Man resembles a cauldron, a reservoir of energy [...] He is composed of the most remarkable substance. It insatiably demands new material, new water, new salts, new sugar. It is, by nature, characterized by endless fluctuation, desire, the obligation of need, by struggle, inequality, new constellations, equalizations, levelings-off. This is its metabolism and its inner life.1

Abstract: When Alfred Döblin penned *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftnord* (Two Girlfriends Commit Murder by Poisoning) in 1924, the story already bore all the hallmarks of sensationalist true-crime fiction: a working-class lesbian affair, an epistolary romance, and a premeditated murder by poisoning. It was based on the Klein/Nebbe murder trial that had then recently taken the Berlin press by storm. Unlike the extensive press coverage of the case, Döblin’s book-length work deliberately avoided causal explanations for the murder. Instead he explored multiple unconscious drives and the metabolic exchange of energy that motivated the protagonists’ actions. Written at a key moment in Döblin’s development as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, *Die beiden Freundinnen* is part of his long-term project to return the *Naturwissenschaften* to a study of the organic interconnections and mutual dependency he perceived as linking all natural phenomena. In this essay I examine *Die beiden Freundinnen* in light of Döblin’s early reflections on Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, his emerging *Naturphilosophie* in the 1920s, and his commitment to investigating the hidden motors of human consciousness.

The Klein/Nebbe Case
In February of 1922, Ella (Elli) Klein, a 22-year-old hairdresser in Berlin, began mixing large doses of arsenic into her husband’s evening meals. She and her married lover, Margarete Nebbe, who shared the same apartment building in Berlin-Lichterfelde, had plotted to murder both of their abusive spouses and begin life anew together. Elli’s husband, Willi Klein, grew increasingly ill as he was simultaneously poisoned and nursed by his wife during the subsequent four months. He died on April 1 in Berlin’s Lichtenberg Hospital, allegedly from alcohol poisoning. An autopsy requested by his

mother and a subsequent search of Elli’s apartment (which revealed the nearly 600 letters she and Margarete had exchanged during the course of their affair) exposed the homicide. In March of 1923, the two women were tried in a highly publicized case that drew together Weimar Berlin’s increasing fascination with sexual deviance, a widespread belief in a new, urban criminality and a sense that the war had produced large-scale forms of political, moral and social disorder that were wholly antithetical to traditional, Wilhelmine values.²

Major Berlin newspapers featured articles on the case by authors ranging from anonymous reviewers to Klein and Nebbe’s defense attorney, and literary figures such as Josef Roth and Robert Musil. In August of 1924, Rudolf Leonhard, a communist literary-political activist and the newly named editor of The Forge press, wrote to leftist journalist Alfons Paquet to announce the forthcoming publication of his series, *Aussenseiter der Gesellschaft: Die Verbrechen der Gegenwart* (Outsiders of Society: The Crimes of Today). Elli Klein and Margarete Nebbe’s story, as retold by Alfred Döblin, would be the first book in the series.

Döblin’s modification of the real-life protagonists’ names (Elli Klein became Elli Link, Margarete Nebbe became Margarete Bende) for his novel *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (Two Girlfriends Commit Murder by Poisoning, 1924) represents but one of the myriad ways in which he dramatically reconfigured the story of the homicide for his contribution to the series. Published between 1924 and 1925, *Aussenseiter* enlisted modern authors including Theodor Lessing, Ernst Weiß and Iwan Goll to write dramatized versions of criminal cases that had caused major press sensations in Weimar Germany.³ The 14 volumes represented a radical departure from previous German collections of causes célèbres, such as the *Neue Pitaval* (1842-1890). Viewing the justice system as a potentially culpable party, the works in Leonhard’s series set out to narrate the collapse of normative distinctions between “criminal” and “non-criminal” by pointing out the justice system’s failure to conclusively establish causality, assign blame, and judge expertise.⁴


³ Die Schmiede is also responsible for publishing Kafka’s *Ein Hungerkünstler* (1924), and – posthumously – *Der Prozeß* (1925). A full list of publications can be found in Frank Hermann and Heinke Schmitz, *Der Verlag die Schmiede 1921-1929. Eine kommentierte Bibliographie* (Morsum/Sylt: Cicero Press, 1996).