as well-dressed noblemen. They are able to transform themselves into the appearance of men as well as into the shape of ravens. The demons begin to wreak havoc in the village. They turn into ravens and attack a young girl, only to return to their human forms and pretend that they are physicians capable of treating the girl’s wound. As soon as one of them is alone with the girl, he resumes his raven form and again begins to hack, rip, and stab at the girl (Wallenstein 342-347). The question of whether or not demons actually came to the village, actually took on human form, and literally changed into birds is a moot point. Prague had been crushed by imperial troops; the surrounding land area was subjected to raiding soldiers and the waste of war—rotting carcasses fed upon by scavenger birds. The villagers were left to starve in many cases. Out of such circumstances, it is not surprising that that these people from the seventeenth century could have believed such stories of demons attacking a village. In many ways, one might begin to ask, as Döblin did, whether or not more “truth” is not contained in such “supernatural” tales. Ascribing every event to a naturalistic cause lacks something human. A causal explanation may account for part of the phenomena, but it also denies the human, experiential element, the view of the events as filtered through the subjective human consciousness. It is this experiential element which Döblin was anxious to emphasize later in his life, and seeds of those elements are certain found here.

The poetic interpretation of events, a mystical or superstitious interpretation of events is something inherently human. Döblin believed that because this poetic quality in human nature existed, he could therefore access or “tap in” to the real emotions, the real mindset of people from the past:
So weit Menschliches reicht, menschliches Denken, Fühlen, gesellschaftliches Leben, so weit ist Echtheit in der Dichtung, als wahrer Zugang, möglich. Denn wir sind aus keinem andern Holz als jene drüben in den Gräbern, und die Zustände und Einrichtungen, unter denen wir leben, machen es möglich, daß uns, zeitweise, auch die scheinbar ganz abweichenden drüben beherbergen. („Der historische Roman und Wir“ 183)

Döblin’s interest in accessing the mindset of people in history not only served his “realist” or “objectivist” ends in terms of style, but it also lead to a deeper exploration of a kind of “collective mind” of society. Döblin presented his readers with raw information, disconnected from any sense of plot or literary convention, but he simultaneously acknowledged that people tend to organize information in peculiar ways. Sometimes they create stories of birds or demons attacking them during a time of war. It is people who make sense of the physical world around them. It is the minds of people, readers, who take the information they are given and categorize it or put it into some sort of framework. Even though it would be several years later that Döblin would actually begin to articulate the importance of the mind of the individual, as he did in *Unser Dasein* (1933), his writing style clearly has implications for the place of consciousness and an examination of epistemology. Döblin’s fractured, disjointed style acts as a kind of probing or testing of the reader’s consciousness, of the reader’s mental organizing and creative abilities. The disjointed, near-sighted view of objects, people, and events in the text of *Wallenstein* was all part of Döblin’s effort to “break-through” the world of appearances and probe the underlying realities which served as the motivating forces for the occurrences in nature and society. This objective portrayal of the puzzle pieces of life provoked not only the imagination of the reader to supply the connection points between material entities or characters, but Döblin also allowed the reader to see his own imagination at work, filling in the cognitive glue between characters and events as the artistic interpreter of the world.
The artist looks for meaning in the in-between connection points of the natural, historical, social world, and the reader is to look for the connection points—even to create the connection points—in the artist’s novel as he reads. The individual perceives the world through his unique experience and because of the filtering of his own consciousness, the individual person is a kind of creator of the world around him. In the second book of his *Unser Dasein*, Döblin describes (presumably) his own existential position. Thomas Keil summarizes: “Vor allem aber ist es eine Absage an jeglichen ‘Anstoßer’, es gibt keinen, der der Sonne befiehlt, aufzugehen—nur der Tod des Ichs kann das. „Ruf nicht die Sonne. […] Ich bewege die Sonne, um die alles kreist.” (91).” This is the paradoxical principle which seems to govern Döblin’s aesthetic. Simultaneously man creates the world around him and yet is also created by the natural world. Döblin’s novels, therefore, are a constant reminder of this principle. They are reminders that the reader must be active in finding the connection points, or imagining the connection points between events, images, scenes, and characters. The reader and the artist must not merely be passive observers, but rather participants in constructing an understanding of history and nature, of society and reality.
III. Historical Context of Wallenstein and Döblin’s Philosophical Response

As is mentioned in the previous chapter, part of the motivation for a style which encouraged the very awake and active consciousness of the reader was Döblin’s response to the circumstances surrounding World War I as well as to modern technological developments. The historical backdrop helps to establish the perspective of the changing tides in early twentieth-century aesthetics and philosophy. Döblin’s unique form of epic literature acts as an alternative form for understanding history. In contrast to the traditional Hegelian or Christian views of time in which a linear trajectory of mankind’s destiny is determined by Reason or Providence, Wallenstein offers a view of history which does not have a predetermined end or goal. The very idea of progress and evolution appears, in his novel, to be completely obliterated. Rejecting a larger meta-narrative of history, Döblin sought historical unity and meaning in the natural, material world and in a kind existential valuation of the present time and place.

The traditional views of history which Döblin rejected were teleological in nature. Two of the main forms of teleological history which Döblin resisted are found in Christian theology and in Hegelian philosophy. The British philosopher R.G. Collingwood wrote concerning the traditional Christian view of history:

[…] the historical process is the working out not of man’s purposes but of God’s; God’s purpose being a purpose for man, a purpose to be embodied in human life and through the activity of human wills, God’s part being limited to predetermining the end and to determining from time to time the objects which human beings desire. […] History, as the will of God, orders itself, and does not depend for its orderliness on the human agent’s will to order it. […] Hence the total course of historical events is a criterion which serves to judge the individuals taking part in it. The duty of the individual is to become a willing instrument for furthering its objective purposes.

The great task of medieval historiography was the task of discovering and expounding this objective or divine plan. (The Idea of History 48,53)
The Hegelian view of history is similar, though rather than the workings of God through time, human reason becomes the driving force and the main figure of the world’s narrative. Whereas Christian history has a promised end of history—God’s shaping all events to his own glory and mankind’s benefit, culminating in some aspect of the world’s redemption and the establishment of the heavenly kingdom—Hegel did not claim to know the future (Collingwood 48, 114). He did not promise a utopian dream. For Hegel, history culminated in the present moment. Attempts to know the future had to remain speculative. The past, not the future, was the historian’s territory. That being said, Hegel did understand history in terms of a progressive line of events. History was the story of freedom and the development of human consciousness, which “will exhibit a progress from primitive times to the civilization of to-day” (114). This development of reason is not repetitive, and “since all history is the history of thought and exhibits the self-development of reason, the historical process is at bottom a logical process. Historical transitions are, so to speak, logical transitions set out on a time-scale” (117). Even if Hegel did not provide any sure promise of a utopian dream or heaven on earth, his philosophy of history gave the assurance that the trajectory of the human race through time would ultimately be a rational, necessary development towards freedom. There was a goal and, similar to the medieval Christian, the Hegelian historian traces the pattern of the past to understand why the present day is a necessary result of what had gone before. Whatever the events of history, both worldviews could in the most general sense be considered optimistic.

According to Döblin in his essay „Der Geist des naturalistischen Zeitalters“ (1924), modern society required a new philosophy for life as well as a new view of history. Optimistic hopes of the future or rational explanations for the necessity of present circumstances could no longer be justified. The old medieval view of God’s working through time or the promise of
human reason making ever greater strides was not sufficient for contemporary culture. Döblin suggests, perhaps not surprisingly in light of the Great War, that traditional views of history which centered around theology or a particular nation or culture could even be dangerous.


Döblin’s said that it was the mindset of the scientist who set aside the metaphysical questions of the past and the preserving of old traditions and instead focused on the technological developments of the present that would define the new age (68). This new preoccupation with the questions of “how” instead of “why” applied to history as well.

Many critics have commented on Döblin’s unique application of the principle of emphasizing the processes rather than purpose of history. Unlike a Hegelian or Christian understanding of the course of the world, Wallenstein shows a series of historical events without ultimate destiny or goal. Günter Grass wrote concerning his “Lehrer Döblin,”: “Wie der
Ulenspiegel ist der Wallenstein kein historischer Roman. Döblin sieht Geschichte als absurden Prozeß. Ihm will kein Hegelscher Weltgeist über die Schlachtfelder reiten” (237). Harro Müller likewise comments on the lack of closure in Wallenstein and the absence of any sense of destiny or of an ultimate end to history:


The question arises as to why Döblin felt the need to propose a new view of history. The answer of course lies in the circumstances surrounding World War I. Given the thoroughly religious history of the German people and the philosophical weight of a thinker such as Hegel, Wilhelmine culture prior to the Great War was nonetheless brooding with a sense of discontentment, a feeling that the old theological and philosophical clothing was becoming a bit too snug and worn for the thriving, growing German culture. They sensed the need for change and progress. They desired to become modern. Steven Ozment describes German culture prior to the war as:

one of iconoclasts who became icons: Nietzsche in philosophy, Sigmund Freud in psychology, Albert Einstein in science, Richard Wagner in music, Mann in literature, and Max Weber in sociology. A grand patron of the arts and a grander meddler in them, William II, the Hohenzollern emperor, possessed none of the talent of such men, although he thrust himself upon the political world as one who was larger than life. […] Emperor William provoked international conflict by projecting an expansive Germany. Determined to see Germany become a world power, he plunged the empire into Europe and the developing colonial world. (233-234)

The combination of confidence in being a leading international cultural power, and the sense of insecurity or discontentment with a political system that seemed so medieval became a
dangerous catalyst for change (230). Everyone seemed ready to move forward, confident that the future promised something better. It is doubtful that either Christian theology or Hegelian philosophy alone would have given rise to such an optimistic and experimental plunge into the new age to come. Neither belief system denies the potential for the future to be difficult, even traumatic. Nevertheless, the philosophical security which these two views of history provided for a general sense of beneficial progress, created the mental leisure to tolerate new and daring ideas, including popular combinations of the natural sciences and the philosophy of history. For example, Darwin’s theories of biological evolution were far from innovative when he published *Origin of the Species* in 1859, but his implication that natural selection and the development of species could be applied to historical change and progress was revolutionary (Collingwood, *Idea* 129). Wilhelmine Germany was no less susceptible than any other European nation to such attractive ideas of a scientific form of cultural and historical progress, and they were ready to make an evolutionary leap into the future. The nation was eager for a change, and given society’s various, and optimistic, assumptions of history, nationalistic expansion and the hope for a spiritual revival through the “adventure” of war was not to be ruled out.

Niall Ferguson, in his book surveying World War I, quotes Friedrich Meinecke reflecting on the early days of the war: “To all those who experienced it, the exaltation [Erhebung] of the August days of 1914 belongs among the most unforgettable memories of the highest sort...All the divisions within German people...melted away suddenly in the face of common danger…” (Ferguson 175). Döblin joined in the enthusiasm for the war as well and volunteered for service as a military physician in Saargemünd (Bernd 48). There was not only a widespread, popular enthusiasm for war, but the intellectual community welcomed it as well. Marion Wolf writes, “No doubt the German artists of 1913 were anticipating the war, though—contrary to their
political leaders—less from nationalistic aspirations than as a ‘horrible release,’ an opportunity of purification, for their stagnant society. The young dramatist Carl Zuckmayer, for instance, considered the looming conflict ‘the innermost liberation of the entire nation from outdated conventions’” (Wolf 226). Thomas Mann’s *Gedanken im Kriege* (1914) also reflects this strong enthusiasm for a unifying cause for the people (Bernd 47). Ernst Jünger likewise gained much of his fame as a literary writer in describing the experience of the First World War. He was able to capture the optimism during 1914 as well as the crushing despair as the war came to a close. He wrote of the high, nationalistic spirits at the beginning of the war: “Aufgewachsen im Geiste einer materialistischen Zeit, wob in uns allen die Sehnsucht nach Ungewöhnlichen, nach dem großen Erleben. Da hatte uns der Krieg gepackt wie ein Rausch. In einem Regen von Blumen waren wir hinausgezogen in trunkener Morituri-Stimmung. Der Krieg mußte es uns ja bringen, das Große, Starke, Feierliche“ (Jünger). Whether for political, historical, artistic or spiritual reasons, the enthusiasm for the war had its roots in a linear view of history. The hope was that the war would bring about a new age, would further German influence, or would bring spiritual and cultural refreshment. World War I was to be a kind of apocalypse after which a new Kingdom of Heaven on Earth would be revealed.

For a time Döblin held to his initial hopes and commitments to the cause of the war, but as reports began to reach him concerning the deaths of his friends, his enthusiasm, along with everyone else’s, wavered and a slow realization of the horrors and banality of the war began to dawn on him (Bernhardt 50). The European conflict of course rushed to its cataclysmic end at Versailles in June of 1919 with all of Germany’s surviving artists, intellectuals, politicians, soldiers and citizens trailing along, frantically attempting to absorb, explain, and justify this catastrophe of unimagined, global proportions.
From the time Kaiser Wilhelm II fled Germany in October of 1918, realizing that the war was lost and his government was doomed, the political structure of the nation mutated in ways which find clear parallels to the circumstances described in Wallenstein regarding the Thirty Years’ War. The Germans had been used to the imperial, militaristic order of Wilhelm II, but in light of the failure of the war, the people became desperate for change and enthusiastically welcomed the new Republic under the leadership of Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert. What the people did not want—or expect—was that Ebert’s new government would be the one to sign the armistice to stop the war and, eventually, to submit the German nation to harsh reparations of the Versailles Treaty. The signing of the armistice appeared, publically, as if the new government had also failed, and with it, the promise of modern democracy. What was not readily apparent was that the military had allowed Ebert’s new Republic to surface in order that it, and not the military powerhouse which had been leading the nation up to that point, should take the blame and responsibility for the unconditional surrender (Leydecker 2).

The shocked nation had little idea of what a new government should look like. There were severe conflicts between Ebert’s party, the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) and the independent socialists, the USPD (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands). While Ebert desired a more conservative approach to the government, choosing to reform the militaristic structure already in place rather than completely doing away with it, the USPD, and the even more radical Spartakusbund, began making attempts to overthrow the new Republic by force in order to institute a purer socialist vision of the state. The result was that the Freikorps—the remnants of the German military force—had to be re instituted to prevent total revolution. The public, ironically, welcomed back the militaristic order which it had formerly
been so eager to cast off, feeling very much as if it would have better all along to remain dutifully subject to a strong, central authority (Leydecker 3).

The refreshed military presence restored political order but it also created a strange, ingrown reaction to the war after the Treaty of Versailles. The economy was crumbling, and any hopes of developing a stable, democratic political system seemed all but crushed. The reparations imposed by the Treaty caused a frightening increase in inflation, making the German mark practically worthless by 1923. Politically, the nation became ever more divided between the radical socialists (USPD) on the left and the extremely conservative nationalists and the monarchists on the right, leaving little middle ground for debate and compromise. The harshness of the Versailles Treaty and the miserable circumstances at home made tenable even the strangest of explanations for the tragic events. It even began to seem that more was at work than simply the loss of a war. It became easy for military leaders in Germany to misconstrue the Treaty, not as the result of the German army’s defeat, but as some sort of international conspiracy against the Germans by Jews and socialists (Leydecker 4-5).

It was in this environment that Döblin began to write Wallenstein. In light of such hardships as the crisis of hyper-inflation and the political battles between the left and right, it is little wonder that Döblin wrote a novel that was “uncompromising in [its] depiction of the materiality of human existence and of the capacity of human beings, individually and collectively, for extreme forms of behavior” (Midgley 211). The figure of Wallenstein in the novel is as much a brutal, capitalistic, industrial profiteer as he is the respected head of the emperor’s armies. Wallenstein, with financial aid from Jewish allies, mints his own money in order to pay for the soldiers he needs to lead his campaigns, causing an economic disaster of inflation. The political situation of the Thirty Years’ War likewise seems to mirror that of
Wilhelm II and the divided parties during and after World War I. Even though the character of Ferdinand II in the novel shows little motivation to lead his empire, and Wilhelm II demonstrated too much ambition to lead his, the result of the two political periods was a similar kind of stasis. Neither political government allowed for Germany to move forward as a modern democracy. Both the political environment of the seventeenth century and that of the twentieth appeared stuck in the ditch of medieval German feudalism.

Döblin’s own understanding of his novel and the events of the Thirty Years’ War seems to have wavered and changed from the time he began writing Wallenstein at the end of 1916 to even well after its publication. The novel was certainly understood by critics as an anti-war piece at the time of its publication, and Döblin meant it as such (Koepke 104). According to Matthias Prangel, “Das Werk ist einerseits eine historisch verfremdete, gleichnishaft Darstellung des Ersten Weltkriegs und des in Döblins Korrespondenz aus dieser Zeit immer wieder angedeuteten chaotischen Grundgefühls, dass es im Krieg offenbar auf nichts ankomme und alle normalen Wertordnungen liquidiert seien“ (37). Be that as it may, Döblin also saw the person of Wallenstein as the key for breaking Germany out of the old feudal order and into the modern age of absolutist governments (38). This does not necessarily mean that Döblin saw the figure of Wallenstein as morally good, only that he could have been instrumental in ushering Germany into the time of the “naturalistisches Zeitalter.” After the novel’s publication Döblin first insisted that Wallenstein had to do primarily with the “progressive Wallensteinfigur” but then asserted a year later that the epic was really about the person of Ferdinand (Prangel 38). The apparent confusion about his own work demonstrates that it was true for Döblin what has already been said earlier about so many of the artists and intellectuals of the Weimar period: they were people anxious to be engaged politically and socially and yet somehow found it preferable to remain
critics with an anarchistic bent rather than leaders with clear steps toward the rebuilding of the
cultural and political infrastructure. Despite his joining of both the USPD and the SPD during the
years between 1919 to 1927, Döblin remained “unpolitisch” on the whole:

Er war zwar schon fest von der Notwendigkeit einer Ablösung der deutschen Monarchie
überzeugt, setzte aber in dem für jene Zeit typischen antizivilisatorischen Affekt die
Vorstellung einer vermeintlich echten Demokratie, nämlich „einer sich wandelnden
Menschlichkeit in die Verfassung hinein,“ gegen die vermeintlich leer demokratische
Verfassungsform der auch nun noch angefeindeten „Anglofranken“: „Wir brauchen keine
englische Staatsform und können doch demokratischer sein als irgendein Land.“
(Prangel 38)

What is clear from Döblin’s biographical activities as well as from the novel itself, is
that he was more interested in the provocation of his readers and in questioning the deference
given to traditions and authoritarian ideas of the past. Indeed, because of the very self-
questioning structure of the novel, the sentences and word choices—sentences and words which
cause the reader to pay close attention and never allow himself to be swept into a general flow of
the overall narrative—the effect of a resistance is created to any kind of faith in a linear structure
of a story, any kind of meta-narrative or authoritative approach for history and, therefore,
resistance to any prescriptive form for life and society.

In his essay, “Der Geist des naturalistischen Zeitalters,” (1924) Döblin explains how
modern civilization is no longer preoccupied with metaphysical questions of the ultimate
significance of human existence. Rather, science and technology have introduced a spirit of
practicality, of exploring processes and means instead of ultimate goals and ends. The world has
become faster with technological advancement and villagers of the traditional countryside are all
slowly becoming egalitarian city dwellers. In this new world, “Man hat die Größe und
Wichtigkeit der alten Probleme respektvoll anerkannt und sich dann mit der Herstellung von
Zahnpasta beschäftigt“ (68). The new period was one of variety, where many intertwining,
independent streams of cultural influence contributed to the building of the Großstadt (80). Neither God nor theology was at the center of the new society. Instead, the modern, cosmopolitan citizen attempted to understand how he could adapt to and become part of a collective existence, which was the new society:

Man erlebt eine ursprüngliche, über Verträge hinausgehende Verbundenheit. Schon von da kann sich manches ableiten. —Man wird immer mehr und durchaus neu in die Natur eindringen, deren Zeit erst anbricht. Und diese Periode, die keinen jenseitigen regierenden Gott kennt, wird sehen, daß das Wesen, das diese Welt ist und sich in ihr äußert, in viel stärkerem Maße, als man früher glaubte, als man noch humanistisch war, grandios gesellschaftlich und freundschaftlich ist. Diese Periode wird wohl beachten, was bis jetzt noch selten gesehen wird, das Faktum: die Welt baut ein Gesellschaftswesen. (83)

Döblin’s belief in the need for freedom to allow the new the society to emerge made him suspicious of those aggressively seeking to assert political power. Certainly one of the main concerns for the characters in Wallenstein is that Wallenstein himself is becoming too powerful—both economically and politically. Towards the end of the novel, Baron Breuner and Abt Anton discuss the crisis of Wallenstein’s advantages against the empire:


Ultimately of course, several of the princes decide that drastic action must be taken in order to prevent Wallenstein from seizing the Holy Roman crown and thus destroying the balance between the Kaiser and the Kurfürsten, the elected princes.

Günter Grass has been intrigued with Döblin’s concern with Wallenstein’s economic power and his ability to surround himself with influential people in order to be able to shape the
events of the war for personally beneficial outcomes. The constellation of factors which contributed to the birth of Wallenstein as a potential dictator is not unfamiliar in history. Grass argues that Döblin was aware that a corrupt government or the appearance of a corrupt dictator may lie more in a faulty system or a wider constellation of influences than merely in a single institution or in a single person.

Grass examines Wallenstein’s process of exploitation and his violent means of obtaining the wealth he needed to launch his military campaigns. Wallenstein created his own constellation of people with financial power in order to buy significant political influence. As Grass observes, the parallels between Wallenstein and the circumstances of the Second World War and Hitler’s own ascension to his dictatorship are striking:


Döblin was certainly aware of the egoistical and individualistic tendencies which existed in his own society, and he recognized the tendency to place faith in a “Superman“ for the benefit of the larger society, and he worked to resist those trends (Wichert, Döblins historisches Denken 126-127). Even if Döblin tended to see Wallenstein in a somewhat positive light early on, his
style incorporated elements emphasizing individual things, emphasizing the particles of society rather than unified wholes or particular, heroic individuals. In showing life as disparate entities, as fragmented yet interdependent pieces, Döblin came to believe that he was encouraging responsibility on behalf of individuals. He sought to encourage people to find their own sense of collective interconnectivity as he portrayed nature and society as parts of a larger body but never with hierarchical or categorical prescriptions for how exactly that larger body was to fit together. He certainly never presented a model or an ideal for that larger social organism. He ultimately interpreted his own writing formula as a prod for his readers, which encouraged them to play an active role in their community while simultaneously discouraging imperialistic aims (Unser Dasein 424-25).

A further set of ideas which contributed to the restraint of an individualistic focus in the culture or egoistical political ambitions was Döblin’s proposition that human existence was defined primarily by the character of Verwesung und Werden—the process of decay and of becoming. When an organism breaks down, the natural materials of which it consists eventually contribute to the nourishment or growth of another organism—the entity decays and becomes something different for the benefit of other entities. In addition, according to Döblin’s Naturphilosophie, humankind contained, to some degree, all other types of existence in itself. This meant humanity was subject to the same natural laws as all other material objects and life forms. Döblin saw the differences between plant life, animal life, and humans as differences of degree rather than of fundamental essence: “Es sind Unterschiede, aber sie machen keinen wesentlichen Schnitt zwischen Tier, Mensch und Pflanze” (UD106). The principles of decay and change were woven into the fabric of all nature and they bound it together, creating a sense of
solidarity between humankind and its environment. Döblin understood all of nature as interdependent. Thomas Keil puts Döblin’s ideas into perspective in this way:


Rather than an understanding of history which encouraged a progressive view of humanity, improving upon the mistakes of the past in order to achieve the possibility of creating a perfect society or an improved version of the human species, Döblin’s assessment of the human experience is much more cautious. Harro Müller explains how Döblin’s aesthetic style was reflective of a complete revolt against any kind of idea of a “Bildungsprozeß” which could be drawn from history, that any kind of a history derived from causality or teleology was abandoned. History was to be understood primarily from the perspective of the organic material of nature and the laws which governed them (Müller 406-7). Müller notes:

Dazu enthält der Wallenstein-Roman zuviel von dem, was Adorno in der Philosophischen Terminologie ‘Aroma des Materialismus’ genannt hat: ‘Das Gemeinsame an allem Materialismus ist..., das am Tod Verdrängte in seiner ganzen Schwere in das Bewußtsein aufzunehmen. Also zum Materialismus gehören wesentlich dazu Erfahrungen von der Leiche, von der Verwesung, von dem Tierähnlichen. (Müller 412)

Again, the meaning of life seems to exist, for Döblin, in the tension which comes from being both apart and separate from the natural world. As long as progress is defined as a rising

above this rule, as Nietzsche seemed to think it was, only a primitive and incomplete, unfruitful existence could follow. Nietzsche’s portrayal of mankind as essentially individualistic, animal or beast-like meant, to Döblin, that mankind’s connection to the earth, to plant life, to all other forms of existence on which it was dependent, would be forgotten (Wichart 126). Historical progress had to be defined differently than merely rising above nature or the development of the human ego to the exclusion of all else. Progress could not mean mankind’s triumph over and independence from nature and natural processes, which included death. Döblin’s view of life and history is not optimistic in terms of future achievements or the hope of an afterlife: “Es ist hier keineswegs die Rede davon, daß also alles zum Tode hinstrebt—wie gelegentlich behauptet” (Keil 41). Death is that which brings a halt to life, and yet it is that which continually reminds us of the material nature of our existence. It reminds us of the cycles of nature—that the death of one organism ultimately contributes to the increase, biologically, of raw material, which other organisms use for development and growth. Decay, *Verwesung*, is the means by which the organic material of a dead organism is redistributed, broken down into pieces and parts for other organisms to use. This interdependent relationship to the rest of the world was, for Döblin, fundamental for the formation of human identity.

In this light, a study of history takes on a much more existential perspective—a view of the past through the lens of the existential present. If human existence is essentially determined through natural laws, which have presumably remained constant, the study of human history could become something similar to a kind of medical history. In Döblin’s view, as already stated above, human nature is fundamentally the same from generation to generation. History is not, from this perspective, a tracing of mankind’s evolution or progression. This does not mean that
change cannot be observed, but change does not imply a move forward, only a recombination of the organic material already there. Thomas Keil observes:


The idea which inspires this particular approach to history is this principle of Verwesung und Werden. The violent images of Wallenstein work to illustrate these ideas of decay, change, and conversion or “becoming” as controlling principles of existence. In doing so Wallenstein serves as an effective tool for creating alternative views of history and life in contrast to the meta-narrative perspectives infusing the culture surrounding World War I. Without a central authority figure or source, politically, religiously, or philosophically, to impart meaning from on high, Döblin sought to re-imagine history and the world in a way which gave rise to human freedom and responsibility while simultaneously providing philosophical safeguards against the ideological dangers of despotism and the abuse of individualistic aims.

The similarities of Döblin’s Naturphilosophie and Marxist materialism have been noted by critics, and for good reason. Just as Döblin was interested in seeing the raw “facts” of the world apart from any philosophical tinge, so Marx believed that the structure of history was based on natural “facts.” Unlike Hegel, Marx understood the structure of history as arising out
mankind’s material needs rather than formed by the creative demands of logic and the universal mind (Collingwood 124). History was, for Marx, the story of economic supply and demand:

[…] for Marx himself nature was more than the environment of history, it was the source from which its pattern was derived. It was no use, he thought, to draw patterns for history out of logic, like the famous Hegelian pattern for the three stages of freedom: “For the Oriental world, one is free; for the Greco-Roman world, some are free; for the modern world, all are free.” It was better to draw patterns out of the world of nature as Marx did with his no less famous one of “primitive communism, capitalism, socialism’, where the meaning of the terms is professedly derived not from “ideas” but from natural facts. (124-125)

Despite similarities between Döblin’s philosophy and Marx’s, there are differences, and it must be remembered that Döblin was hardly a dedicated Marxist. He remained apolitical and indecisive when it came to prescriptive solutions for society; however, by the time he published *Berge, Meere und Giganten* (1924), his political stance had at least solidified into that of an anti-Marxist (Koepke 118). This fact does not diminish his materialist concerns or his emphasis on the strong, even dominating influences of the natural world upon society, but whereas Marx insisted on a modified version of Hegel’s historical dialectic and a spiral-shaped trajectory of progress towards the goal of socialism, Döblin contented himself with an alternative view of history which is neither teleological nor purely cyclical (Collingwood 114, 125). Döblin believed in the “Erbschaft” of the past, a knowledge of which aids the understanding of contemporary events, but he had no expectations of evolutionary progress in the Darwinian sense. He had no expectation that mankind would develop beyond the material and spiritual existence with which nature had endowed it. Döblin, as is indicated in the quotes above, saw potential for variety, change, and the recombination of material entities to form something different. In this sense one could see history as a linear, chronological progression of perhaps an infinite variety of forms that people and society could take, but there is no reason for this line of events to be considered teleological. There is no reason to imply, in Döblin’s philosophy, that
one form of society is inherently better than the others or that it had developed from and superseded the rest.

Such a purely naturalist or materialist view of history would appear to negate any ethical or moral claims upon society, and yet Döblin consistently demonstrates a concern for the engagement with and improvement of society, a concern which would seem to presuppose that certain periods of history, certain forms of human government, certain ideas and ideals for human interaction are inherently more desirable, better, or more progressive than others. The violent images in Wallenstein appear to be the result of the inherent philosophical conflict in Döblin’s mind. The grotesque scenes and the examples of montage confusion throughout the novel press the question as to how meaning and significance can be salvaged from individual objects, places, people, and things apart from a teleological view of history. How can individual entities have meaning without deriving it from an external source or having a meaningful quality somehow imposed on them? Döblin attempted to answer these questions through the exploration of the natural principle of decay and change, Verwesung and Werden, shown in the violent images of Wallenstein. In this naturalistic paradigm he sought to find meaning for life while simultaneously avoiding prescriptive or authoritarian ideologies. Döblin ultimately desired to emphasize the interdependent nature of the world and the principle of mankind as “Stück und Gegenstück” as the underlying framework for life and history. Even though it would not be until the late 1920s and early 1930s before he would systematize and articulate these theories, the early seeds of his ideas are present in the violent images of Wallenstein as they represent the processes of Verwesung and Werden.
IV. Images of Verwesung

Though Döblin had his own motivations for the portrayal of death and decay in his novel and his placement of the natural cycles of life and death, of growth and decay as a central theme, he was not alone in his use of these images and metaphors. Many authors and artists began focusing on the elements of destruction and death following the Great War. Roger Woods in his essay “Ernst Jünger, the New Nationalists, and the Memory of the First World War” provides a helpful overview, not only of Jünger’s writings concerning World War I, but of that entire generation of veterans which fought in such a futile cause. Woods argues that Jünger, and many other of his fellow writers, had a psychological need to somehow reinterpret the catastrophic defeat as a victory (134). Meaning had to be found in some other form than military success. One way of doing this was to portray the war as a natural event as well as something governed by chance and inevitability. From this perspective, questions of responsibility for the war were ignored or deflected. If mass killing on the battlefield could be portrayed as more a part of the natural processes of decay than as an indication of moral failing or of a tragic mistake, then it seemed to make the war psychologically more bearable. The focus of the discussion of the war was shifted onto the virtues of the soldier—his courage and bravery—rather than dwelling on the losses of the nation. These themes which emphasized “how” a soldier fought, and not “why,” became the subject of much of the post-war literature (134).

Included in this focus on the spiritual, existential qualities of a good soldier was the search for a larger, collective good which resulted from the conflict. Jünger argued that one had to have a belief in something redemptive about the war. Perhaps the war had resulted in tragic loss as far as many individuals were concerned, but surely the nation as a whole had somehow benefited. Such a desperate view was, seemingly, the only alternative to the concession of the
war’s total futility—a view which, according to Jünger, would have denied God and every shred of humanity (135). Still, no matter how well a soldier may have fought and no matter what collective spiritual awakenings may have occurred as a result of the war, the element of chance and the cold, disinterested hand of nature were no less horrific. Jünger, in one of his essays, used the image of soldiers as ants being crushed underfoot by a giant to describe the chaos of the war. This description was inspired by Alfred Kubin’s 1914 picture, Der Krieg. The giant in Kubin’s portrayal is a monster with elephant-like feet, and he is carrying a weapon which appears to be part club and part blade. Scurrying men, like ants, flee before the giant, vainly attempting to avoid being crushed (131). This was the nature of things. There was no morality attached to the circumstances; there was no purpose involved. The entertainment of the notion that some higher purpose was at work in the war proved almost psychologically impossible. Döblin’s graphically disturbing images from the seventeenth century were, therefore, not wholly new. They belonged rather to a larger trend of art and literature which sought to somehow understand, and even justify, the Great War.

Examples of decay abound in Wallenstein—examples of people or animals who have died or are in the process of dying and, almost literally, falling apart. Döblin explores the various kinds of decay as it relates to individuals as well as collective bodies. The two most prominent figures of the book, Wallenstein and Ferdinand, are examples or representatives for the two kinds of decay possible for an individual: mental and physical breakdown. These two men are not only representatives of humanity but of a political body as well—the Holy Roman Empire. This political union is under attack from external forces but it is also suffering from internal strife, which threatens its own kind of political or social decomposition, and these figures seem powerless in the face of the inevitability of their own personal and political demise. Both men
recognize the powers of *Verwesung* at work but are unable to fight against it: “Beide fanden in der gräßlichen Deutlichkeit des Tages, daß der Tod den anderen an Auge, Nase, Mund, ja an den Händen gezeichnet habe. Beide wüßten es nur von dem andern” (559). Ultimately, it is the realization of breakdown which causes the various people in the text to respond or react in some fashion. Döblin’s novel offers the reader a chance to observe the process of how various members of society or different entities fall apart and how they choose to react underneath the severe scrutiny of nature.

Wallenstein represents physical decay as he carries with him the ailments of gout:

In Znaim nahm der Herzog Privatlogis; die Bewohner von fünf Häusern mietete er aus. Doktor Stoperus sah mit Verwunderung, wie die Gichtknoten an Wallensteins Händen, den Ohrläppchen Zehen aufbrachen, der Herzog hellere Farben bekam, rastlos durch die Zimmer ging, in denen Raum rasch für besondere Zwecke eingerichtet waren, wie der Herzog nur abends keifte, auf den Kammerdiener los schlug, in der alten gehässigen Weise ihn selbst mit dem Tode bedrohte, weil er ihnverderben ließe. (547-8)

Wallenstein’s physical decay is exacerbated by his mirroring social and political undoing as the pressure increases from the other princes who are conspiring against him. He compares himself, to an infested apple or corpse, towards the end of the novel. He says he is worm eaten, a clear evidence of something rotten and dead:


Wallenstein’s reaction to his sense of personal decay is a violent sort of resistance, a last stand against his natural fate of death:

Da stand er, stand, in Schlesien, ein Gigant an Kraft, zahllose Kompagnien, Massen von Artillerie Munition, bezahlt aus den Steuern der gepreßten Stände, rückte sich nicht,
As Wallenstein’s health weakens, his military fury seems to increase, and he becomes an increasing threat of power within the empire. Ferdinand describes him as having transformed into a devil: “Friedland [Wallenstein] hätte das habsburgische Reich halten können. Nun ist er zunichte geworden, verschandelt, in einen gräßlichen Dämon verwandelt, vor dem wir zittern müssen” (555).

In a similar fashion, Ferdinand der Andere represents the process of mental decay. The continual stress of maintaining the empire and the affairs of the war lead Ferdinand to an increasingly distracted state of mind. He exhibits frequent patterns of avoidance. He becomes lazy and careless in his political dealings, confident that Wallenstein will deliver successful military victories whenever needed: “Und so leicht und beruhigend sprach der Kaiser, der sich wohlig schwer zurücklegte, daß Eggenberg den Eindruck hatte, die Sache ginge ihm nicht nah, ginge ihn nichts an” (517). Later in the novel, Ferdinand becomes almost frantic under the stress of being Kaiser, and he flatly refuses to engage in the political struggle to manage his empire any longer: “Was haben sie im Kopf, dass ich alles muß. Von mir bleibt nichts übrig,’ […] Er brüllte: ‘Dienen! Dienen! Ich - will -nicht!’ Dröhnd” (666).

By the end of the third book, Ferdinand appears to be on a clear path towards mental instability. He decides on impulse to rush down into his wine cellar and, with his servant dwarf, he takes his dagger and begins ripping open casks of wine as if he were fighting them in battle and then celebrating a victory. He then bids his dwarf companion to baptize him as Pope:

Menschenfresserisch knirschend zog er ihn auf; schaukelte ihn mit zauberischem Schalgenblick flüstern vor der Brust. Mit brünstigem Vergnügen riss Ferdinand, der Degen und Wehrgehenk in der linken Hand trug, das Türchen zum Keller auf in den
Dunst ließen sie sich herunter, schlügen ein Fass an, zechten, Ferdinand erbrach im Augenblick. Sie schrien triumphierend, bellten die Decke in der Dunkelheit an, drohten, kicherten, reizten die Fässer zum Kampfe. [...] Und als Ferdinand wieder würgte und nicht mehr trinken konnte, bat er den Narren, einen Eimer zu nehmen und Wein ihm auf den Kopf zu gießen, auf die Brust, immer mehr. „Ich bin ein Heide, Herr Papst. Taufe Er mich, Herr Papst.“ Und der betrunkene Zwerg zelebrierte über dem Kaiser der Taufe. (325)

As Neil H. Donahue writes, “By the end of Book III, the now sickly Ferdinand has slipped into a delirium of hedonistic surrender and gets ‘baptized’ a fool by his jester with a bucket of wine. From that moment on he drifts into retreat from his role as political leader […] He slips into a state of heedless indifference and delusional isolation” (85-86). Rather than making any final stand against his decaying faculties or those of his empire, Ferdinand succumbs to the pressure and seeks only to escape rather than resist. He begins to seek almost constant refuge in feasts and parties, in dreams, in hunting trips out into the forest (“tagelangen Ausflügen”), in religious counsel and in a strange uniting with nature and the “märchenhaft” creatures (goblins and dwarves) of the forest (690).

The social implications of decay and the natural breakdown of an entity into component parts is also captured in the novel. Ferdinand and Wallenstein are not the only political leaders suffering from various kinds of breakdown. The Protestant, Bohemian princes who rebelled against the control of the Holy Roman Empire are eventually defeated. Their bodies are cut up and hung upon the gates of Prague to serve as a lesson to other Protestant rebels. The horrific image of the corpses captures a more extreme level of death and decay, and it pictures not only the natural effects of death upon the human form but also symbolizes the fractured state of the empire:

Am Alstädter Brückentor von Prag ragten auf den Zinnen, aus den schwarzen viereckigen Fensterluken quer nach vorn in die blasende Luft elf Stangen und Spieße. Mit eisernen Klammern waren sie am Gemäuer befestigt. Auf den Stangen und Spießen saßen mit

From this picture we get the idea of something like a Futurist or Cubist painting—bodies represented as a collection of divided parts rather than as whole entities. Picasso had painted his *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in 1907 with its portrayal of the prostitutes as a collection of disjointed geometric shapes as one of the signature works of the Cubist movement. Georges Braque soon followed suite with his own blocked, fragmented versions of still-life paintings (Nash 163, 167). There is a good reason to see Döblin as a kind of literary equivalent to a Futurist or Cubist painter, something contemporary critics of Döblin often pointed out (Koepeke 7, 8). His style of writing is often fractured and fragmented, but so are his characters. These are no longer men hanging on the gate of Prague but rather a collection of dismembered body parts and rotting flesh.

Döblin certainly took advantage of the inspiration of his contemporary artistic surroundings, but it should not be forgotten that *Wallenstein* is a novel about the Thirty Years’ War, and Döblin immersed himself in historical texts prior to writing the epic. It is impossible to say how much research material he encountered as he was writing; we can only be certain that the project was massive, causing him to long for entire libraries for finding a sufficient number of sources in addition to what he could find at various museums throughout Germany (Kobel
Given the breadth of his exposure to seventeenth-century literature, it is probable that Döblin was familiar with the artistic trends of that time period as well.

The Thirty Years’ War was a time when violence figured prominently in paintings. Eckhard Kluth argues that much of the violence portrayed in art during the Thirty Years’ War had a religious shade of interpretation to it. It may not have been the case that the artist was a particularly devout Christian, but he operated in a culture that frequently equated suffering and violence to the trials and temptations which every good Christian, according to biblical teaching, must endure. Tragedies allowed religious believers to identify more closely with the sufferings of Christ, and to the degree they suffered, were like Christ. Suffering reminded the Christian of the seventeenth century of the highest virtues of humility and submission to the will of God (545). It is important to understand this mentality when approaching art from the Thirty Years’ War because, for most of the culture, war was not considered an inherent evil. It was, by and large, an accepted part of life. Martin Knauer warns contemporary art critics to consider this worldview, that people were often more concerned about the way one died than the premature occurrence of death, which was inevitable. Trials and suffering were reminders to prepare one’s soul for the afterlife or, if there was a reason for God to send his judgment in the form of war, to repent (509). Again, Döblin was not writing Wallenstein as a Christian concerned with the eternal condition of his readers’ souls, but he was writing with a similar aesthetic concern: he was interested how people died, not why. Similar to the seventeenth-century painters, he wrote with a desire to provoke questions as to the underlying nature of people and how they functioned, not why, taking for granted that death and destruction eventually come to all. One of the primary functions of the decay process for Döblin is the provocation to reflect, to actively think about how society and life work.
The fragmentation process described in the novel not only affects the individual politicians and princes but the entire empire as well. The larger decay of the political form of the empire is further expounded upon in the text as two princes, Eggenberg and Trautmannsdorf, discuss the fate of the Holy Roman Empire in the midst of the war. The image of a worm-eaten apple is used of Germany as it suffered the attacks from Sweden and France:

“Was kann uns noch geschehen,” fragte Trautmannsdorf, “wir sind in Deutschland ein wurmstichiger Apfel; Habsburg ist faul, der Schwede ist der Wurm und der Franzose ist der Wurm. Hilft nur schneiden.“ „Was bleibt von dem Apfel übrig.” “Es wird uns bald nichts übrigbleiben, mein lieber Freund Eggenberg, als der Schwedentrunk oder ein schmerzloser Schwertschlag durchs Genick von unserem alten Gönner Wallenstein.”

In this passage, the idea of decay is suggested as an apple infested with worms. This is another part of the decay process: that the decaying object becomes a desirable source for food and nourishment to other parties, in this case, worms. In Döblin’s larger scheme of Naturphilosophie, nothing ever simply decays and fades away, rather the elements of the dead or decaying object ultimate contribute to some other entity. The decay process, in addition to provoking the question as to the functionality of the world, reveals the inherent interdependent quality of all of nature.

Just as the political structure suffers from the powers of decay, so do the peasants. There are several passages where the villagers are described as the victims of raiding soldiers, as tortured and killed, and their physical bodies are literally collapsing into pieces. In the execution of Michael Mauerberger, the ring-leader of a mass of angry peasants, he is likewise described as being ripped into fragments, not unlike a Cubist image, just as the Bohemian princes were:

“Versprengte von Cronbergs Reiterei suchten Rache den Rädelsführer faßten sie, er wurde ihnen vom Oberst Billehe entrissen, und da er gestand, am Rosenheimer Famoschreiben beteiligt zu sein, sogleich enthauptet, gevierteilt. Die zerhackten Stücke stellte man aus, auch gegen die
oberösterreichische Grenze, wo das Branden eben begann“ (722). A further example of the suffering of the peasants portrays the pitiful condition of the gypsies as they are driven from their homes. In Bohemia, after the emperor’s troops have invaded and Catholicism is being re-established, one of the changes effected in the exportation of the Croatians and Gypsies. As the soldiers come through the country side, the air of death and decay goes before them, and the people left in their wake are those who, though perhaps still alive, have been ripped apart:


One of the most horrific episodes in the novel is the detailed description of the burning at the stake of a Jewish couple. The husband had been arrested for theft and was to be sentenced to death. In an apparent act of love and compassion, the wife offers herself in her husband’s place. The result is that they are both executed. Before they are killed, the husband is burned and tortured with hot irons and then has strips of flesh cut out of him by the executioner (438). Through the torturing process and the subjection to the flames, the condemned couple appears progressively less and less human:

Da langte ein kaum sichtbarer, blau in Weiß vorschwebender Flammenarm von hinten nach ihm. Er wirbelte herum, torkelte zur Erde, kletterte in die Höhe, seine Lumpen flammten, er nahm den Kampf auf; war fast nackt. Die letzten Lumpen wollte er sich vom Bauch, von den Lenden reißen, sie saßen fest, schwarz verbacken, verklebt mit der Haut; er scheuerte mit den Ellenbogen dagegen. Auf seinem Kopf standen keine Haare mehr, runde Kohlehallen, die abrollten, die er sich über das Gesicht schmierte, über die großen platzenenden Blasen. [...] Und wenn der Schleier fiel, frohlockte das Volk, daß es ihn sah, das wilde tanzende Geschöpf, das hüpfende, das schwarz und rot immer ähnlicher dem Satan wurde. (441)
Döblin prolongs the entire torture scene like a cinematic camera which will not pull away; he will not let his audience escape the last moments of the husband and the wife as the flames eventually consume their bodies, contorts them, and leaves them only heaps of burned flesh and bone. The kind of breakdown or decay represented by both the gypsies and the execution of the Jewish couple is not only grotesque, but tragic. As will be seen later, Döblin, influenced by Nietzsche’s ideas concerning art and music, incorporates the themes of tragedy throughout his novel, evoking not only repulsion and disgust at the horrors of war, but also a sense of sadness and loss. This sense of tragedy, the sense of horror and loss, becomes a catalyst for Döblin’s larger aesthetic and is what gives his art its powerful potential for affecting his readers.

As is already suggested above, these villagers also respond to the scenes of violence and decay, just as Ferdinand and Wallenstein react in different ways with the realization of their mortality. Peasant revolts begin to spring up throughout Germany as a means of the villagers to take matters into their own hands as their own political leaders were failing:

Unter der Annäherung der fremden Eroberer entstanden Revolten bei den bayrischen Landfahnen; viele flüchteten, suchten ihre Habe zu verstecken, sich und die Angehörigen in Sicherheit zu bringen. […] Vor Preising stellte sich ein kurzer Kerl hin, das Gesicht wie ein Waldmensch umwachsen, die Leute liefen ihm zu, predigte vom Schindeldach eines Häusleins[…] (529)

This Waldmensch preaches to the crowd and argues that the war and the torment is actually good for the people—it was their own foolishness, their lack of pursuing any kind of education which led to their harm. This makes them aware of their mistakes and calls them to corrective action. It should serve as a lesson to the people them to become self-educated, self-directed in their lives:

“‘Träges faules Volk ihr. Was ist denn ein Fürst, ein Herr, ein Kurfürst und großgewaltiger Kaiser. […] Er ist ja nur mächtig, weil ihr Furcht habt und Angsthasen seid. […] Der Krieg täte
euch gut [...] Durch eure Dummheit und Furcht regieren die Fürsten, in eurem Kopf steht ihr Thron [...]“ (530). It is interesting to note that this call to action by the Waldmensch reflects Döblin’s own later concerns for the socially oppressed of the modern era and bears resemblance to his suggestions on education and the fight for increased social awareness politically, religiously, and socially in order for the poor to improve their station in life. (“Der historische Roman und Wir“ 186)

As much as Döblin was interested in understanding the social or biological process of Verwesung, in which the interconnected members of an entity become obviously separate and distinguished, he was also interested in seeing how the distinct members of a body held together as a whole. In the novel, Döblin describes the murder of Wallenstein and comments on how the mass of body parts is no longer Wallenstein—the person of Wallenstein had been extinguished. After Wallenstein is attacked, killed, and the body has been wrapped in a carpet, he is described: “Sie konnten an ihm tun, was sie wollten. Das war nicht mehr Wallenstein. Ein gurgelnder Blutstrom war aus dem klaffenden Loch an seiner Brust hervorgezogen, wie von Dampf brodelnd. Mit ihm war er davon” (715). This scene of violence leading to Wallenstein’s death is similar to Döblin’s reflections on the loss of lives experienced in World War I. He writes in Unser Dasein:

Oder da ist man Leiche im Massengrab bei Verdun oder in Polen oder in den Karpaten oder in Serbien, wo sind keine Massengräber, eine enorm kräftige Bombe kam, Triumph der Artillerietechnik, ein Stolz der Chemiker und Physiker, und bewies, was sie konnte: drückte die Decke eines als vorzüglich gepriesenen Betonunterstandes ein, und an hundert Mann waren im Bruchteil einer Sekunde ein Matsch organischer Substanz, aber nicht mehr Menschen. (Quoted in Müller 412-413)

He goes on to describe the men who had been killed, their life plans, all of the care and nurturing which mothers and fathers and friends had invested into these people. The mess of
organic material which Döblin observed could not be compared to the memories of the people they once were. “Sie Leichen zu nennen, wäre Übertreibung. Das also war ihr Dasein. Was soll man vom Menschen verlangen” (Müller 413). Döblin was interested in the decay process, the breaking down of organisms for the sake of medical knowledge, for knowing how a body worked, but he also realized that there was something else which held the parts of the organism together, and that the spirit or glue of the individual parts could be lost. Somehow the spirit could take the parts and make them human, make them connect and work into a living organism. The human spirit could take the parts and make them more than what they were left to themselves. It is this role of the consciousness, the spirit, which recognizes the various component parts of biological existence, but also of social existence, which Döblin wanted to draw out in his readers. He was interested in stirring up the spirit which existed in between the component parts. As is demonstrated in the various passages above, violence and decay provoked responses in the novel’s characters. They realized that they had to take action against their physical, mental, or political demise. They had to do something different; they had to become something other than they were in order to effect the change. Through the process of breakdown, one had the opportunity to see the underlying forces of life at work as well as the interdependent nature of the world. This knowledge provides a framework for understanding as well as bringing about various kinds of change in one’s environment or social setting. It will be helpful in the next section to examine the varieties of change, the kinds of Werden, which are presented in Wallenstein and to examine the social implications of these various types of transformation.
V. Images of Werden

In his book Ströme und Steine: Studien zur symbolischen Textur des Werkes von Alfred Döblin, Dietmar Voss provides a helpful framework for grasping the basic principles of Döblin’s writings. Similar to the issues of Verwesung und Werden in Döblin’s texts, the images of stones and streams are, as Voss points out, prevalent in Döblin’s novels and act as one of the main metaphors for how Döblin interpreted life’s processes. In Wallenstein for example, there are a number of references to people associated with streams and raw material, which is crushed by rocks and then washed away.

Sie liefen geduckt im Frühlingswetter zwischen den Wäldern. [...] Sprangen an, hingen sich an die dicken Zotteln, krochen in dem Gedünst an ihnen hoch, grunzend und blasend wie sie oft im Lauf zerquetscht an Felsen oder bei Flußübergängen ertränkt. [...] In den Wäldern hinter den schwedischen Linien, in der Oberpfalz, im versengten Sachsen schwemmten die Massen; aus Erdlöchern Ställen Ruinen Gräbern, wo sie sich verbargen, kamen sie. Hassfletschen: „Es gibt nur Katholische und Lutherische, Kaiserlicher, Schweden, Bayern; es gibt sonst nichts auf der Welt. Schlag uns tot.“ „Es kommt nicht darauf an, ob wir leben. Müssen zu Mist und Erde werden.“ (704-05)

Voss argues that the images of stones and streams serve not only as symbols for the kind of transience which Döblin saw in the world, but also for the building material which life offered. Stones and streams were another way Döblin illustrated the types of change and Werden he observed in nature and society.

For Voss, the image of streams and water reflect the fluidity of definitions and meanings. Everything in life is subject to change and alteration. While Voss provides many examples of the implications of the image of streams, it suffices here to say that, Döblin understood language, art, history, psychology, consciousness, and culture less as concrete, unalterable entities and more as phenomena or events which flowed into one another, contributing to a dynamic series of “fluid” or transient experiences. Voss quotes from several researchers who have explored the issues
underlying Döblin’s use of language as well as his understanding of history and human psychology. Quoting Paul Ricoeur, Voss explains the emphasis Döblin placed on a non-systematic understanding of life and history in his images:

In der Logik des poetischen Bildes stellt sich gar nicht die Alternative, ob ein Segment artistisches oder Triebzeichen oder Geschichtszeichen usf. ist; es ist, in der Flucht seiner strukturellen Vernetzung, immer dies alles zugleich. So verwirklicht sich im dichterischen Bild auch „die konkrete Identität zwischen der Progression der Gestalten des Geistes und der Regression zu den Schlüssel-Signifikanten des Unbewussten,“ mithin eine „paradoxe Textur;“ welche gleichzeitig retro-und „prospektiv“ dimensioniert ist. (27)

Voss continues in this line of thought, citing the research of Julia Kristeva, who argues that Döblin abandons a symbolic understanding of art—i.e., representations of definite meanings or metaphysical entities—for a more “semiotic” understanding of language and art:


Voss goes on to discuss Döblin’s description of stones which combat the erosion of water, or the seeping in of water through cracks—and this is an illustration of life as well (39). There are entities which resist the tides of influence within nature and within a society. Both people and natural materials have a tendency to harden, to become definite in shape and character for a time. In this way, life could be seen as made up of various building blocks or stones, waiting for builders to use force to stack and chisel these stones as they saw fit.

Inevitably these solid entities would collide in the “flow” of time and the course of history, and in their collision, pieces would be broken off. This process of collision and
“grinding” of the stones of life was another way, according to Döblin, that society and nature changed (Voss 152-53). Whether the rocks are chipped apart or broken down or even melted into lava or magma through various pressures and influences in their environment, these hardened entities in nature or society are not above the elemental forces which eventually force all into a kind of “Strom der Masse” (58-59). The streams of life have the effect of eroding the individual entities and turning them into elements of larger, collective bodies, and this process is not entirely destructive. According to Döblin the heat and pressures of natural forces or, metaphorically, of societal forces could be life-giving and creative (95).

The result of these visions of change and Werden was, for Döblin, an awareness of and concentration on the creative variety in history rather than its pre-determined fate. While there might be natural parameters for change and progress, i.e. neither society nor nature could progress beyond the natural material of which it consisted, there could be no prescribed ideal or fate as to the outcome of the various social and natural influences at work. Going back to the themes of fate and determinism, Döblin’s view of history is much more open-ended, much more emphatic of the creative possibilities within the natural, material mix of life than on a particular form for society. A culture would always be in a state of continuous, dynamic change, and because of this fact, the society could not be limited to a specific form or historical ideal. Voss writes:

Again, the historical and social focus for Döblin is the means, the functions, the uses of things, the potential and possibility rather than on definite ends.

The *Steine und Flüsse* framework complements the *Verwesung / Werden* paradigm. Both analogies emphasize the organic quality of life and the reducibility of complex social entities to natural substances, drives, and compositions. In *Wallenstein*, the awareness of the potential for an organism or a political unity to breakdown, to change, or decay creates different reactions and responses in the characters. As Voss points out how the *Steine und Flüsse* metaphor contributes to the shift in understandings of history and fate, so the *Verwesung und Werden* framework transforms people’s understandings of each other, and their environment. The culture is viewed differently once characters in the novel become aware of the forces of *Verwesung und Werden*.

One of the main themes highlighted in *Wallenstein* is the treatment of people as food or as natural resources. The characters in the novel recognize that the entities which decay can become a contributor, a part, of something else. As if the Thirty Years’ War were about the struggle between various wild animals, the respective political powers seem to view each other as potential prey to be slaughtered and eaten. An economical extension of this is the view of people as natural resources or stores of currency. People, countries, political positions can be converted, not only monetarily but religiously as well.

In addition to the exploration of the increase of power or wealth for one party at the expense of others, there is also a treatment of the cancerous elements within a body—when one party becomes so strong that it actually threatens the life or functionality of the other members. These implications of the *Verwesung und Werden* model ultimately draw the reader back to
considerations of responsibility within a community. Döblin’s strong emphasis on social bodies as interrelated and interdependent organisms provokes questions of self-examination and inquiries into how individuals and institutions function in their roles of give and take, consumption and contribution.

Döblin’s novel primarily consists of examples of the violent means of Werden. Like the apple which symbolized Germany in the example above, the worms of France and Sweden are never very far away, waiting to come take advantage of the raw materials, of the wealth, of the sustenance which the Holy Roman Empire had to offer. These parties are those who seek to forcefully take advantage of the decaying elements for their own ends. This principle of a violent version of Werden is captured throughout the novel as revealed in various kinds of “fressen,” “futtern,” and “weiden.” The eating, feeding, biting and chewing references act as dominant, controlling metaphors in the novel. The first page of Döblin’s text sets the tone by introducing the reader to a feast scene of Ferdinand’s:


Oh, wie schmeckten die gebackenen Muscheln, die Törtchen und Konfitüren Seiner Kaiserlichen Majestät, Schand und Schmach, dass einer Graf, Fürst Erzherzog, Römischer Kaiser werden kann und der Magen wächst nicht mit; die Gurgel kann nicht mehr schlucken, als sie faßt; [...] (9, 11)
The juxtaposition of the war images with Ferdinand’s feast makes for a disturbing but effective association. Döblin portrays war as a process of consumption, and Ferdinand’s enthusiasm for feasting in celebration of the defeat of his enemies is shown as a kind of cannibalism—war is the means of eating one’s enemies. The images of eating and feeding have been clearly established and suggest that the war is an extension of animal-like behavior—to kill, plunder, and pillage for the sake of personal pleasure and gain. The elements which made up Friedrich’s armies and territories, as well as the wealth and raw materials which had belonged to the Bohemian princes, has been violently converted into food, sustenance, support, for Ferdinand.

Friedrich Emde comments on this scene as an additional support for the idea of Ferdinand as an unstable Kaiser: “Kaiser Ferdinand ist ein zutiefst verunsicherter Mensch. Er ist nur fähig, die Schlacht im Bankettsaal zu schlagen, wo keine Gefahr droht und allein die zu vertilgenden Speisen sich vor ihm fürchten müssen“ (68). Ferdinand is preoccupied with his own concerns. He is not out on the field waging battles, but he is happy to benefit from those who are. Largely disconnected from the affairs of the empire—and unwilling to connect—he is content to allow the horrors of war and the eventual abuses of Wallenstein’s military leadership to go unchecked. He is not engaged with the concerns of Verwesung und Werden, the underlying cycles of nature, nor does he appear aware of how his decisions affect the rest of the members of the empire, which members in turn affect him. It is not until later in the novel that he feels the touch of decay in his own life or realizes the degree to which his existence is dependent upon the larger social organism. He is blinded to the needs and concerns of the larger social organism by his own individual desires and plans.
The image of feasting and the associations with the slaughter on the battlefield continues throughout the text. Maximillian of Bavaria displays a similar kind of love for violence. Maximillian has his court jester chase a stork and attempt to eat it while it is still alive. This is Maximillian’s idea of entertainment, but it also highly symbolic of what Maximillian seems to believe about the nature of the world. Maximillian is speaking with one of his friends after they have observed the chaos of the court fool wrestling and fighting with the stork, and Maximillian draws a parallel between this fight between man and beast with the biblical story of St. Michael the Archangel wrestling with Satan over the body of Moses. Maximillian tells his friend, Küttner, who had also been wrestling with the stork:

„[…] Sankt Michael hat im Lande Moab dem Satan die Leiche Moses’ abgerungen. So habt Ihr gerungen […] Küttner, was soll geschehen!“ Er zog den anderen an der Hand zu sich herunter: „Ich bin verloren. Ich—“ Er stammelte. „Vor dem wüstesten Menschen der Erde liege ich, vordiesem Goten. Er wird sich eine Freude daraus machen, mich zu beschimpfen […]“ (522-23).

The ironic sort of portrayal of religion, war, and entertainment or amusement is humorous, tragic, and disturbing all at once. The significance of both war and religion, and wars waged for the sake of religion, seem to have the same absurd sense of meaning as the fool wrestling with the stork. Just as Maximillian orders the fool to attack and try to eat the live bird, so it seems that God has condemned Maximillan to wage a war which has superficial significance—perhaps similar to that of Michael and his match against Satan—but the conflict seems ultimately to be for the amusement of a sadistic God, and a perverse exaggeration of the fulfillment of the natural cycles of predator and prey, of consumer and consumed.

Both Ferdinand’s feasting and Maximillian’s illustrate not only the excesses of war but the underlying absurdity of the entire constellation of circumstances. Döblin, in these images, has not gone so far as to paint the basic necessities of eating and drinking as absurd, only the
excesses of those appetites and the abuses which stem from a blind dedication to one’s own individual concerns apart from an awareness of the larger community.

Other passages illustrating how people or goods are seen as potential food to be consumed and digested for the support of a larger social organism include the description of how to control the imperial armies. Wallenstein gives his opinion on the duties of the Kaiser. The way to control the army is to control the food supply: “Sache des Kaisers ist es, sie zu belohnen. Sie hungern zu lassen und zu füttern, je nach den Umständen, um sie desto willfähriger zu haben. Das ist das Geschäft des Kaisers. Die Aufgabe der Krone. Es ist in allen Ländern so. Man verliert die Krone ohne dies Spiel. Man sollte vielleicht diese Menschen auf den Thron lassen, das wäre wohl das Richtigste, das Glatteste” (559). Wallenstein recognizes something about the eternal principles of the world: that power and control are rooted in a kind of “survival of the fittest” mentality; eat or be eaten. Death and decay demand that a leader recognize this cycle or he forfeits his base of authority.

Wallenstein is a leader who realizes what he has to do in order to win his battles. He plans to win at any cost. He is brutal in converting the wealth and possessions of peasants and even his own property in order to turn it into means of funding the war effort. This is another derivation of the Verwesung und Werden principle: people are not only portrayed as food, but there are financial resources attached to individuals. People do not necessarily have to be killed or defeated to make them valuable. People, as well as their possessions, can also be assimilated, converted into useful means for the military or a political or religious cause. As the princes debate whether or not they need Wallenstein to lead the imperial army, Graf Trautmannsdorf cautions against the employment of Wallenstein because of the havoc he will wreak, and he
again makes the comparison of Wallenstein as a predator only interested in accumulating more food:

‘[...]Der Wallenstein! Er wird schnappen! So groß wird kein Rachen eines Wolfes sein wie seiner, wenn er schnappen wird. Er freut sich unserer Lage; sie verspricht ihm viel. Was meint Ihr, Eggenberg, und Ihr, Graf: wird es nötig sein, daß Ihr Euch noch rettet laßt von ihm? Er wird Euch retten, soweit es ihm Spaß machen wird, und von dem Braten speisen, mit Fettsoße, Zwiebeln, Gemüse und Pastete, soviel er mag. Das Reich wird anders aussehen nach dieser Rettung als vorher. Ich wünsche Euch guten Geschmack—für ihn.” (552-553)

The connections to Wallenstein’s search for food and his financial exploitation of the peasants of the Holy Roman Empire are quickly made clear. As long as the enemy is defeated and the empire is preserved, he does not care if he bankrupts and pillages the lands and wealth of the empire into oblivion. Not only does he begin minting money and inflating the German market, thanks to the aid of Bassewi the Jew (167), but he is prepared to pillage the German villages, terribly abusing the rights of the Kontributionssystem, which was intended to support imperial troops and serve as a kind of self sustaining means of defense during the course of the war: the soldiers protected villagers while they provided the military with food and shelter. Wallenstein took full advantage of the Kontributionssystem. In a conversation with Wallenstein, Graf Meggau, explains:

Frank Tallett, in his history of the Early Modern period and its military developments, reports that the regular supply and demand relationship created between troops and the towns which they occupied actually worked quite well. Even if a bit strained in terms of providing enough resources for the troops, merchants and farmers, as well as the middle-men who represented them, could actually profit from the soldiers seeking to pay for food with the wages of their commission. It was when soldiers were not paid by the military authorities that problems occurred. Plundering and the “foraging” of crops became a last resort for sustenance. The development of the Kontributionssystem was essentially a streamlined version of this kind of desperate pillaging, and Wallenstein exploited this technique to the last degree. Tallett writes:

Territory occupied by their [Wallenstein’s, Mansfeld’s, Gustavus Adolphus’s] armies, be it enemy, friendly or neutral, was systematically milked of its resources. The local administration, where it continued to exist, was obliged to allocate and collect regular weekly or monthly contributions from the local population, in the form of money, foodstuffs, or whatever else was required, which were handed over to the occupying forces. […] Demands for contributions were backed by the threat of force: failure to pay would result in the butchery of the recalcitrant population and the destruction of its property, though this of course was mean to be an expedient of last resort […] (55-56)

But it was not just the peasants who were seen a financial targets, as potential resources which could be assimilated or converted to the benefit of the military, to politicians, or to the various religious factions. The authority figures themselves, the princes and politicians, were also seen as sources of financial wealth to be taken advantage of. The image of the dead Bohemian princes on the gates of Prague, cited above, is quickly followed in the novel by the description of the redistribution of their territory and wealth for the benefit of the Hapsburgs:

The retribution on Protestant rebels was harsh—harsher than anyone expected. Punishment through the redistribution of wealth is seen here, in Döblin, to be more than fair and just. Even if some compensation to the Habsburg interests would have been foreseen, the emperor had exacted too much in the eyes of the Bohemians.

The images of people and land and money being converted to feed the troops or to pay them are not the only images of conversion. In many ways the entire novel is about the conversion of the various religious groups to another faith. The princes and emperors support their claims for war by their religion, and the more people who can be converted to the “true faith” the better for their larger social organism. Early on there are scenes of panic among the villagers as soldiers and Jesuit priests come to interrogate and torture those who are not of the faith. This happens shortly after Bohemia has been re-conquered by imperial troops:

Büttel Profosse Pikeniere und Geistliche wanderten von Gasse zu Gasse, Dorf zu Dorf. Sie gingen in die Schlafkammern, zogen die Decken von den Betten, denn viele Ketzer legten sich in diesen Wochen zu Bett, um den Fragen zu entgehen, die jedem entgegendarbhnten, der den Kommissionen die Türe öffnete: ‘Wer ist im Haus? Und Ihr, seid Ihr katholisch geboren, geworden, verspricht Ihr es zu werden oder nicht?’ (148)

Maximillian, as a good Catholic, wrestles with the pressures from the Church to either defeat the Protestant forces or to convert them. One of the priests at Maximillian’s court tells him it is sin not to have the power to convert or kill the heathen, and assures Maximillian, “Es gibt nichts Größeres, als Fürsten zum Glauben zu bringen oder sie zu töten” (375). Gustav Adolf has similar ideas of the Protestant faith. After he has already arrived in Germany, he reflects on his initial commitment to wage war for the crown of the emperor: „Nun muß mein letztes und höchstes Ziel sein ein neues Haupt der evangelischen Christenheit, das vorletzte eine neue Verfassung unter den evangelischen Ständen, das Mittel dazu der Krieg. Zugrunde gerichtet muß
der Katholik werden, sonst kann der Evangelische nicht bestehen; ein Vergleich oder Mittelding besteht nicht“ (489).

In seeking to convert parts of the empire to either Protestant or Catholic beliefs, the various political leaders also seem to see the opposing religious confessions as a kind of disease for the empire, so that if conversion for those of a different creed was not possible, then they had to be driven out of the territory or killed. Though Döblin does not embellish or develop the image of cancer and cancerous members of an organism to symbolize the crisis of the Thirty Years’ War, the idea is strongly implied. Again, Döblin includes the prominent example of the Protestants in Bohemia being driven out into non-Catholic regions if they did not convert (152, 53). He includes the image of the infested apple to symbolize the empire, and the worm, which represents France and Sweden, and further notes that it is not only the German princes who think the “apple” of the empire or of Europe is rotten. France, despite sharing the Catholic faith of Ferdinand and the empire, wished to cut down the power of the Hapsburg family. France saw the expansion of a Hapsburg Holy Roman Empire as a kind of cancerous threat, or a plague, as the French diplomat, Charnacé phrases it in his negotiations with Gustav Adolf. Charnacé begins:


The conflict is not about religious institutions but political structure. Within the European spheres of political power, France felt that the Hapsburgs were taking up too much of the
“apple.” Even though, as Charnacé concedes, France was not allowed to take up arms against the Hapsburgs according to the Regensburg treaty, this did not prevent France from funding Gustav Adolf. In the case of preserving the balance of power, religious lines could be crossed; drastic measures had to be taken. Cancerous growth or an infectious plague within the larger organism of Christendom had to be stopped. Döblin raises important questions throughout the novel as to how far individuals or groups of people have to go in order to cut off the infectious member of a particular institution or organization.

The elected princes eventually confront the same questions of an unbalanced, cancerous growth of power in Wallenstein, and they seek to rid the empire of him. Wallenstein had been a necessary instrument for protecting and preserving the empire, but his sphere of influence had grown too large. The cost of supporting Wallenstein was eating up the imperial treasury as well as its land. The worm eating away at the imperial apple was not Sweden or France any longer so much as one of the empire’s loyal servants. The complex, underlying process of Verwesung und Werden demands that people be flexible and ready for change—must be ready even to change themselves with changing circumstances. Wallenstein chooses to transform into a kind of fierce devil, ready for a last stand before his biological and political death, while Ferdinand slowly changes into something of a fool. He becomes less and less concerned about upholding title as emperor, as shown above. The princes have to be ready to change as well, and they take action on behalf of an empire suffering from cancerous tendencies; they assassinate Wallenstein.

Again, similar to the cautionary image of the apple infested with worms, the means which must be taken to save the empire, to rid the apple of the worms, may be effective in accomplishing the goal of defeating the enemy, but they may also destroy the object which the princes are trying to preserve. It is this realization of sacrifice and adaption which provides a new
kind of paradigm for making ‘moral’ decisions. “Morality,” or the framework for determining
good and bad decisions, hinges on self-interest and the preservation of the larger organism to
which one belongs. The princes do not have an easy choice to make. They recognize that
Wallenstein must be done away with, but it is only as a last resort that they turn to assassination.
After Wallenstein is murdered the two princes Eggenberg and Trautmannsdorf discuss their
regrets and the necessity of the deed:

Eggenberg aus dem Bett flüsternd: „Was klagt Ihr mich an, Trautmannsdorf?“ Der Graf:
„Ich klage Euch nicht an, ich bin nur durch ihn hochgekommen.“ Und dann
erschüttert: „Ich bin nicht schuld daran. Er sollte abgesetzt werden, wenn es sein mußte,
mit Gewalt. Wir haben niemanden zu der Bestialität autorisiert.“ „Wenn er lebte,
Tautmannsdorf, und Euch hörte, würde er den Kopf schütteln; man kann Gewalt
nicht begrenzen.“ (716)

This conversation towards the close of the Wallenstein encapsulates some of the basic tensions
throughout the novel. Both men, Eggenberg and Trautmannsdorf, recognize the necessity to
eliminate Wallenstein by force; they have recognized the principles of Verwesung und Werden at
work. This is the way of things: nature and society are systems which exist through fluid,
interdependent relationships. Nothing is static for very long. If an organism is not consuming,
then it is being consumed by another. It may be that this process of consumption and
contribution happens to a single body simultaneously. If Wallenstein had not been assassinated,
it would have been logical to prepare for the transformation of the Holy Roman Empire into
something very different, even to prepare for its potential death.

The conflict around the issue of taking action against Wallenstein has to do with the truth
of Trautmannsdorf’s warning: “Man kann Gewalt nicht begrenzen.” Once such drastic means of
violence have been taken, even for the best of causes, one runs the risk of inciting further acts of
violence, retaliation, revenge. Had Wallenstein remained alive, it might also be likely that the
novel would have had a more definite end. Rather than the war continuing and France weighing in for battle, Wallenstein could have brought the war to an early close, though perhaps accompanied by the simultaneous collapse of the Hapsburg rule. The desire to prevent the ruin of the Hapsburg Empire had to be considered against the potential for further damage in other areas of society. The discussion between the two elected princes demonstrates the ethical framework in which Döblin operated: a framework based on self-preservation.

The kind of action that one takes to alter society or the path of nature has consequences. The patterns of *Verwesung und Werden* motivated Wallenstein to take action in the attempt to resist his own demise. The religious and political parties also take drastic action and attempt to correct the infected areas of their religious or political territories. The German princes conspire to assassinate their key military leader in order preserve the quality of the empire. Even the peasants, after becoming aware of the kind of abuse and assimilation they had to endure, began to react and take up arms and prepare to defend themselves. Only Kaiser Ferdinand II has a different set of actions—to escape, to flee the responsibilities of maintaining the absurd machine of war and the empire.

Earlier in the novel, Ferdinand begins to sense the absurdity of the war, even the ridiculous nature of attempting to assert or maintain his claim to authority. In fact, he begins to feel that the more he tries to impose his will upon the circumstances of the war or rally for support, the more it works to his own demise: “Ich hab’ ja nichts zu schenken, Eleonore. Ich besitze selbst nichts. Je mehr ich Kaiser wurde, um so mehr wurde von mir genommen, liegt nun da” (360). This realization of his own powerlessness gradually leads to his abandonment of the empire and taking company with a band of thieves in the forest. His mental instability has reached a point where, as Döblin describes him, he appears to have become a complete fool:
Ferdinand aber schien, seit er die Quälereien von der Fechterbande erfahren hatte, ein vollkommener Narr geworden zu sein. Er war von einer flutenden, stoßweise ihn durchrollenden Erregung heimgesucht. Wie ihn die Räuber auf die Straße warfen und er gefangengenommen wurde, war er, als wäre er alle Sorgen losgeworden. Er hatte schon die Wallonen im Wald nicht, wie die Buben erzählt hatten, aufgefordert, ihn zu befreien, sondern nur von sich erzählt. Er sei in einem hohen Amt gewesen, hätte es aufgegeben. Denn das Regieren hätte wenig Zweck. Es läuft alles von selbst. Es ist auch alles gut, hätte er erkannt; man müsse nur wissen wie. Man könne mit ihm tun, was man wolle, man täte ihm nicht weh. (727)

This is an interesting passage because it seems to imply that Ferdinand, while his mental faculties are slowly decomposing, has not reached yet the point of total insanity and the degree of brokenness which he has experienced has caused him to have a kind of revelation—one which recognizes that nature does have a certain process and order. The system of society does take care of itself. Ferdinand thinks that it is not important to direct the course of events, but to simply know how the system works. This “revelation” allows Ferdinand to see all things as “good” or as neutral because all processes, all events are ultimately a part of the larger organism of society.

The question arises as to whether or not Ferdinand’s revelation here an example of his madness and the result of a new phase of incoherence and delusion, or is in fact an example of the kind of effect which decay or breakdown can bring to an individual or society.

It is problematic to assert that Döblin is here speaking through the character of Ferdinand in order to explain the “message” or moral of the story. As seen above, Döblin had no desire to have his own voice manipulate the material of the text. In spite of that, Ferdinand’s conclusions, his realization that “es läuft alles von selbst,” would appear to be consistent not only with the rest of the novel but with Döblin’s philosophy and general vision of the world as he wrote. As the certainty of military affairs vanishes with the assassination of Wallenstein and the political stability of the empire frays along with Ferdinand’s mental faculties, the end of the novel seems to spiral into a kind of pit of despair. The stability of the empire seems to have almost completely
fallen apart, and yet in that moment of near total breakdown comes a kind of surgical or medical clarity, the seeing and understanding of circumstances broken down into their respective parts. Perhaps Ferdinand is finally in a place where he is no longer under the misconception that he was in control of the processes of the war to begin with. Throughout the entire novel, Ferdinand has desired to be the Kaiser, to be in control, to assert his authority—though he did this with much hesitation and uncertainty. At the end of the novel, Ferdinand seems to be completely divested of his power and ambitions. His former desires for power have been “surgically” removed from him by circumstances; he has come in full contact with the forces of Verwesung. As a result, he can now see the component parts of the empire, and of the war, rather than his own ambition. He is no longer blinded by that single vision of his own success. He realizes that there is no single element which directs the flow of events: “Es läuft alles von selbst.” One’s purpose in life was to simply see how it all worked together rather than trying to force one’s will on the entire flow of events. Having experienced this revelation, the events practically rush to Ferdinand’s murder as he is stabbed to death by a troll in the woods. After he dies, the Kobold drags Ferdinand’s body out into the forest and leaves him to hang upon two tree branches (732-33).

The image of Ferdinand dying on a tree is telling, given his search for advice not only from his confessor but from a hermit in the woods as well. The final picture of Ferdinand is a clear allusion to Christ, dying on the cross. This is an ironic association, especially considering the alternative Gospel story which Ferdinand hears earlier from the hermit. According to this alternative Gospel, Christ was eager to bring peace to the world and rid human existence of all its troubles, just as Ferdinand is eager to establish peace and end the war. The hermit tries to tell Ferdinand that the search for peace, the quest for the end of human suffering, is vain, doomed to
failure. Christ’s good intentions only resulted in his crucifixion, a kind of death on a tree. He could not change the inherent character of the natural world; he could not make it fundamentally better than it was.

Before Ferdinand wanders away into the forest in an effort to escape the pressures of the political crisis, he tries to find a solution to war and to the issue of whether or not to keep Wallenstein in the employ of the empire. He seeks for a religious answer. He wants to know what God or the Church would have him to do. In an earlier example, Ferdinand appears almost frantic with worry as he talks with his confessor, Pater Lamormain, about these concerns (455-61). On the one hand, Ferdinand desires to flaunt his position as emperor and refuses to take immediate action on the question of Wallenstein. He wants to show the princes that he can keep or dismiss whomever he wishes, whenever he wishes. Ferdinand tries to convince himself and the Pater that his indecisiveness should be tolerated because of his authority. On the other hand, he desperately desires an answer. Lamormain hesitates to provide any direct, concrete advice, choosing rather vague generalities of Christ’s teachings of peace. Eventually, after Ferdinand pressures Lamormain further, the confessor finally advises to dismiss Wallenstein (461). Becoming more and more desperate for direction as time goes on, as well as looking for excuses to escape the confines of the palace, Ferdinand seeks the spiritual advice of a hermit (666). Ferdinand is not a war-monger; earlier in his dealings with Denmark, it is clear that he desired peace (381), and in his frequent questioning of his confessor, Ferdinand seeks to understand how to accomplish the peace of Christ.

The hermit whom Ferdinand visits provides him with rather disturbing information. Not only does he tell Ferdinand that he has seen a vision of Christ’s face among the roots of his cave dwelling—establishing here, once again, the association of Christ with trees and roots—but that
Christ’s death was ultimately a failure, that Christ did not accomplish the peace he came to
effect:

„Er hat Satan gesehen, ich ahne ihn nur; ich sehe die Welt, rieche ihre Verwesung—aber
er kannte auch die Menschen, die Seelen. Der hat sich für uns geopfert. Er wußte, daß
uns nichts überzeugen könnte als sein schmerzenreicher gräßlicher Tod. Christus Jesus
hat sich verstellt für uns. Für dich und mich. Die größte Seele, er hat sich in die
Waagschale werfen müssen.“ „Gegen den Satan.“ „Es hat ihn an den Satan
herangetrieben, alle Freiheit, alle Selbständigkeit, die Lust des Lebens hat er von sich
hingeworfen. Ihn wollte er von uns verscheuchen, von Mensch und Getier. Und—„„Was
ist.“ „Du weißt ja allein weiter, Bruder, was ist.“ Er durchbohrte mit den Blicken den
Kaiser, schrie: „Es hat nichts genutzt. Der Satan wiegt schwerer. Nicht einmal sein
Andenken ist aufbewahrt, man weiß nichts mehr von ihm.“ (669)

The hermit had prefaced these remarks with the comment: „Es gibt nur einen Teufel. Gott
hat es nicht. Den Teufel gibt es” (667). Apparently this hermit is not the only Catholic who
believes these ideas. Earlier in the text, Döblin describes a scene where one of Tilly’s soldiers
asks a priest about the morality of war and what God thinks about war. The priest’s response:
Nur nicht unser” (334). The conviction of the hermit and of the priest seems to be that Christ was
a good man who attempted to fight the injustices of the world—the injustices which Satan
created in the world. Christ died a martyr for a good cause, even the best of causes and yet,
according to the hermit, his death, his struggle was a failure. The cumulative effect of the
hermit’s message upon Ferdinand seems to be that he realizes that struggling against the forces
of Verwesung in the world is doomed. Whether in a moment of delirium or of relative sanity, his
realization „Es läuft alles von selbst. Es ist auch alles gut“ is a kind of resignation to the struggle
against the forces of Verwesung und Werden. His subsequent death can be seen in many ways,
not so much as a martyrdom but rather as an acknowledgment of his place in the natural world. It
may not have been the only choice open to him or even the best, but it is a choice consistent with
the other violent images throughout the text and with Döblin’s larger philosophy of nature: It is
ultimately the natural forces of death, decay, and change which dominate human existence, and it is futile to try and resist these processes or impose an artificial peace or order over and against the natural flow of history. Instead of a view of life which resists these natural forces, the text, read with an understanding of the development of Döblin’s larger worldview, encourages a self-critical examination as to how the system of nature works. A further implication for the reader is the embracing of his or her role as an interconnected, vital entity to the whole. The natural imperative for members of society should be the active consideration how they can fit in with and contribute to the larger complex of the world.
VI. The Peculiar Human Quality of Consciousness: the Basis for Cultural Transformation

R.G. Collingwood, a British philosopher and contemporary of Döblin’s, published a book entitled *The Principles of Art* (1937) in which he argued for a modern aesthetic which was self-critical. He wrote that an artist’s greatest calling was to provide a mirror for the community. Apart from any direct moral prescriptions as to how the community should look or what sort of values should be upheld, the artist, according to Collingwood, provided the best medicine to his society by simply showing its members an honest reflection of themselves:

[Art] must be prophetic. The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts. His business as an artist is to speak out, to make a clean breast. But what he has to utter is not, as the individualistic theory of art would have us think, his own secrets. As spokesman of his community, the secrets he must utter are theirs. The reason why they need him is that no community altogether knows its own heart; and by failing in this knowledge a community deceives itself on the one subject concerning which ignorance means death. For the evils which come from ignorance the poet as prophet suggests no remedy, because he has already given one. The remedy is the poem itself. Art is the community’s medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness. (336)

This is the aesthetic framework Döblin worked within. Clearly he did not desire to produce a didactic work of art, something with a clear, propagandistic message or moral at the end of the story, and yet he was concerned that his readers were too much distracted with mere entertainment. They were not interested in self-examination or facing the difficult truths of their community. Döblin desired that his art be a kind of provocation for his readers to look into their own hearts, without his own heavy-handed moralizing. He was not suggesting a new ideal—at least not directly. He was convinced that people of the modern society “fühlen auf neue Art ihren Kollektivcharakter, ihre soziale Natur. Sie sind im Begriff, neuartig zusammenzuwachsen. […] die Welt baut ein Gesellschaftswesen. Man verstehe, man fühle, was das heißt,” (“Geist“ 83).
This new societal organism, the communal spirit which bound the culture together was a replacement for God, for the force on which the medieval world hinged. The modern society was not bound to God, but they were bound to each other. Knowledge as to how the system was to work would come with time as people explored the functions and potential of the individual parts. Presumably society would form itself in a similar fashion to the way Döblin’s novels seemed to form themselves—through a self-correcting series of experiments, trying out one way of describing life and then another (Wichart *historischer Roman* 51).

This kind of self-critical, self-examining function of a work of art is an idea drawn from Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Döblin works with at least two main concepts from Nietzsche in *Wallenstein*: the self-reflexive character of the fairytale and the use of the tragic element, which inspires unity within a society and even provokes a vision for life after which the community strives. Nietzsche writes concerning art and fairytales:

"Nur soweit der Genius im Actus der künstlerischen Zeugung mit jenem Urkünstler der Welt verschmilzt, weiss er etwas über das ewige Wesen der Kunst; denn in jenem Zustande ist er, wunderbarer Weise, dem unheimlichen Bild des Mährchens gleich, das die Augen drehen und sich selber anschaun kann; jetzt ist er zugleich Subject und Object, zugleich Dichter, Schauspieler und Zuschauer. (47-48)"

Nietzsche is speaking of the artist, but to the degree that the artist is able to draw in the spectators, to make them co-creators with him, as Döblin does, the spectators, too, participate in this subject / object experience of self-reflection. The readers are able to see themselves and their community in a different light; the perspective is one of the primordial unity which binds all of nature and society together. Nietzsche believed music was the pure language of this underlying world spirit, and in listening to music, the spectator could be broken out of his individualistic, egoistic perspectives of life and drawn back into that primordial communion with the world and the larger society. Given the very nature of the medium of music, Nietzsche could insist on a
collective, communal transformation of the culture. An audience could experience the music of an opera or theatrical drama together. Döblin’s search for unity within society and a medium for re-connecting back to nature was more cerebral than it was romantic. The nature of his medium of communication was also inherently more individualistic. A large number of people may read the same text, but they read it independently. The production and distribution of a piece of literature does not necessitate any kind of public performance in the way music does. Despite the differences of affect between the mediums and the differences between the opinions of the two men in regard to art, their goal was similar. Döblin sought to stir the active fires of consciousness, analysis, and imagination in his audience; Nietzsche seems to have been more concerned with musical moods, but they both desired to see the larger community re-connect with one another and with primal unity of nature.

Thomas Keil quotes from Unser Dasein trying to explain Döblin’s search for something like an underlying, metaphysical meaning within the physical world:


Even as Ferdinand experiences enlightenment and a new kind of clarity and understanding of nature at the end of the novel, so too readers, in interacting with the text of Wallenstein, likewise find traces of beauty and a reconnection to their environment.

For Nietzsche, the reconnection to one’s environment, the sensing of the primordial unity of all things (das Wahrhaft-Seiende und Ur-eine), one needs the aid of music, but also of the tragic. The underlying drives and passions of the world are, according to Die Geburt der
Tragödie, ultimately tragic in nature; the essential nature of the Dionysian spirit is that it contains the element of death and re-birth, of Verwesung und Werden, and that it is lawless or formless. The Dionysian spirit operates within the bounds of ineffable dreams and unconscious wishes. It is the substance of humanity’s most basic urges and drives, which are as creative as they are ultimately destructive. These urges are ever present for an individual or community, but they require special care by an artist—a dramatist for Nietzsche’s context—if they are to be articulated. Art captures these ineffable dreams, but a successful artist will always, according to Nietzsche, take care to sacrifice the hero of the drama. If the hero of a tragedy were to live on, so would, in the eyes of the public, the embodied Dionysian ideas live on as indestructible or undying. A living hero would tie those very ineffable ideas to a fixed form and thereby deny their very essence. A dying hero, or a dead hero, reminds the spectator that the figure that the story is only representative of the larger Dionysian spirit. In this way, the spectators can never tie their affections to a single entity but rather the audience becomes caught up in the idea or the emotions which the character, the dying hero represents (108). Through the hero’s death, the public’s longings have been stirred and satisfied simultaneously.

Earlier in Geburt der Tragödie, Nietzsche discusses how vital the tragic and fearful elements are in art, and he cites Rafael’s painting of the Transfiguration where both the elements of fear and enlightenment are captured in a divine vision. Nietzsche interprets this painting as an example of the Dionysian elements of human psychology as giving birth to a glorious vision—the fear and death are necessary to prod the imaginations of the artist and audience to see and create something beautiful: “[…] [Apollo] zeigt uns mit erhabenen Gebärden, wie die ganze Welt der Qual nöthig ist, damit durch sie der Einzelne zur Erzeugung der erlösenden Vision gedrängt werde und dann, ins Anschauen derselben versunken, ruhig auf seinem schwankenden
Kahne, inmitten des Meeres, sitze,” (39-40). Nietzsch sees this aesthetic as healing and restorative for a culture (128-129). The ability of art to give form to humanity’s deepest emotional and psychological drives and to articulate them, brought with it a healing of self recognition. Art harnessed the haunting powers of the Dionysian spirit and made it useful. An aesthetic which embraced these principles of tragedy, according to Nietzsche, could lead a society back to the world spirit which inspired the Greeks.

Döblin’s aesthetic follows the same pattern. The images found in Wallenstein are those of decay, and they are also tragic images. It is a novel about breakdown, about loss, and the candid acknowledgment that “‘Ihr wollt sterben. Ihr könnt nichts als sterben’” (723). This is the plight of human existence: decay and change, death and re-birth into new forms.

The benefit of the breakdown, of portraying the world as one of death and decay, is not necessarily one of a beatific vision as in Nietzsche, but it does, according to Döblin, have a humanizing effect. The benefit of such violent, fragmented art is that it causes people to think, re-consider, and to see how they fit into the larger system of nature and society. Dietmar Voss, reflecting on Doeblin’s style in terms of Steine und Ströme, sees Döblin’s unique form of writing as a kind of surgery, designed to break through hardened hearts of readers, made cold and unperceptive to the needs to their community through adherence to individualism:

Döblins poetischer Stein ist Instrument einer psychochirurgischen Operation—„wie eine Säge“ dringt er durch den steinernen Panzer des Subjekts, sucht er den „Durchbruch durch die Mauern der Individualität“ (UD 254). Um sodann auf ein inneres, im Fleisch des Subjekts verborgenes Gestein zu stoßen: auf die explosive Landschaft des Unbewuβten, jene Lavablöcke, zu denen sich via Verdrängung die anarchischen Triebströme formierten sowie die abgespaltene Triebgeschichte des Subjekts, seine ungelösten Konflikte mit all den neurotischen Knoten, geschnürt aus unbewuβten Wünschen, Ängsten und Schuldgefühlen. Um sich in dies seelische Gestein
hineinzubohren und es wirksam anzugreifen, muß moderne Poesie selbst steinern, elektrisch, hart sein. (Voss 247)²

This ‘‘surgical“ benefit is not only for the individual, but also for the community, for modern poetry should have the effect of pulling the individual out of his own preoccupied, self-focused ideas and redirect him back to the ‘‘,Hingabe an die dunkle, überall wartende Gemeinschaft […] des sogenannten Todes‘ (UD 326), d.h. zu ekstatischer, die Lebensenergien aufreizender Todesgegenwart und zur rauschhaft intimen Teilnahme an der universellen Welt, d.h. an der ‘anorganischen Welt‘, wohinein die Seele kraft moderner Kunst, Poesie ‘eingesenkt‘ werden soll (UD 245)“ (Voss 244).

For both Döblin and Nietzsche there seems to be a kind of spiritual relationship between art, the natural world, and the reader or spectator. Art is a kind of new sacrament which heals the reader of his sins of hyper-individuality and restores in him an openness and acceptance, even love and care, for his surrounding community and environment. The goal of art is to bring the reader to the kind of epiphany similar to that which Ferdinand experiences. The reader realizes: “man muß sich nicht als Mittelpunkt oder Spitze der Natur sehen, sondern alle Dinge an ihrem Platz in ihrer besonderen Lagerung erkennen.“ (UD 195).

Döblin wrote in Unser Dasein: “Bewußtsein ist ein spezifisch menschliches Vermögen“ (195). Despite his recognitions of the animal-like characteristics which mankind possessed, this base quality of existence was not the complete fulfillment of human potential. Speaking of the influential ideas of his times, Döblin wrote:


He then goes on to observe how this ‘‘awareness’’ and active thought process is as much a part or more of these major philosophical influences as the role of non-rational impulses. For Döblin, the imagination of the human organism, the creative consciousness was what distinguished a person from all other types of living organisms. This faculty was not to be thrown away lightly or disregarded as insignificant. On the contrary, it was this “spezifisch menschliches Vermögen” which was the heart and soul of the natürlichen Zeitalters. Even though Wallenstein focuses more on the nature of society as a holistic entity and less on the role of individuals as such, Friedrich Emde points out that Döblin did not ignore the issues of the individual: “Die Interpretation von Wang-lun und Wallenstein hat jedoch gezeigt, daß in diesen Romanen keinesfalls nur die ‘Masse Mensch’ vorkommt, ja daß diese Masse entgegen weitverbreiter Auffassung nicht einmal der Protagonist der Handlung ist. Zentrale Positionen nehmen vielmehr genau zu bezeichnete Figuren mit einer in den Romanen erzählten individuellen Geschichte ein“ (122). He goes on to describe how ultimately Döblin’s attempts to provide philosophical significance to the fictional world through the portrayal of action apart from character development failed: “Der Versuch, durch Handeln Sinn zu stiften, ist im Wang-lun gescheitert. Im Wallenstein schließlich versagen alle traditionellen Sinngaranten. Das Individuum hat dem Sinnlosigkeitsverdacht gegenüber der Welt nicht entgegenzusetzen; es kann den Weltlauf, dem es ausgeliefert ist, nicht beeinflussen” (Emde 122). Whatever his earlier attempts at investing meaning into the world, Döblin eventually settled a strong conviction on this point of
Bewußtsein. It is such a “consciousness awakening” which is finally stirred in Ferdinand at the end of Wallenstein, and it cannot be an accident therefore that Döblin calls Ferdinand “die eigentliche menschliche Leitfigur des Werks” (Schriften zu Leben und Werk 186). It is this consciousness and awareness, particularly an awareness and concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering, which Döblin portrays as making us human and what he wanted to provoke in his readers. The violent images, the disturbing examples of decay and death are ultimately a kind of shock treatment for Döblin’s “patients.” Not only are we taken out of any kind of individualistic, self-centered comfort zone through elements of tragedy and horror, but we are invited through the fragmented style to use our minds to reconstruct events, to make sense of the sad, scattered puzzle pieces of the world which Döblin presents to us. The world was a place of suffering, a place where people, institutions, organizations, and plans were all subject to death, decay, and the threat of inevitable failure. In order to live in this world and to make a new society, to become a new community in the modern era, Döblin recognized that what was needed was a philosophy for life which accepted the world as it was and then engaged it in all its brokenness. A new, thriving society would not be created from ideals which pointed away from the difficulties of everyday life and into an unknown future. The modern community would not be helped by a religion or political agenda which was based on promises of another world or a world to come. What the new society needed was men and women with minds awake and hands ready for action.
VII. Conclusions: the Unwritten Religious Epilogue to Döblin’s Modern Novel

Whatever we may think of the rightness of Döblin’s ideal of a morality based on collective values and solidarity with the natural environment, his philosophy remains an unfulfilled ideal insofar as his portrayal of it in Wallenstein is concerned. Wallenstein is not a novel about the collective potential for good, even if it proposes that society should operate according to the principle of an interdependent existence and work for the good of the whole. As David Midgley aptly notes, the book is nothing if not a testimony of the potential for collective human brutality (218). Wallenstein provides an interesting, energetic, and insightful look into the processes of human nature and those of the material world, but the question lingers as to whether or not this novel does not simply provide the “means to create the effect of a meaningful universe” (Dollinger 105). An epic of this proportion is full of action, information, and visceral details, but the lack of a goal or purpose to history as well as the dominant presence of the impersonal forces of nature seem to undercut any source of motivation for engaging in social change. Even if the reader can see possible and persuasive means of social change, he is not provided with the ends for that change. What appears to be a very optimistic portrayal of life in Döblin’s art is sharply contradicted with his rather pessimistic philosophy. His Naturphilosophie seems many times to be little more than a reformulated assertion of situational ethics, and it is difficult to say for how long the mere artistic portrayal of a purposeful existence would sustain the philanthropic moods of society.

Despite the contradictions, Döblin had definite ideas for social change based on humanitarian values. He understood his self-reflecting, self-critical, “medical” portrayal of the world as the means to fight the kind of abuses of a totalitarian or imperialistic state or a capitalistic, profit-driven industry. He wrote later that the goal of the historical novel or of an
epic, like Wallenstein, was: „Die Entlarvung und Anprangerung dieser ungeheuerlichen Entartung […] Der unermüdliche Kampf aller Menschen, besonders der Armen und der Unterdrückten, um Freiheit, Frieden, echte Gesellschaft und um Einklang mit der Natur gibt genug Beispiele für Tapferkeit, Kraft und Heroismus.“ („Der historische Roman und wir“ 186). The common people who did not have the resources to dispute economically or educationally / intellectually with those in power were the people for whom Döblin fought, and Wallenstein is an example of an epic that makes the reader very aware of the manipulative methods of political, religious, and economic opportunists. An alternative history was needed which revealed the deception of those in power to combat the misconstrued facts taught in school systems. Döblin wrote: “Die Masse erfuhr niemals, was wirklich eine Gesellschaft ist, weder in der Schule noch draußen. Statt dessen fing man sie ein und berauschte sie mit Vorstellungen aus der Sphäre des Herrn und des Knechtes, mit den Vorstellungen der Gewalt, des Kriegs, der Technik, des Erfolges, des Rekords“ (186). Döblin was very concerned about the abuse of power and the poor of society who were denied their rights because of their background or economic status. He was hardly a Social Darwinist, though his philosophy, in and of itself, seems incapable of offering any real resistance to the abuse of an industrial capitalist or political tyrant. Döblin was not a hypocrite, at least not intentionally. We should not forget, for example, that he valued his primary career as a physician and psychiatrist much more than his writing. Working with patients was more important to him than almost anything else (Fuechtner 112). He was socially engaged. He did care about people and the improvement of their living conditions, even if he did propose a very alternative system of reasoning for accomplishing those goals.

Thomas Keil observes of Döblin’s Naturphilosophie expressed in Unser Dasein that human life is not necessarily valued within this system of thought as hierarchically more
significant than any other entity of nature. Döblin desired to emphasize the importance of the entire natural conglomeration of existence; all of it was important; everything belonged together. This belief problematizes the assumptions of human dignity or human life as the base for ethical considerations: „Hier ist auch die Ansatzstelle, an der Döblins Naturphilosophie scheinbar jegliche Humanität verliert und zum Tode zu streben scheint. Dagegen ist zu sagen, daß es hier eben nicht um Leben oder Tod geht, sondern um verschiedene Arten des Daseins. Das Leben ist nicht negiert, es wird allerdings auch nicht euphorisch gefeiert“ (Keil 44). This did not mean, as stated above, that Döblin was unconcerned with ethics. He recognized that one’s view of society and nature had implications for ethical behavior. The reference point for ethical concerns centers, in Döblin’s philosophy, around the collective existence of the new social organism which was growing as a result of the new technological developments and because of the Geist des naturalischen Zeitalters („Geist“ 83). What Döblin hoped for was a deeper awareness of the interdependent nature of a community—a realization that the decisions and actions of one always affect another consistent with the principles of Verwesung und Werden. All interactions between social and natural organisms are dynamic; relationships of all kinds will always involve building up and tearing down, and the injury done to one member of the body will likely also be a cause of suffering to the rest of the members. His philosophy appears to advocate disinterested concern for one’s neighbors based ultimately on a foundation of self-interest while simultaneously avoiding any kind of moral or ethical system which could be imposed upon society.

A decade prior to the publication of Wallenstein the English novelist, essayist, and journalist G.K. Chesterton published a book entitled What’s Wrong with the World in which he confronted some of the issues of seeing society in a fragmented fashion. Rather than beginning with the question of how things work and the nature of the individual parts of society, Chesterton
believed that a proper understanding of a community could never be conducted apart from knowing the “why” of a culture or apart from having an ideal. He objected to what he saw as a “medical” view of society. He wrote:

A book of social inquiry has a shape that is somewhat sharply defined. It begins as a rule with an analysis, with statistics, tables of population, decrease of crime among Congregationalists, growth of hysteria among policemen, and similar ascertained facts; it ends with a chapter that is generally called “The Remedy.” It is almost wholly due to this careful, solid, and scientific method that “The Remedy” is never found. For this scheme of medical question and answer is a blunder; the first great blunder of sociology. It is always called stating the disease before we find the cure. But it is the whole definition and dignity of man that in social matters we must actually find the cure before we find the disease. (15)

Chesterton’s response to the social ills of his day was to propose an ideal for society. In order to know why a society is not functioning properly, Chesterton argued, it is best to know how the society was intended to operate. We cannot know what it is wrong unless we know first what is right. Detailed information about the ills of a society will never provide a blue-print; showing a community the hidden “secrets of its heart” will never tell them whether the secrets were problematic, dangerous, or healthy. According to Chesterton, Collingwood’s concerns about the corruption of consciousness would never be put to good use unless Collingwood first had an idea of what an uncorrupted consciousness looked like.

The fear that Chesterton had of a society without any ideal of itself was that the community was opened to any number of inhumane abuses, having no philosophical grounds on which to dismiss them:

[…] it is enough to say that unless we have some doctrine of a divine man, all abuses may be excused, since evolution may turn them into uses. It will be easy for the scientific plutocrat to maintain that humanity will adapt itself to any conditions which we now consider evil. The old tyrants invoked the past; the new tyrants will invoke the future. Evolution has produced the snail and the owl; evolution can produce a workman who wants no more space than a snail, and no more light than an owl. […] Men need not trouble to alter conditions; conditions will so soon alter men. The head can
be beaten small enough to fit the hat. Do not knock the fetters off the slave; knock the slave until he forgets the fetters. (26-27)

Döblin’s rejection of a philosophy based on ideals and absolutes is related to his view of history. Having lived through World War I and a time in history when great expectations were placed on ideals of human improvement and historical progress, Döblin was concerned that German culture had been swept up into these optimistic views of the future and that people had been blinded to the normal, ordinary concerns of the local community. High-minded ideals are capable of justifying abuses as well: sometimes the ends do appear to justify the means. Döblin believed that the alternative to such a potentially destructive view of history was the belief that daily concerns were what made up the historically important elements of the world: “Was in der Welt vorgeht, erkenne ich als meine Sache, und meine Sache ist etwas, das die Welt angeht,” (UD 473). Again, Thomas Keil comments, “Konkrete politische Forderungen oder Visionen entwirft Döblin auch im Abschnitt ‚Sehr ferne Ziele‘ (UD 474) nicht. Es bleibt bei der Forderung nach ‚Genügsamkeit‘ und ‚Kampf gegen den industriellen Anreiz‘ (474), dieses vermeintliche Schreckgespenst des Kapitalismus” (Keil 58). There are no long-term plans or visions of history according to Döblin; there is only the focus on our existence and our partnership with the surrounding community. It is the recognition of that interdependent existence which creates a healthy society and makes for a better world.

Towards the end of his life, Döblin became a devout Catholic, which would seem to be in stark contradiction to his earlier beliefs of a Naturphilosophie grounded in materialism. In actuality, the opposite is true—he converted because he recognized in Catholicism the same affirmations of a broken, suffering world and as well as a belief system that gave impetus and meaning to the conscious and creative engagement of that world. Friedrich Emde quotes from Döblin’s Schicksalsreise:
Das „Glaubensbekenntnis“ leistet für Döblin Verschiedenes: Zum einen wird der Mensch vor dem „kreatürlichen Vegetieren“ und vor der Verzweiflung bewahrt, denn Jesus zeigt als Gott ein Ziel an, das sich nicht in dieser Welt erschöpft, und vermittelt dadurch die richtige Erkenntnis der Welt. Der „Punkt, der befriedigt,“ ist gefunden, denn die bei der ersten Begegnung mit dem Kreuz von Mende ausgesprochene Erwartung, die Bewährung des Gedankens: „was hier hängt, ist nicht ein Mensch, dies ist Gott selber,“ hat sich erfüllt. Gott selber hat es „der um das Elend weiß und darum herabgestiegen ist in das kleine, menschliche Leben. Er hat es auf sich genommen und durchlebt. Er hat durch sein Erscheinen gezeigt, daß dies alles hier nicht so sinnlos ist, wie es scheint, daß ein Licht auf uns fällt und daß wir uns auch in einem jenseitigen Raume bewegen.“ (Emde 269)

Again, what became such a powerful, motivating factor for Döblin’s conversion was that he saw in the crucifix a God who recognized the suffering of the world, suffered with the world, and gave meaning and hope to such a broken existence. It was a God who engaged. Döblin had feared prior to his conversion, that the world had been made by a God who somehow did not possess the power to preserve it or through error had made a faulty, broken world. Christ, thought Döblin, was sent from Heaven to repair the broken world God had left. This view is similar to that which, in Wallenstein, Ferdinand hears from the hermit—Christ was well-intentioned in his attempt to fix the world but ultimately doomed to failure. What Döblin came to believe instead was that the world was not a mistake or broken through God’s carelessness.

Rather, the world was still in the process of Werden:

In der so beschaffenen Welt, die erst noch auf ihrem Weg zum Ziel ist, hat Jesus nicht die Funktion, als Zusatzgott die Schöpfung zu reparieren, sondern einzig und allein die Aufgabe, der menschlichen Erkenntnis Klarheit darüber zu verschaffen, „was Dasein und Welt wirklich ist.“ Der eine Teil der zu vermittelnden Erkenntnis besteht in der Tatsache, daß der Urgrund [Gott] die unvollkommene Welt nicht aufgegeben hat. (Emde 268)

The answer as to why we should engage in the improvement of society, why we should be conscious of the interdependent nature of this world, and why we should be aware of those entities which depend upon our actions and simultaneously on whom we depend for our
existence, comes for Döblin, from Christ’s example. If God had created the world with the
design that it would grow and change and mature towards something better, it meant Christ was
not merely another inconsequential victim of the harsh and unchanging laws of nature, rather he
established a pattern for how the improvement of the world would come about.

The belief in Christ’s incarnation—that he was simultaneously God and human—meant a
divine affirmation of Döblin’s own paradoxical proposition of humans relating to the world as
both “Stück und Gegenstück,” as part of nature and yet separate from nature. In a similar
fashion, according to Catholic doctrine, Christ became wholly part of this world, and yet he was
wholly divine, wholly other than what we know of natural existence. The example of Christ’s
incarnation meant firstly that God, having created the world and being separate from it,
recognized the condition of the world and decided to enter into it. God did not remain aloof but
engaged. Secondly, when God chose to interact and become, somehow, part of his creation, it
was not as a collective force. The presence of the divine was not realized in the world as a result
of multiple separate entities coming together. God appeared as an individual, and not an
individual who waited for a collective enlightenment of the masses before he acted, but as an
individual who had to choose to identify with a dying, suffering humanity. Thirdly, Christ’s
suffering and dying as God and as a human meant there was a larger purpose involved. If Christ
had died only as a man, it could be seen that he simply succumbed to the forces of nature. His
death would not have meant anything. If, however, Christ as God deliberately chose to suffer and
die—when he clearly did not have to subject himself to this—it indicated a different purpose
involved. The idea of voluntary sacrifice was introduced, that the privileges of divinity had been
voluntarily given up and not simply taken or stolen from Christ. The strong implications of
God’s unique, individual purpose and choice as revealed in Christ’s incarnation prompted Döblin
to see the world in terms of a creation that God was actively shaping and bringing into maturity through the process of Verwesung and Werden. As difficult and even painful as it might have been to accept a God using these often horrific cycles of nature to accomplish his purposes, at least this was a God willing to subject himself to the same processes as the rest of humanity, even to the point of death by crucifixion. What this meant for Döblin was, at least, that his own engagement with society and the work to improve his culture was redemptive; it was not in vain from this theological perspective. Christ had shown not only a divine motivation for engaging society and the world but also an example or pattern for how to go about doing this, and his example was not contrary to Döblin’s observations of Verwesung and Werden but complimentary. Productive change could take place in a culture by individuals voluntarily embracing the principles of death and decay and transforming them into redemptive sacrifice by identifying with and serving the poor, hurting, downtrodden masses in society.

These themes of recognizing the tragic nature of the world and then, in spite of the difficulties, actively engaging the world and the people in it is what concerned Döblin as he wrote Wallenstein and it was those same concerns which would eventually lead to his conversion. The active engagement of a God with his creation provided a theological grounding for Döblin’s aesthetic as well as his philosophy of nature. His Catholicism did not counter his observations of the world, but complimented them and gave a new impetus for continuing to engage in culture and society. Wallenstein is a work of art which demands that we bring our imagination and creativity to engage the broken, decaying world in which we live. It is not out of moral obligation that this call, this provocation was made, nor did it arise out of Döblin’s belief in some other-worldly or historical ideal. His call to recognize the decay in the world, and then engage it and participate in the creative process came from what he believed it was to be a
human, to be both “Stück und Gegenstück.” The man or woman of the modern, technologically advanced society was still to be rooted in the cares and concerns of this world and in the normal activities of daily life, fully aware of the interdependent relationship they shared as individuals with the larger community and their natural environment. It was through the active awareness of individuals and the collaborative efforts of their community that they would not only create and define the modern society but that they would become it.
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