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Not All Who Wander Are Lost: Alfred Döblin's *Reise in Polen* [Journey to Poland, 1925]

This article examines the ways in which Alfred Döblin's travel text Reise in Polen [Journey to Poland, 1925] creates and explores the Jewish spaces of Poland. Through the use of anthropological and historical discourses, Döblin's text separates Jewish from non-Jewish spaces in order to create Jewish spaces that are not only geographically, but also temporally distinct. A close examination of the text reveals how questions of mobility are central to the text's constructions of individuals and their surroundings as they intersect identity. The narrator moves through these spaces as a privileged stranger and above all as a traveler, demonstrating a mobility that contrasts to that of the Jews he encounters. This contrast between his mobility and their relative lack of it links agency with space, a linkage that illuminates the text's more general approach to national and religious identity.

In 1924 Alfred Döblin – doctor, novelist, and journalist – journeyed through Poland and wrote a series of articles about his experiences for the *Vossische Zeitung*. The articles provided the basis for his *Reise in Polen* [Journey to Poland, 1925], which explores the relationship between diaspora, nation-state, and religion through the genre of travel text. Döblin sets out to learn more about East European Jews in Poland in order to gain insight into Jewish identity and the interactions between Jews and non-Jews. Years later Döblin wrote that Berlin's first twentieth-century pogrom, which took place in the Scheunenviertel in November 1923, motivated his journey:

ich fand, ich müßte mich einmal über die Juden orientieren. Ich fand, ich kannte eigentlich Juden nicht. Ich konnte meine Bekannten, die sich Juden nannten, nicht Juden nennen. Sie waren es dem Glauben nach nicht, ihrer Sprache nach nicht, sie waren vielleicht eines untergegangenen Volkes, die längst in die neue Umgebung eingegangen waren. Ich fragte also mich und fragte andere: Wo gibt es Juden? Man sagte mir: In Polen. Ich bin darauf nach Polen gefahren.

[I found that I really should learn more about Jews. I found that I actually did not know any Jews. I could not call my acquaintances Jews, although they considered themselves Jews. They were not Jews according to their religious beliefs, and also not according to their language. They might be a lost people who have long since been absorbed in their new environment. I asked myself and also asked others: Where are the Jews? I was told: In Poland. Thus I traveled to Poland].¹

¹ Alfred Döblin: *Schicksalsreise: Bericht und Bekenntnis*. Frankfurt/Main: J. Knecht 1949. P. 164. The translations are my own.

Here we see Döblin connecting notions of ethnography and space with one another – unable to find “authentic” Jews in his immediate context, Döblin proposes that they still exist in Poland. And in order to understand the intersections between location, religion, language, and culture, he must travel to Poland and see for himself. In his travels he seeks to find the essence of Jewish identity, to travel back in time to discover the “Ur-Jews” – the Hasidim² – in their original surroundings.

Döblin’s representation of the Hasidim acknowledges their existence, but as one that belongs to the past and bears little connection to the Western present, both geographically and temporally. What Mary Louise Pratt writes about travel and exploration writings in the eighteenth century also applies to this text of the early twentieth: “To revive indigenous history and culture as archeology is to revive them *as dead*. The gesture simultaneously rescues them from European forgetfulness and reassigns them to a departed age”.³ Eastern Europe is a space of the past, and according to Döblin, there is little, if any, connection between the East European and West European Jews. In Poland he searches for insight into Jewish identity, but what he finds remains inscribed in a particular time and place. He brings back images of East European Jews to the West, but creates an unbridgeable temporal and geographical divide between the two groups that makes it impossible to see the East European Jews as examples to emulate.

Part of this indelible separation is created through the use of anthropological discourses. As Assenka Oksiloff and others have shown, the “primitive body” was an object of great interest in the early twentieth century – both as an object of scientific study and one in the popular imagination.⁴ *Reise in Polen* reflects such anthropological discourses of the body and demonstrates how they influenced Döblin’s view of Poland and its people. For example, Döblin often describes physical attributes in close detail, and pays close attention to those characteristics that are “typical” for a people.

² Döblin’s knowledge of different movements within Judaism is somewhat limited and this article focuses primarily on his interpretation of the events and people he sees rather than on historical accuracy. However, a brief explanation is necessary: the Hasidim belong to a religious movement (started in the eighteenth century) that places great importance on the spiritual experiences of religion, and places less importance on intellectual and philosophical thought.

³ Mary Louise Pratt: *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge 2000. P. 134.

⁴ Assenka Oksiloff: *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema*. New York: Palgrave 2001. See also: Fatimah Tobing Rony: *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and the Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham: Duke University Press 1998.