

## ALFRED DÖBLIN

### REMARKS ON MOUNTAINS OCEANS GIANTS

After my novel *Wallenstein*, in 1919-20 I was caught up vigorously in politics, continually, not least in writing; staked a position. With my *Linke Poot* (Left Paw). That was a different kind of style, of speaking; it was good that I gave it a distinct name. For Kant was not Kant when he was a Geography professor (which he also was). Then some messing about: a mediaeval drama came along (*The Nuns*). Meanwhile on a Baltic beach I had seen some stones, ordinary pebbles, that moved me. I took stones and sand home with me. Something was stirring in me, around me.

When at the war's end I brought *Wallenstein* back home from Alsace-Lorraine without a concluding chapter, I felt around, sought around in me how I should end it. Best not to at all, I sometimes thought. Then, at the beginning of 1919 in Berlin, I was profoundly affected by some blackened tree-trunks on the street. That's where he must go, I thought, the Emperor Ferdinand. What stirred me, the stream of feelings, a new spirit, at once seized on what it had found. Commandeered what another related transient vanishing spirit had left behind. How feeble, to stick the label "re-orientation" on this. We are terribly fouled up in our thinking, by our daily practical dealings with its clear challenges, by the need for quick decisions, by habit. Puzzling things are no longer a puzzle when repeated ten times over, without in the least being cleared up. Most discoveries and scientific thinking consist of grabbing chunks from the jaws of habit and showing their obscurity. I "re-oriented myself": it was merely the symptom of an inward process. When I saw the blackened tree-trunks and was affected by them, the consequence was a child stirring in its mother's womb.

Emperor Ferdinand had to go right away down that path. I laughed, but allowed him no grace period. I felt: this is a break. It's no longer *Wallenstein* but something new. But I ought to and must lead the Emperor to it, whatever his past. Even if he should only become lost in this new realm, and pass away. And what else should he do: even I couldn't find my feet there. But I had to give the book this wonderful full stop. Even today I'm glad I allowed no contradiction, rule, consequence to trouble me, but set down what I was able to, what I loved, and let it go from me.

The full stop wasn't the end of it. With me it's like this: some things start by entrancing me, but I can't pursue them systematically. They slip away from me. I don't know where they go to, but if they're important they come back again and again, and that's the way I "pursue" these things. It's a kind of acid test that things undergo. If they don't come back they are deleted and were as nothing.

Amid all the politics I spent some months in 1920 – I don't know how it happened – occupied with biology, which I hadn't bothered with for years, and then with all sorts of natural science stuff. I

sniffed about here and there. Took notes on ants and the curious way they construct their fungus gardens, then stuff from astronomy and geology. I had no idea where it was leading. A remark in a historical record about the Abbess Judith of Kemnade took me off for several months in a quite different direction<sup>1</sup>. But the stones from the Baltic moved me. For the first time, really for the first time I hesitated, no, was reluctant, to return to Berlin, to that city of buildings, machines, masses of humanity, which otherwise I clung, clung fast to. I had a desire to stay longer in free Nature and let these things, for once, play around me.

Since childhood I have been a townie, a big-city dweller; at the age of fifteen, on a country outing, I saw my first cherry tree. To me it seemed ridiculous, romantic enthusiasm, vapid time-wasting to bother myself with the countryside. Prussian discipline, facts, sobriety, diligence: these were instilled in me at the Gymnasium in Berlin. I still remember my almost breathless joy when the first cables for Berlin's electric trams were being strung, and the mockery of my schoolmates when I went a half-dozen times to the Kroll Opera, not to a show but to stand by the basement entrance and gaze at a machine whose purpose I didn't know but which held me enthralled. Until recently I had something against Nature, I often said so and even wrote it. Even today I'm repelled by the search for aesthetically beautiful landscapes. It's pathetic to look at a bank of clouds and see nothing but nice shadows. The world is not there for gawping. Young ladies are not the measure of all things.

Then, as I have said, after the war it came over me. It began with the inconsequential full stop that concluded *Wallenstein*. Stones from the Arendsee<sup>2</sup>. It had me. The ascetic of the Prussian school receded. Or redeployed. Tears flowed, the Earth fetched me. I set down some essays on Nature: "Water", "Nature and her souls", "Buddha and Nature". Wanted to make a little book of them, but didn't, couldn't. The maxim of these ideas was "I – am – not".

I experienced Nature as a secret. Physics as the surface, begging for explanations. I noticed I was not the only one lacking an attitude towards Nature, the World Being; there were many others. Puzzled, I now viewed textbooks, for which I once had respect, quite differently. I sought and found nothing. They knew nothing of the secret. Every day I saw, I experienced Nature as the World Being, meaning: weight, colour, light, dark, its countless materials, as a cornucopia of processes that quietly mingled and criss-crossed. It happened that I would sit over my coffee and be unable to find my way to what was happening there: the white sugar grains vanished in the brown liquid, dissolved. Now how was that possible: "dissolve"? What was something flowing, fluid, hot doing to the solid to make it give way, snuggle up? I know I often became frightened, physically frightened, giddy in the face of these things – and sometimes, I confess, even now I feel uneasy.

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<sup>1</sup> AD's play *The Nuns of Kemnade*, written in mid-1921, was performed in Leipzig in April 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Large lake in Saxony-Anhalt.

For some months the pressure of these things was so strong that I deliberately turned away from them. I had to. I had to write something to be rid of them. Something different, quite different. Resolutely I set to. Best would be something epic. I could throw myself into that most easily, it would carry me far away. – What happened was strange.

Critics had reproached me for always painting some grand historical canvas. So they were challenging my imagination. This annoyed me. This time I would steer well clear of history. And anyway I'd just put behind me my Abbess Judith from the Middle Ages. I wanted something of the present time. Something pointed, active, to counter the "happening" of Nature. Me against my Nothing. And nothing could be more epic, more in motion, than: drive the present time out beyond itself. Nothing could be done with the present as such: I'm no Zola or Balzac. I needed an empty space, beyond the present. Thus, the future. That would be the most fertile field for activity and phantasy. When I found it I was glad.

I sent out a couple of feelers. The first part that I wrote was the voyage of the Negro Mutumbo, later incorporated in the Greenland section of the completed work). Here someone is crossing the sea, burning holes in it, has a magic cloak, the sea has to put a stop to it. Then came a plan for a huge expedition, at first I didn't know where to. But I didn't want to take off to the stars, this would be an adventure on the Earth, wrestling with the Earth. So: these people, nothing more than a kind of bacteria on the Earth's skin, become over-mighty from brains and cleverness. They take up the proud imperious struggle with the Earth. Soon, at the end of 1921, I had my goal: Greenland: icy waste, the volcanoes of Iceland trained on it. I had an image of glowing ovens: volcanoes as ovens, equipped with huge chimneys, heat-conveyors, heat-channels, reaching across the sea to Greenland. The volcanoes massively reshaped, the Earth loosened in its depths.

At the end of 1921 I felt my way, borne along by an idea that gladdened me with its scale, its boundlessness, it made me proud and cocky like a rider racing his horse across the steppe. I felt my way over the terrain: Atlantic Ocean, Iceland, Greenland. In the National Library, City Library I devoured atlases, geography books, specialist maps, wandered through the Museum of Oceanography, Museum of Natural History. Meanwhile the background was becoming clearer. I pinned it down in the big clothbound notebook in which I sketched plans for my novels: "The big city. Development of its industry and technology. It's prodigious, more prodigious than Nature. First there were kings. Song of the knights. History of this Earth. Wars. Science. Then came the workers. The big city: Berlin. What lived there. Struggle of Nature with Technology. Erotic types. How finally a volcano is opened up. Or how houses are left empty. They won't let houses rule over them. Alienation of people from nature." Epic and Hymn. Hymn to the city.

By the beginning of 1922 I was so impatient I abandoned my professional work for four weeks to make a start on it. It revolved around the Iceland-Greenland adventure. I drew special maps of Iceland, delved into vulcanology and the science of earthquakes. It went swiftly into geology and mineralogy / petrography. As always I wrote and researched at the same time. I lived from hand to mouth. At first, anyway. Gradually as I work I gain an overview of my needs, and put my materials in order. The collection grows to a substantial volume as I work, arranged in my file-box alphabetically according to key words. In the first quarter of 1922 the Iceland-Greenland section was put to bed. I knew roughly where the momentum was coming from, not yet where it would lead.

But I soon noticed something during this beginning. I had moved out in order to evade the terrible mystical Nature-complex. And – was sat in the middle of it. In the middle. In my hands I held books on mineralogy, petrography, geography, looked at rocks in the museum! I was deep in it again from another direction. Sunk. It had reared its head again. The strongest weapon I had raised against this heavy, chest-tightening concept was of no use. I myself was engaged in the Theme: human strength against Nature's power, the impotence of human strength. Without knowing or wanting it, I had made a mirror-image of my little special effort. Yet I was not the same now as I had been before starting the book. I keep saying "Nature". It's not the same thing as "God". It's darker, huger than God. The complete whirling secret of the world. But still something of "God". It seems right to me that people approach this intimidating riddle with shoes in the hand, and only seldom. Now as I wrote I found that the way I felt about the secret had changed. I found myself facing a secure, strong power that demanded expression, and my novel had a specific task: to praise the World Being.

I – prayed. That was the transformation. I prayed and let go. I resisted as meekly as one resists in prayer. My novel was no longer a gigantic struggle among city-states, but an affirmation: a comforting and celebratory song to the great Mother Powers. Around May 1922, while I was in seclusion in Zehlendorf<sup>3</sup> for several months, I gave voice to this in the "Dedication". I laid down my arms before the autonomous Will in me. And knew and know: an autonomous Power was making use of me.

Around this time I set aside the basically finished Iceland-Greenland books, and began to write systematically from the beginning. My plan read:

"In the first book, the conquest of the world is over. Plan for the de-icing of Greenland. There are districts in cities with remnants of nationalities that hate each other. A Negro from the Gold Coast. The machine-lords make use of the man of violence. A scene: the mowing down of the excess people, and then the machine-lords themselves. Corpses of those shot, embalmed, hung from pillars for decades, but were not silent. At specified times moved their arms, screamed harshly. This was Mutumbo's clock. – Frenzy following the de-icing of

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<sup>3</sup> Berlin suburb, near the lake mentioned in the Dedication.

Greenland. They want to lay waste all the city-states. Then the transformation of the pleasure-city, city of bronze.

A figure: lanky very young man with deepset eyes, a megalomaniac. He claims descent from gods, and orders their worship. Has himself worshipped in the form of animals. He constructs a hill, and there in a bowlshaped depression his palace with its towers. The Greenland campaign is conceived and crushed by him.

Spread of this regime across the whole Earth. Shattering images of the flight and retreat of African and Arab hordes out of the cities.

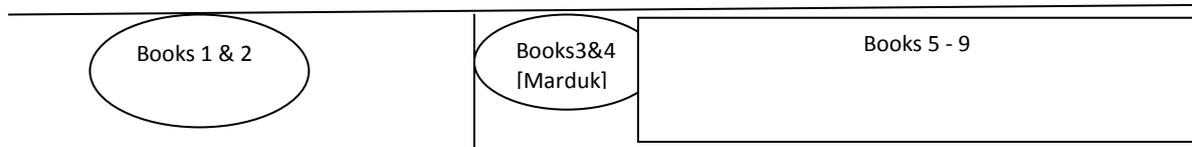
The last people have the capacity to rejuvenate themselves. They cannot die. The rejuvenation process, or maintenance of a particular age. Sleeplike trance. These contrasted with the Naturals, the older peoples. Their last battle.”

This was distributed and planned over and around the Iceland-Greenland books. That I distributed so much and always more in this central section had the secret advantage that I kept – withdrawing from it, that at least temporarily I – ducked out.

The first two books are this undermining, an introduction. I was swiftly captivated, had to follow on, to see and set down vividly how, under the flourishing onward march of technology, mankind as a social organism and as the human animal conducts itself. It wasn't possible to expand further on this; but everything I touched on was at risk of growing into an entire book. I constantly had to cut back and apply the brakes. To give myself respite and keep coming up for air, from time to time I broadened out the report – the whole sections could only be a report – to an oasis-like tale, allowed events to spread. Hence Melise of Bordeaux and the whole Urals War and other smaller passages. After the synthetic food and the Urals War, at first no more progress was possible, no way over the ridge. Another register was needed. After the masses and density of the first books I had to let in something lighter and more personal. I am an enemy of the personal. It's nothing but swindle and lyricism. The epic has no use for individual persons and their so-called fate. Here they become the voice of the mass, which is the real and natural (hence epic) person. The individual fate of a city-state, Berlin as a representative one, now developed; Marduk, the second Consul, his friend Jonathan and the woman Elina accompanied and unfolded and gave voice to the events. These two books, the third and fourth, became a novel in themselves. There the theme of the whole work was taken to its bitter end, even surpassing the Iceland-Greenland adventure. Marduk and Elena were the first to lay down the arms used against Nature and really against themselves. Marduk was dismembered, melted down by Elena and returned to the Earth. Behind and under his life of violence, he found himself.

And so I had run right past my Greenland obstacle. Had shot right over it. What to do with it. No problem: it had been the individual fate, insular, menaced, of one city-state. The whole of

technology, the monstrous apparatus of power of western humanity was still alive. They would have to follow Marduk's path. The scheme looks like this:



Books 1 and 2 reach the point where technology breaks down, and stay there. Marduk, over two books, leads us to the goal of the whole novel. Humanity as a whole must take a long enormously sweeping path in order, much later, to reach the same goal. This from Book 5 to the end.

After the Marduk books I had to feel my way via a transitional book, the fifth, towards the two colossal books of the Iceland-Greenland adventure. Now a quite new song started up. The really big one. A new spirit knocked the stuffing out of the original sketch. It was the Urals War again, but not brief and ending inconclusively, but full-width and working out all the consequences. Now the whole of humanity would meet its fate.

In general I was steered by a plan that I'd sketched thus: "Marduk's realm. Meanwhile the terrible further growth of discoveries. The discoveries attack even this realm. That's Part I. Part II: war against Nature. Greenland the high point. Nature falls on the attackers, failure of the enterprise. Part III: gentle coming together. Troubadours."

But this was only a general direction of growth. The details were created in the moment, developed according to circumstances. And great Nature never moved against the humans. Humans assailed her. Those who opened their hearts and their eyes met a richer fate than Marduk. Kylin and Vaneska are not continuations of Marduk and Elina. The characters in the later books have no independent existence, are very close to Nature. Vaneska in particular is never released from the – geographical and epic – landscape.

Just as I had hesitated long over the last chapter of *Wallenstein*, so here with the last book. After the collapse there was really no more to say. But in the months while I was writing the later books I was long since done with much of what I wrote. The inner drive had been lifted. At first I'd been impatient to get to grips with these things; now, to be free of them. For a while I'd often been asking: "Where are you at now?" It was a happy feeling when in May 1923 I conceived Vaneska's fate: the suffering yearning soul sinks itself in the horrible rampaging Giants, calls them her brother, and they

die willingly. We are not lost to the other powers. We can have agency. The mighty realm of natural "souls". It's no longer this book... .

In some respects this was a peculiar book for me. Its style, for one. Normally I relish conciseness, objectivity. Here I was unable to resist impulses of a purely linguistic kind. It went wide and colourful. It was as if everything wanted to be autonomous, and I had to be on my guard. The lofty plane of several parts, their solemn hymn-like character, contributed to this. I also confess that I had the feeling I was no longer in the region of my own prose or normal prose, in the purely linguistic. Where the journey's going I don't know. The old verse-forms seem to me impossible. You shouldn't force anything, should not want, let it all become.

Then the women. Before this I had never beaten about the bush. They just weren't important enough to me. All too easy, when women pop up, to go idyllic, or psychological, or private; they sterilise the epic. You must treat them in a different way if you want to draw them into your epic. You have to defang them, demolish all that is sweet, self-important, catty, interesting about them. The true Female is what's left over. No longer the solitary Outsider-thing, but the simple elementary minx, that other human species, the Man-Woman. For you must realise that the woman, unlike those degenerate females who only "love", does other things besides; namely, just like a man, guzzles, drinks, falls ill, is nasty or docile. During the writing I managed mostly to leave women out. I had to guard my male characters from being made ridiculous and silly by them, as generally happens with a "loving creature". Now in connection with my theme, in the emotional space of this work, I had women in my grasp. That wonderful phenomenon, the Female, was there. That manifestation of Nature, Nature as the Female. She was not so different from the male. It was merely a variation of Nature in the context of the Human. It was not clear to me that there could be only Male and Female. There must be a third, a fourth kind. These were the varied species of the later books. The boundaries between Male and Female kept dissolving away from me. But this blurring of the boundaries lent an enormous charm to human relationships. I stepped beyond normal / perverse. Its "sense" became clear to me from my underlying feeling.

I've said enough. I don't like spending time on old works, partly – as I have mentioned – because I'm already somewhere else, and what's the point of looking backwards. On top of that this latest book is for me something singular, frightening. Does it help anyone, what I've said here? I don't know. All in all you have to learn to see the unfamiliar. A riddle is no longer a riddle after the tenth repetition. The books I write are neither hard nor easy. I provide data – some, it seems, new and strange. How "hard" or "easy" the data are is irrelevant, a private matter.

Farewell and a long life, Balladeuse, Marduk, Icelandic volcanoes, Greenland's glaciers, Venaska, Giants. By our fruits shall you know us. You are all me and not-me. I am glad that I'm no voyeur, that I welcomed you like a good host when you came into my house. I never asked you whence and whither. We understood each other by a handshake and a glance, even now, as I show you dear lovely creatures to the door.

END

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