

COMPETING WITH THE UTOPIAS

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It conceives itself more comprehensively, measures larger than the globe of this world, does the human head. It can think and rethink itself and us at any desired remove, freed from earthly gravity. It writes itself prospectively differently than it reads itself retrospectively. The human head is a monstrosity.

Hence the extravagance. Because of it, we alone of all creatures (not even birds excepted) point to things far beyond ourselves. So head-created Progress outstrips us. We sniff a happiness quite beyond ourselves, and wander small-mindedly into wide roomy head-systems; for the human must always be more than is promised by his tight-laced bundle of aptitudes; because too much is expected of him, he always demands too much of himself; must always reach beyond himself, seek a better world beyond the time allotted and ahead of his own presence.

As long as humans are on the move – and they’ve been searching for longer than we have evidence – they try to reel in their Utopia. It might mean an idyllic total welfare decked out in little flowers, but can also be called a theocracy. For centuries it lay beyond this vale of tears, then Paradise was sought on Earth. No, various Paradises: one wasn’t enough to encompass that much imagining of justice, desire for freedom, strength of faith, will for order, obsession with security. Enough was never enough.

So he imagines himself, the human with his head that surpasses the world. And what he imagines becomes for him reality, it *is* because imaginable, he can grasp it; I say it’s more real than the sharp-edged fact on which he daily bangs his knee. He wants to know, and already knows in advance, what lies beyond the Seven Mountains. He speaks in triumphant tones of a concrete Utopia. In everything, even in his cabbage patch, he seeks perspective. And like the automobile compared to a horse and cart, so must a Cezanne compared to a Raphael represent Progress. Always that which *is* must be greater than that which *was*; and what is to come must be more perfect than the present and the past. Even the conservative phrase “It was better before and can only get worse” is simply the inversion of monstrous thinking beyond the present.

And so it can give no peace, the Promethean head. Its searching, straying restlessness, always chasing after a hint of Utopia, it calls “creative”. And so the New arises, and from the New yet more New. And because it is not yet autocratic enough and clouds provide no foundation, for the longest time there developed and still develop the New and Bigger – within nature, with the aid of a nature leashed or under a controlled unleashing, or even bluntly directed against nature: inorganic synthesis, and the already-present Utopia of atomic energy from fission.

Recently the New (and the New from the New) has appeared outside earthbound nature: satellites, space stations orbit around us, leave us behind, seek out other

planets, return bringing knowledge for the New that in big heads makes imaginable yet more New.

For example, UFOs, because thinkable, are also there, and stalking us: in the cinema and in reality. The new concept of God has acquired saucer-shaped form. Salvation or retribution are once again awaited from outside. Astral concepts are used to shape new-style archangels. Release from the earthly vale of tears is to come about in the cosmos. Only the Revelation of St John presents difficulties, because it is so unsurpassable; and it must be surpassed, at any price. Should a present-day Heinrich Schütz wish to capture in motets our contemporary yearning for release from this over-populated vale of tears, his orchestrations would have to sound even more fleshless and sphere-like than Schütz's choirs of the starving during the Thirty Years War. But this remains to be done. Finally we can do it: let the ether sing. Finally there is the prospect of winning, in images at least, the competition with all the Utopias invented in too-big heads. Already our latest and pre-latest Utopias have been reeled in and commercialised on film. And so we go as family groups, as a couple, by ourselves to the cinema to take a look at our future. And if we don't want to go to the cinema because films, even Utopian films, are as rule shortened, we can open a book; for we can still read, though always with more difficulty, because we lack concentration and are on edge in between meetings, and though always with ever greater embarrassment because we know it's an old-fashioned and quite purposeless time-wasting activity; but libraries are still open, reading – even if restricted in one way or another – is still allowed, books still beckon, especially if covered in dust.

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Mountains Oceans Giants is the title of Alfred Döblin's great, exalted, forgotten novel, which appeared in 1924 and is waiting to be discovered anew: a Utopian blueprint, written immediately after the chaotic *Wallenstein* novel that reads like a Utopia fleeing backwards. A book not nourished on the latest technologies in the science-fiction mode, rather it takes for granted possible and maybe-possible technologies and in its main currents was written as if under a visionary over-pressure: so real and diffuse at the same time are his bursts of thought, chains of images and flares of emotion fevering into bombast and suddenly extinguished: a deluge of invented action.

In *Mountains Oceans Giants* there are city-dwellers who live not in landscapes but in extensive cityscapes, townzones, and whose bodies, idle for generations because freed from labour yet considerably provided with synthetic Meki-meals, carry giant heads – not imaginary but quite natural – on their weedy frames. Future? Döblin writes, looking back at the 26th century:

Physicists and chemists emancipated themselves from animal and plant life. For a long time, reluctantly, with a half-laugh, thoughts of famine had surfaced: a single dry summer could inflict it on an entire region; absurd human thralldom to heat and drought. These chemists and physicists hated nothing so much as a green field of crops, meadows, the grotesque assemblage of a herd of cattle.

Soon the narrator's past imperfect takes us forward with this report: "People returned to the vast cities. They encysted themselves in the cities. Left most of the Earth to itself. The soil rested." And then:

Now the grim passionate struggle of the workers could come to an end. From now on the western peoples, almost all swallowed by the cities, would forever be divided into a small active class and an idle mass. Membership in these groups changed according to inclination and need. The ever-growing mass of unemployed had to be kept occupied with entertainments and make-work. The uniformity of the species soon developed into a chaotic diversity. The rulers had available a large staff of experts and pretend parliaments to attend to the diversions of the idle masses.

No wonder that a society stratified in this way – it will probably, including the pretend parliaments, be ours sooner than Döblin predicted – can think up what is always new and never-thought-of, and that its never-thought-of becomes real: the transcontinental mega-empires, in the west and in Asia; the Urals War between them that rages with manipulation of the elements; the great man-eating Female Leagues following the occasional flights from the cities; the melting of Greenland and further marvellous terrors, all of which, described thus or thus, vary according to chance, and thanks to too-big human heads shall have their future – up to page 511 of my edition, where the head's final destructive whimsy pans out in the primal mother-figure of Venaska after even the Giants are defeated: "Black the ether overhead, with its little balls of sun, sparkling heaps of sintering stars. Breast to breast the blackness lay with these humans; from them light gleamed."

And this extravagant book, whose theme is the heaven-storming extravagance of humanity, I took with me, read for comparisons, argued against, when recent travels through Asia and Africa brought me to places where everything is present everywhere: Utopias – the bygone and the regressed, the only just erected, the overtaken, and other Utopias not yet in the programme.

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The Utopian proposition is nourished not entirely on synthetic future foods; whatever the past has palmed off is sliced up in the present in order to still its future hunger. In Japan, my first destination, I saw one of Döblin's townzones, compared with which the Ruhr conurbation is a tree-lined idyll: the region Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe. From the port cities up to the elevated old imperial city it is described by shacks and huge buildings, construction sites, demolished ruins, intertwined tiers of industrial plants, crowded temples, and little shrines, sports grounds of artificial green, scrapyards of compressed waste, expanses including blighted and hence forgotten rice fields overtaking the horizons. Everything is mixed up together. Tiny stone gardens in traditional style amid encroaching industrial waste whose edges lap against cemeteries. Where the stone-hewn cult of the ancestors, the last piece of picture-book Japan, is still presentable, it is protected by dead corners of the railway lines leading to the Tokyo conurbation not far away: three rapid hours through densely-settled districts, past the millions in

Nagoya, until intricate rice terraces and polythene-covered vegetable plots show that – be it in the most constricted spaces – remnants of Nature still exist.

Soon these major regions will have consolidated into townzones. Countryside will be kept only as waste ground or a nature park. And at some point – in the west already in a rudimentary way, in Döblin's book not until page 229 – an "exodus from the cities" will begin. But where to in Japan, where no expanse remains fallow, and the next step but one brings you to the coast? All this industriousness, this frugality that lives on rice and fish, this complex smiling, the suppressed yearning for a continent and wide open spaces, the already unleashed capacity to stuff the world markets with small appliances and accessories – where should it go, this once and future Asian power recently defeated militarily and now peaceably earning its way?

In Japan's department stores, which are as crowded as anywhere else, Japanese who look like Japanese move past long-legged fashion dummies whose plastic bodies have a rosy tint and – dressed in western style – embody the white race. That's what they want to be, no more slitty eyes. Gaze out on everything of small stature from big blue doll's eyes. Where they come from, these cool, blond, tall creatures, that's where we want to go when the cities empty. For it's certain they will empty, and sooner than depicted in Alfred Döblin's book.

Fed up with their liberation from toil, disgusted by their idleness and the daily Meki-meals, no longer willing to carry the too-big head on the puny body, the masses quit the cities. They head off in hordes that settle for brief periods and seek a bygone Utopia. Then come new exoduses from the townzones of Asia and Africa, their masses mingling with the western nomad hordes to flood across the continent that has become steppeland. Like a sponge, Europe sucks in the human flood.

Japan's people are still kept to the islands, those overloaded vessels. They must still endure a life cheek by jowl, stacked high in layers like the millions of dried fish in Japan's markets, sorted according to species and size, arrayed on little sticks, neatly salted in chests ready for export. They plunder the seas, not only nearby but in far-off foreign waters. Fish, mussels, algae, seaweed, seagrass, sea cucumbers, arctic krill, anything that can be dried, pressed, stacked, laid out in rows, compressed as fishy substance, ground into fishmeal, is brought home and could, as long as the oceans yield it up, feed the whole world. They would have to be admitted everywhere, they would bring their technology and their fish. Already they have set up seagrass plantations in the ocean. They are already starting fish farms. Already they can turn deep green gelatine from algae into flakes, stamp them out in any desired size, seal them in plastic, store them up until the year 2000, to pick a year at random.

And in among the marketable products of the seas – which if one were to consider all the want still in the world and at the same time leave the oceans and their exploitation to the omni-commercialising Japanese, the end result would be the total feeding of the whole world marching in step with the advent of another Utopia – in the shops fringing the markets I saw small appliances of various kinds down to the

fingernail-sized, devices of whose purposes I had no idea, but which, produced so cheaply at such low wages, could supply the world – much like the dried algae – with homely data-storage devices, family-size computers and other cute playthings, wherever markets are open.

Nothing in between. Here the mass products of Nature, smelling fishy – there the most up-to-date technological whimsy, smelling of nothing. In between, a chasm. A complex vacuum. For between fish and electronics they fidget with the remnant threads of persisting tradition and the tangle of contemporary neuroses. Peaceable, up to the usual – usual elsewhere too – worldwide terror and anti-terror. Add in hard-working and punctual. With so much shared past aggression and a present sated with suppression, the Germans and the Japanese could set up a trade in national clichés. Allegedly comparable, even if the Japanese are allegedly built differently: they are allegedly intolerant to dairy products. Both nations have allegedly democratised themselves as rueful sinners to the extent they no longer persecute their minorities – particularly ever since Germany has been more or less without Jews; for even in Japan the *Eta* – meaning “the impure” – are as good as tolerated.

There may be two to three million of them. Enquiries about their origins are not easy, and only whispered behind the hand. In ancient times the Japanese ate meat and could even tolerate dairy products. When Buddhism arrived in the 6th century and forbade killing, the new doctrine was restricted to the slaughter of livestock: meat-eating was deemed dirty. Even dairy products were no longer consumed. Ever since then, slaughterers, butchers, tanners and shoemakers have been shunned. They were called *Eta*. They are found throughout Japan, congregated in villages or scattered, especially common in and around Kyoto, Osaka and Hiroshima. They are not persecuted, but all are disadvantaged. Try as they may to conceal their origin, it will at some point come to light that they are *Eta*. Then they lose their occupation and with it their social status, downwardly-mobile among the upwardly-mobile. Of course, in modern Japan as elsewhere there is an emancipation movement for the protection of minorities. In Parliament there are socialist and communist members who belong to the *Eta*-class but who, obviously, primarily quarrel about ideology.

I was almost glad to discover that even in Japan, with all its levelling to the point of uniformity, there exists a minority problem; for what characterises this present world is that its human occupants, contrary to Döblin’s future masses who have left behind all racial divisions, are everywhere sprinkled with minorities. In Japan they are the impure meat-eaters, who can digest dairy products. In Indonesia the industrious Chinese, turning their hand to every branch of trade but also practising high-interest usury, occupy the position of Jews. When in 1966, after the overthrow of Sukarno, a dreadful cleansing took place, fear of communists cloaked in the excuse of a Communist peril led to between 200,000 and 400,000 killed, among them many thousands of Chinese who were suspected of Communism because they were particularly industrious and invested their capital profitably. And in East Africa, where my travels brought me next, the role of the Jews is taken, like the Japanese *Eta* and the

Indonesian Chinese, by Indians. In Uganda, Idi Amin showed how to deal with minorities. They are needed, suitably repressed, to keep the economy going; they are killed because they must serve as an internal enemy; a few are left alive because you cannot live without an internal enemy.

Beautiful Third World! Indonesia is a rich, green, luxuriant land, blessed with three rice crops a year, and poor. Already exploited to the hilt by the Dutch, now it's infested with home-grown corruption. A third of its rice consumption must be imported, while the equally rice-eating Japanese, amid industrial waste and without the blessing of three harvests, have excess rice for export.

Ventilators, bicycles, motorbikes, photographic goods, all kinds of technical odds and ends a human being can think up to increase his needs: almost all of it comes from Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, the three dominant townzones whose shopping malls soar into the 21st century while, beneath the mutually-reflecting shop windows, slum districts proliferate, the Middle Ages persist, and there is fear of the demons of today. Cheap goods, smuggled goods flow through the only open trade routes of corruption. And because in Indonesia the local bribery practices open the doors for the whole world from Siemens to Unilever, the Japanese are permitted in far-off Borneo to fell the last hardwood forests, and with such rational intensiveness that not a scrap remains of country-bumpkin dreams such as reforestation. The Japanese are already intruding into the Java Sea. Soon, their way paved by corruption, they will have secured ocean fishery rights among all twelve thousand islands; for the Indonesian government is so exclusively occupied in retaining its power, securing its benefices and growing its Swiss bank accounts that no time is left to deal with matters of more immediate concern to the other 120 million Indonesians, 80 million of whom proliferate cheek by jowl on Java: developing the pitiful coastal fisheries into an ocean fishery which –with some help from Siemens, why not – could supply the whole country with fish through refrigerated supply chains.

But Siemens has its mind on faster business. And the ocean fishery is handed to the Japanese. They're dab hands at that. They're good not only for hundreds of thousands of motorbikes and millions of dinky pocket calculators; they know that on fish and other ocean products everything depends: meaning, the future, survival.

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For we are not yet as far along as Alfred Döblin with his accelerated bursts of thought. As yet there are no Meki-factories to supply free synthetic food to the global townzones and their slum districts. Or we are in fact so far along, but hold back the momentous invention just as, according to Döblin, the English Senate did: they imprisoned the inventor Meki, a wise cynic whose inventor-life was his only being, for ten years until he committed suicide: "London understood that monopoly control of the secrets of the synthesis and the facilities was essential, and that with this would come unprecedented power."

In Döblin's book it is European big-heads that secure pre-eminence through their monopoly of Meki-meals (later, monuments are erected to the suicide Meki); but I suspect that the pioneers in this field will be Japanese. They're so softly, so politely tenacious. They have switched from their capacity for destructive, self-destructive kamikaze flights to peaceful goals. Softly and without the noise of big-talking Americans, modest and lacking the arrogance of big-headed Europeans, they will smuggle in their innovations. While the markets for motorbikes, photographic equipment, miniature computers and dried fish still dominate, Japanese Meki-factories already announce the first market segments of their synthetic universal foodstuff. Still in small quantities, a little ridiculous and whimsical – you read about it in a fat tome about the future, Döblin was the author's name – but the demand is increasing: from the jaded, out of curiosity, and from the masses, out of want.

For the masses are increasing. Everything else may stagnate. Every progress may turn out to be a regress. In the European home only the pensioner-mountain towers higher while schoolrooms lie empty because at some point too few children are made. Asia knows no drop in birthrates from the Pill; children everywhere, in slums, in villages. Pretty children, happy children. Quiet undernourished children only too keen to produce more children, because children give life a swarming meaning, because reproduction and yet more reproduction is open to even the poorest, because having lots of children is a substitute for the lack of social security, because no one from the country's power-holders thinks to free this social insurance of the poor, based on a wealth of children, with a communal system. For that would be socialism. And socialism, they keep pointlessly saying, leads straight to communism.

And so – and it's no act of God – every day, and now no longer in slow motion, there occurs the only growth of our present day, the population explosion, causing other consequential growths: unemployment, deprivation, malnourishment, diseases, hunger. And were not the Japanese (who are English, according to Döblin) soon in a position to provide mankind not just with the Volkscomputer and worldwide databank installations but with synthetic Meki-meals, we would have to give in to utter despair, because nothing else works.

That's what writers tell us. Their plots always continue on: when the Meki-factories had assured the satiation of the masses with the help of synthetic food, humanity, kept in idleness with ever-full stomachs, began to sicken and become weary of themselves. "Dangerous apathy, erupting suddenly and turning everything rotten," notes the author Döblin. "Pageantry sports partying held little attraction. Fashionable pretty titillating seductive items, made by machines, were laid out for people who silently turned down their mouths. There was a swirl of old forgotten costumes."

To counter this slackening and dangerous turning away of humanity, the industry-dominated Senates of the western townzones unleash the Urals War. Once each side's rolling fire-machines have consumed the other side's, carrying away western and Asiatic masses in the process, the dawning of peace should have reinstated daily Meki-meals. But then the townzones emptied. People withdrew from the masters of the

close- and long-range devices. Settler movements unsettled the globe. Farm tools were unearthed. Shamans, the so-called “deceivers”, preached: Back to Nature. And so the big heads had once again to think up something new, a task for humankind. They began to conceive the melting of Greenland: a superhuman disaster that incites Nature to fury, accomplished with none of that nuclear power that we with our big heads and every previous Utopia have thought up as the present-day’s disaster.

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Fear not, something will always survive; for even in *Mountains Oceans Giants* there are survivors, reduced, it is true, to an archaic level, and with heads again smaller. In general everything goes quite differently in Döblin’s future. There’s no war between the stars, no visitations from astral bodies of the third kind. Everything stays nicely on the earthly carpet, which is now pulled along slowly, as if for good reason, and is now suddenly jerked forward and humanity takes a tumble. Even the brand new technologies appear not at all or only by allusion, they are random, as if drafted by the left hand. No details are spun out to make them scientifically credible. Even the Meki-factories are merely asserted. In the Urals War and other more classical attempts at conflict resolution there are casual references to long-distance ray weapons, called “devices” for short. The melting of Greenland, a tremendous spectacle, is made possible by tourmaline webs, which have stored the energy harvested from the energy of Iceland’s volcanoes which have been blown up as the preliminary step. Döblin asserts this and lo, it becomes real, as credible as the fact that in the future world of *Mountains Oceans Giants* there are no writers.

They are absent from the start. No one there writes and has it printed. Because nobody reads, there are no forbidden books to confiscate. Only once, when synthetic Meki-meals have caused a general slackening and dangerous reactions, do we read: “Germans took up the heavy Bible, leafed through the hymn book, sang mournfully in forests.” Otherwise no literary traces of any kind. And because amid all the violence and counter-violence, individual and mass annihilations, not a single writer is ever arrested, there is no need for any writer to protest the arrest or expulsion of writers. In his farsightedness Döblin has overleaped his existence as a writer: the book burnings, his exile during the Nazi years; his profession, it seems, has no future.

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But we are not there yet. Not yet. In Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand, India, in African Kenya, wherever I visited and as agreed followed the programme set up by the Goethe Institute, there were writers, meaning people who, in a hesitant, old-fashioned way accelerated by no technology, make words, form sentences, and help multifarious and contradictory realities take on a new, fictive, hence literary reality and in so doing engage in a dangerous profession; for the realities and their administrators outside of literature as a rule conceive of themselves politically, which means: exclusively. They want no other reality to be valid alongside theirs, not even a fictional one. So it happens that wherever in the world where only one reality is valid, writers are

compelled to silence through censorship, banning, confiscation of their books, expulsion from the country or arrest, or finally their removal from every reality.

This happened in Indonesia more than twelve years ago to the writer Pramudya Ananta Toer, whose books deal with the constricted reality of landless peasants oppressed by usury and corruption. Reason enough for Sukarno's successor to label him a Communist and imprison him with thousands of others on an island, in a concentration camp. No trial was held during those twelve years, no amnesty for him. No appeals or petitions were heeded. The only thing feared by the military of the insular state of Indonesia, concerned solely for their power, was the writer; and in their fear they are not ridiculous individuals, but in good company.

Where I come from – two Germanies – and where I visited – whether Thailand or Kenya – people at once understood or quickly learned to be circumspect with writers. Let's not talk of the German Democratic Republic – we all know about it – let us be aware all the more clearly that our Federal Republic's snooping system is developing in ways that have a tradition in Germany, and in the countries of the Third World, so soon after their independence, they have become dismal practice.

Since the beginning of this year the Kikuyu writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has been held under arrest in an unknown location. [*Note: since released*]. It's all the same to the governing class in Nairobi if such actions reveal them to be in no way different from the abuse of power in South Africa and Czechoslovakia, in Chile and the Soviet Union. In their interactions with people who, beyond or alongside the ordained reality, see, dream, advocate or even, as writers do, describe other realities, the ideologues have all converged. Their need for security enforces this convergence. However much the capitalist and communist systems like to present themselves as enemies keeping clear of any contact, when it comes to maintaining internal security or – in Sunday-speak – the guaranteeing of internal peace, they are as one in the abuse of power.

Because I am a writer, this devilish harmony makes itself evident primarily in the fate of writers. But at the same time it must be said that hundreds of thousands who are not writers are expelled, imprisoned, often enough even killed, thanks to the same ideological convergence.

But writers are especially suitable victims. They are strange, because unfashionably frugal. They get by on almost nothing: a bit of paper. They live by contradictions. What they think up attains a shape, makes itself autonomous, acts, but cannot be imprisoned. That won't do. It disturbs the peace, endangers security, promotes radicalism, hampers progress, poses only questions when what we need is answers: unambiguous, practical, relevant to our present day, yes indeed!

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That's why in *Mountains Oceans Giants* there are no longer any writers. In Döblin's world, humanity has moved on. The grand convergence of our present-day ruling ideologies has no need of them, not even as decoration, and has long since ditched the

troublesome questioners; or there may still be some, but they no longer write: dreaming marginal figures who seek not to express themselves but, lacking any intermediary means, use themselves up. All that's left is a lived literature practised beyond any galley-proofs; for example, the peculiar character Jonathan.

His mother was one of the new leading class, the technological nobility. Although every kind of research was forbidden after the Urals War by the absolutist ruling consuls Marke and Marduk, she worked secretly with a group that set itself the task of further developing synthetic food by speeding up growth processes. Consul Marduk had once belonged to this group, but then split away and ordered a radical de-development. He wanted to do away even with the long-customary Meki-meals, but in the townzone that sprawled across the blighted region between Oder and Elbe there was insufficient arable and meadowland.

In the course of a cleansing operation, Marduk had twenty-one scientists, among them Jonathan's mother, arrested and locked inside an experimental forest where the trunks and branches began to swell, grow rampant, exude juices until the forest became one with the bodies of the scientists. One of the new combinatory, so to speak synthetic, natural substances allowed the discoverer of the growth-miracle to become completely absorbed by her discovery: "The mammoth dripping crackling growth squeezed jammed pulped mashed the people, crushed the ribcage, broke the pelvis, pushed skull-bones together, sprayed white brain matter over roots. The trunks moved..." And then: "Marduk pressed his too-big head to the window. 'It's finished now. Your lot can do nothing more.'"

What remains is the young man Jonathan, a favourite of power-obsessed Marduk, and a succession of women, domineering representatives of the Female Leagues, counter-currents to the male world but just as greedy for power. A persistent, ever-recurring war of the sexes, through which the suffering sensitive Jonathan stumbles, never unambiguously aligning with one side or the other. As a sensitive yet unexpressed potential he is the incarnation of the no longer writing writer, a plaything of powers within whose arsenal are amalgamated all the terror-mechanisms of all our present systems – like that synthetic forest that merged with its inventor.

As in George Orwell's *Utopia 1984*, in Döblin's *Mountains Oceans Giants* all of today's superficially hostile ideologies have attained convergence. Just as in Orwell's oligarchic collectivism as a worldwide framework of power, fascistic and Stalinist structures are one and the same – hence no longer recognisable through opposed emblems, rather as a synthesis of both power-frameworks operating the huge all-encompassing databank – so in Döblin's novel this future tendency is similarly real. In both books, our current social systems of a capitalist or communist kind, likewise their subsidiary clerical-fascistic or half-communist military regimes, and such concepts as democracy, liberalism or worker self-management and democratic socialism, no longer exist, or better: are no longer recognisable because smelted into a single, total, all-controlling Will to Power, whose suppressed aggressions, absent today's still

current justifications, find release in the form of continental wars, regional pacification actions, and an occasional war of the sexes.

Of course we still speak of humanism, of course we invoke parrot-like the achievements of the European Enlightenment, the values of Christian ethics, the rights of the individual, and human rights and the right to work in general, but the future reality predicted by Döblin and later by Orwell has already begun; the prospect looms that the little Utopian target-markers will be reached sooner than they have been planted and dated.

Whether in Asia or in Africa, none of the established power structures, or those newly established through some upheaval, can be unambiguously identified with the inherited ideologies, rather everywhere there looms that oligarchic collectivism that Orwell predicted in 1984, that Döblin prescribed as the power and control system for his townzones. Irrelevant if in Indonesia or Thailand the local power elites prove themselves to be anti-communist and for that reason totalitarian, irrelevant if in Burma or Cambodia the power-holders define themselves as socialist and extend their total control for reasons of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism: all the named states are increasingly similar in that, with interchangeable ideological costuming and notwithstanding changes among the ruling elites, they grow into a global collectivism to which the industrial states of both blocs deliver the technological superstructure, along the lines of Döblin and Orwell: from databanks to fissile material.

No wonder that in such a present-day future, writers – like Jonathan a living anachronism – careen between the powers: they may still write, their appeals and protests may as ever commit to the pathos of humanism; they may be locked up here or there, their dangerousness overestimated, banished to islands, driven abroad or – as with Premier Filbinger and my colleague Hochhuth¹ - their mouths stopped by court injunctions; they may still be needed a little and prizes and stipends may support what elsewhere is punishable; people may in general act as if they want to save a dying animal species for a while; yet we can discern as more than a vague suspicion why expression is no longer possible for writers in Döblin's future reality; they are there only as beings of a hysterical-sensitive kind, like Jonathan: leftovers, bereft of means, without paper.

Yet, even so reduced, they disturb as they wander disconcertingly through the townzones, their sensitivity, gleaming all the stronger for being inexpressible, is sensed as an irritant. They exude playful tenderness, excessive sympathy, yearning for a past that could still dream a future, old-fashioned altruism. Amidst insensitive power structures they retain the power of feeling. No terror frightens them off from revealing themselves. Amid all the misery of the worldwide slum districts, in drought regions from which state-willed corruption exacts the last resources, in every place where

¹ In 1978 CDU politician Filbinger (premier of Baden-Württemberg) sought an injunction against the playwright Hochhuth regarding the latter's critical remarks about Filbinger's actions as a wartime judge in the German Navy. The case aroused renewed interest in confronting Nazi-era figures in prominent post-war positions.[CDG]

injustice cries mutely to Heaven, I saw Jonathan in action. As man or woman. He has no gender. He is feeling in action, far removed from utility and success – and no doubt also a reflection of that Dr Döblin who stood by the poor in Berlin's Urban Hospital.

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In Thailand it's a young doctor who, in the northwestern district of Prathai, in a province afflicted with drought and hunger, directs a ten bed hospital. At first glance a boyish person, 28 years old, cheerful: the usual smile of this country. I watched him pursue with concentration his utterly hopeless task as the only doctor for 80,000 residents of the district. Fevers, TB, a too-late request for sterilisation, mal- and under-nourishment and the ailments that ensue fill his working day. The region is ruled by a few rich landowners to whom armed bands in their pay drive the last water buffalo of the impoverished peasants. The police protect the landowners. The doctor knows this. He is powerless. He has cast his lot with the undernourished wormy children.

Objectively, as if only conveying regional statistics, he told us the reasons: over-reliance on rice, lack of vitamins B₁, B₂, A, lack of protein; showed us the symptoms: pale brittle hair, eye diseases, inflammations at the corners of the mouth, rashes, swollen bellies. If he were to stand up against the bandit terror and the state-enabled corruption he would have to desert the children, the patients, go into the jungle where the resistance is assembling. This doctor will stay as long as they let him.

Earlier this region was forests, now clear-cut in the predatory manner usual in this country. We hear that ever since, the rains have stopped coming even in monsoon season. The doctor can't transport the seriously ill, there's no ambulance. Power failures occur daily. His pitiful salary. What impels this doctor to continue in his hospital with no water supply? He is unique. The neighbouring districts have no doctor like this doctor. He was born in Prathai, studied in Bangkok, returned to his district after graduating. In Bangkok doctors sit cheek by jowl. None want to go to the countryside, to the drought districts. They want to be urban, dream of a practice in Europe, America.

Why do I tell of this one doctor? Because I want to stand him, who returned to his province, up against the thousands of Asian and African doctors who have studied in Europe or America, have stayed on there and not returned: paper doctors, lost to their homelands. Many call themselves asylum seekers, and thereby evade their task. This one doctor casts doubt on them all. Their refusals must be measured against his actions. They should be embarrassed, but I fear they will only laugh.

In Khlong Toei, the huge slum in Bangkok's port district, I saw a young woman who could be the sister of the doctor in Prathai. Born and grown up in the slum, she nevertheless stayed there as a teacher. She teaches unregistered children who being unregistered cannot attend any public school. Khlong Toei is a confusion of wooden shacks on piles stuck into a marsh fed by refuse, excrement, which in the monsoon season swells to swallow up the walkways between the shacks. Sixty thousand people live here, of whom eight thousand are small children. The aid provided by the young

teacher reaches barely a hundred children. Every day she gives each a mug of diluted soya milk. The soya milk is provided by Terre des Hommes. The doctor in Prathai is supported by medicines from Terre des Hommes.

These are the famous water droplets on a hot stone, the only ones that still count. Their futility makes even more real and honourable the work of the doctor and the teacher's slum school (soya milk included), compared to the flamboyant development projects, a good part of whose funds trickle away into government circles and whose flagship results merely widen the gulf between the undeveloped regions and the shiny special projects, be they a steelworks, a semi-automatic composting plant, a super-clinic, or even, in Jakarta, a photosetting printery, which does not, as the plan envisaged, print schoolbooks, but mostly puts pictures on packing materials. The paper, of course, must be imported, for before taking the trouble to promote an Indonesian paper industry, they took the second step before the first and, proud of the latest know-how (and supported by tax-efficient capital aid from West German and Dutch publishers) built a meaningless printing plant which every day, in order to remain solvent, spits out packaging which increases the price of products in this still poor country: planning failure as a tax write-off.

No, Herr Klett and Company!² Rather Terre des Hommes and the many droplets on hot stones. This small aid agency, financed by private donations and not by state means or Church contributions, concentrates particularly on the dire circumstances of children in slum districts. There's no shortage of these. For among the only real growth rate of our present day – unconstrained growth of the global population – we find the accompanying growth in unemployment and under-nourishment, and the flight of exploited peasants from the provinces of drought and hunger into the slums.

Here the future sketches itself. Here the stage is being set for Döblin's mass conflicts. Here, in the townzones, it has come to the crunch as worlds collide together, for example in Bombay.³

Some 70,000 people lived in the Janatha Colony, now called the Cheetah Camp, one of the biggest slums in Greater Bombay, of whose seven million inhabitants, according to varying estimates, between two and three million live in slums. Right beside the Janatha Colony looms the Indian Atomic Research Centre, which gave India its first atom bomb. The atomic researchers didn't much like their slum neighbours; called them a security risk. So in May 1976 the slum underwent compulsory clearance and was flattened by bulldozers. The 70,000 residents were assigned a stretch of open land along the coast, which at the start of the rainy season becomes flooded and swampy. Several hundred children died in the first few months. Suicides increased. Meanwhile the Atomic Research Centre planned to turn the vacant site into a recreation ground. Since then golf courses have been contoured, you can relax over a game of tennis, no lack of swimming pools, research is once again fun for the atomic

² ?The Klett Group is a large educational publisher.

³ Now spelled Mumbai.

researchers, they feel quite secure among themselves: the new elite. Those with the knowledge. Knowledge of bits, and bits of bits. Those with the too big heads, in which they think up what transcends humans and their slum horizon. It's all about them. They are precious. The future belongs to them.

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In *Mountains Oceans Giants* the scientists as an elite are identical with the autocratic senates of the townzones. They have done away with parliaments, or degraded them to pretend parliaments. They have the industrialists at their back: the big boosters. The machine-stormers came to grief against them. The results of their researches – and not the dull needs of the masses – determine the direction. They have brought an end to arduous agriculture and the full employment of serfdom by rationalising their production facilities and ensuring the freed worker masses a little bit of existence with synthetic food. When the ordained idleness threatened to develop into anarchy, they started the Urals War on a pretext. It was scientists who, after the emptying of the cities, harnessed the settler masses to a new goal: the melting of Greenland. And when the tourmaline webs had laid Greenland bare down to the Cretaceous strata and brought it to a vegetable seething, when gigantic primeval reptiles and street-long flying dragons emerged from this melting-pot of rampancy and left Greenland to fall on the western townzones, causing panic among the masses, it was scientists again who knew what to do: they handed the struggle against the tourmaline-engendered monsters to the so-called Tower Humans: synthetic beings of a gigantic kind in which, as in Marduk's experimental forest that amalgamated with everything, animal and human bodies are amalgamated and forced by tourmaline rays to a gigantic growth. The panicked masses, along with the laboratories and Meki-factories, are tucked away from the Earth's surface in subterranean townzones:

As storey after storey was dug into clay, as ever bigger caverns were excavated, and spoil – loose earth, blasted rock – was heaped up in the ruined streets of the surface, everyone lost any sense of fear. They were not fleeing from the monsters: they were on a grand new expedition. The senates called: "Away from the Earth," and they dug merrily down; the miracle of human capability experienced by the Greenland expeditionaries they now could experience for themselves.

Is Döblin hinting obliquely at the future? Even if the melting of Greenland and all the fabulous consequences is regarded simply as a grandiose literary horror story, the removal of humanity, or a part of humanity, underground – an alternative: huge concentration camps that circle the Earth as satellites – remains credible because possible, or possible because credible. The Indian atomic researchers' sense of disgust (and their need for security as well) was strong and plausible enough to make the clearance of the huge neighbouring slum seem logical. Cheetah Camp, the present slum district, lies right beside the Indian Navy's arsenal: once again the security question. But where should the slums in Bombay, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Bangkok, Nairobi go, if their displacement and partial cleansing leads only to bigger slums and increased flight from the countryside? "Into the Earth!" Döblin has his

townzone senates call; but “Up into Space!” could be the recommendation of an international cleansing commission the day after tomorrow.

The slums are still cut off from urban services: unconnected to rubbish collection, sewers, schools, hospitals, to urban water supply. Burdensome limbs that are cut off and left lying. But they rot, stink, keep growing nevertheless, join together, threaten to merge with the city – and nowhere to be rid of them: unless that writer who, among many books, wrote *Mountains Oceans Giants* did really point us to the future.

We now know what too-big heads have thought up, are capable of thinking up. Silently or out loud asserting the opposite, it is accepted that “after us, the deluge”. The latest discoveries may scan the future with curiosity, but in the present the Middle Ages reel us in: diseases, fear of demons, diffuse yearning for salvation, religious frenzy are increasing. Not only the President of the United States⁴ is in thrall to heavenly advice. In February this year several thousand Brahmans assembled in central India to bring a sacrifice to the gods: food to the value of DM3.5 million – rice, milk, vegetable fats – were burned in the middle of a famine region. A leading Brahman said in an interview: There is no point helping present victims of hurricanes; it’s better to try through great sacrifices to prevent future hurricanes. – A contemporary snippet that could have come from Döblin.

Thus did my travels come to an end, while the competition with the Utopias continues. We might add: the cinemas of Hong Kong, Jakarta, Bangkok were showing the film *Orca – the Killer Whale*; that in big hotels in Japan only classical music tinkles: Bach, Vivaldi, Purcell; that everywhere – and especially colourfully among the poorest – life is celebrated, even if in the form of cockfighting; that in Asia there really are demons; that in the whole of Asia Germany is mentioned only in the economic section of newspapers, or in connection with the name of the footballer Beckenbauer; that in that mildly over-filled continent, German tourists shout no louder than those from France, the Netherlands etc.

Back home, all were absorbed with themselves and their petty anxieties. It’s clear that the many snappish remarks and aggressive gestures in word, image and deed are directed at an internal enemy. If the craziness in Asia is in full bloom, here there’s just nit-picking. So there’s everything here, and prettily packed; but there’s not much future to be had. You have to look for it, take time, start again from the beginning, read. In my diary Alfred Döblin’s 100th birthday⁵ is imminent.

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<sup>4</sup> Jimmy Carter, who claimed during his presidency that Jesus was a driving force in his life.

<sup>5</sup> 10 August 1978.