»As if the Earth were for all time Earth«

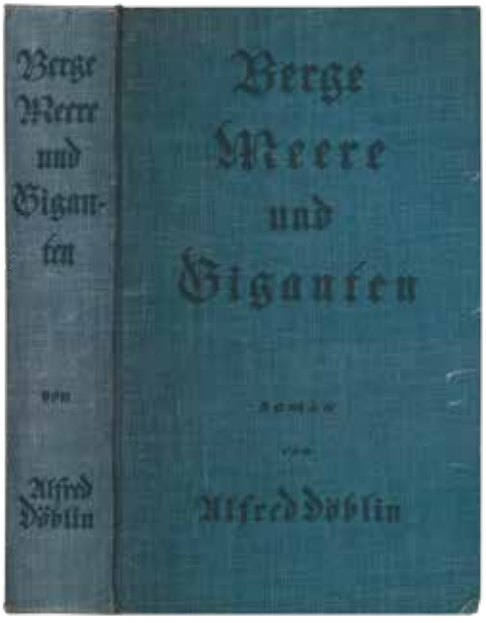
How German literature relates the story of the era of the Great Acceleration

By Bernhard Malkmus

Climate change is not the only pressing question about the future which mankind has to answer. A closer look at the literature of the twentieth century reveals that quite a number of renowned literary figures have grappled with the systemic transformation of ecological systems by mankind in their works.

In the summer of 1921 the German doctor and novelist Alfred Döblin is holidaying on the Baltic Sea. While walking along the beach his attention is captivated by a number of pebbles. Constantly in motion between the sea and the mainland, they bear witness to a time frame that the human imagination cannot conceive. Döblin picks up a pebble. The energy and powers possessed by the Earth are revealed to him in the beauty of the stone. »Something was moved in me, around me«, he writes later of this moment (49).

Quo vadis, mankind? Alfred Döblin anticipates the major issues in the Anthropocene debate as early as 1924 in his novel »Mountains Seas and Giants«.



Upon returning to Berlin Döblin begins to conduct research into natural history, before rewriting the manuscript of the novel he has been working on for some time. To speak of mankind as has been customary for centuries in the European novelist tradition without giving consideration to the bigger picture that is nature now seems outmoded to him. He frenetically rewrites his novel *Mountains Seas and Giants*, turning it into a work that is both a technocratic dystopia and a reflection on natural philosophy. Here Döblin projects the mechanised warfare of the First World War onto a history of mankind, envisioning this history through to the 27th century. Industrialised killing with poison gas, fragmentation grenades and submarines, which he witnessed as a military doctor, develops into global internecine warfare, ultimately culminating in an attempt to melt the ice sheet in Greenland and colonise new regions. In doing so primeval giants are released, hybrid monsters made up of animal, plant and mineral parts. They represent the natural powers that have been unleashed and with which mankind has never learned to live in the course of civilisation.

Harbingers of the »Great Acceleration«

Here war is not the »continuation of diplomacy with other means«, but a happening which is driven above all by industrial production; war is conducted because the means to do so are available. By highlighting this momentum Döblin anticipates a fundamental aspect of something which historians now describe as the Great Acceleration. In this manner the dramatic explosion of production and consumption in the industrialised countries after 1945 is outlined, something which has networked the Earth in economic terms and homogenised it in ecological terms through renewed bursts of globalisation. (We experienced one consequence of this at the beginning of the year when an epidemic developed into a pandemic in a matter of weeks.)

The Great Acceleration was fuelled by a period of ideological competition between the East and the West, and encompasses the post-war period up to the oil crisis at the beginning of the 1970s. The statistical curves for production and consumption display the characteristic hockey stick shape: a sudden and exponential upward

Where is the »natural beauty«? In front of »Teddy« Adorno in the mists of the Engadin valley or behind him in the beige anorak?

movement is to be seen in the middle of the twentieth century (Steffen et al.). This trend is continuing, with the effect that since the 1990s one can speak of a second Great Acceleration with the commencement of bursts of digital globalisation. Thanks to Earth System science we increasingly have more accurate knowledge of the extent to which the entire planet is being transformed by human activity. For not only are the climate and the atmosphere being changed by mankind, but also other key Earth systems whose interplay allow for and regulate life on earth: the biosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere – and the chemical macrocycles carbon dioxide, nitrogen, phosphorus:

»The cumulative impacts of human activity rank alongside other planetary-scale geological events in Earth's history. […] The Anthropocene is a turning point in the history of humanity, the history of life and the history of the Earth itself.« (Lewis and Maslin, 5)

The discussion surrounding the Anthropocene shows us that limiting the questions that will decide our future to climate change is not just wrong, but also dangerous. Like a rabbit in front of a snake, we are staring at global warming and ignoring the other ecological limits placed on the burdens our home planet can withstand, such as the integrity of biogeochemical cycles and the natural acidity of the oceans or the intactness of the biosphere and freshwater resources. Jonathan Franzen's analysis is apposite when he writes »our preoccupation with future catastrophes prevents us from tackling the solvable environmental problems we face right now« (30).

Work as »second nature«

From a philosophical stance the Great Acceleration may be described, as Hannah Arendt writes in 1958, as »a rebellion by man against his own existence« – against that »which was presented to him at birth as a gift and which he now wishes to exchange for conditions which he creates himself as it were« (10). The modern trend towards »Earth alienation« culminates on the one hand in »flight from Earth to the universe«, on the other hand in »flight from the world to the self-consciousness« (15). Arendt primarily sees the danger that man only perceives himself as human through work on a »second nature«. In doing so he forgets, on the one hand, the dependence of human life ozn metabolism with nature and, on the other hand, he loses the ability

to conceive of himself as a primarily political (and not as a working) being – for Arendt a prerequisite for a functioning democracy.

In literature there are early traces of an examination of these far-reaching changes. As early as 1957 Samuel Beckett's one-act play *Endgame* transported audiences in many European theatres to a post-apocalyptic world. This experience of extreme material acceleration in the 1950s is driven by the recollection of two world wars: man is actually capable of creating a world of scorched earth – without »forests«, »rain« and »nature«, as Beckett says. Naturally Beckett is also alluding to the nuclear arms race, the so-called »balance of terror«, the mutually assured destruction (MAD). As the Cold War was coming to the boil at the beginning of the 1960s Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote his play *The Physicists*. In it he does not just raise the ethical question of how scientists should deal with their findings (which predominated in the play's reception); in the figure of the »psychiatrist« Fräulein Doktor Mathilde von Zahnd Dürrenmatt alludes to the fact that the ethical soul-searching of science has long since been rendered obsolete by that which the American President Dwight Eisenhower had warned of in his farewell address in 1961: the »military-industrial complex«.

How can we live in a damaged biosphere? Ingeborg Bachmann seeks a lyrical answer.

Jünger's drones as machine-humans

Using the narrative means of a dystopia, Ernst Jünger had already considered established military-industrial structures in *The Glass Bees* from 1957. Although the story is set in the future, the principal figure, cavalry captain Richard, represents the generation destroyed by the mechanised warfare of the First World War and whose belief in the assurances made by technology has been dashed. In his desperate search for work Richard has an interview with the Zapparoni company, a manufacturer of miniature robots, including the eponymous bees: espionage androids which imitate bees perfectly and which are actually referred to as »drones«. They devour the nectar produced by flowers, but do not contribute to their pollination. Thus they epitomise the exploitive attitude of the »machine-humans«, whom they serve, towards nature. The Zapparoni empire in Jünger's work is an allegory for the penetration of further areas of life by technology – and a presentiment of what we now describe as surveillance capitalism.

In the same year Ingeborg Bachmann conceptualises the loss of a relationship to the world in the atomic age and under the conditions of the Great Acceleration in an absurd metaphor: in her poem »Safe Conduct (Aria II)« the Earth requests »safe conduct to space« so as to escape man, the world's master builder – and thus to guarantee »that from ancient beauty renewed graces on a thousand and one mornings will arise«. The biosphere is no longer at home on an anthropogenic planet and can only impart its regenerative power in the form of hope placed in the future. The lyricist takes the role of Scheherazade: survival is to be secured – as in *One Thousand and One Nights* – by relating the story of the Earth and evoking its poetic beauty. The Earth can also »spit out any creature« which the »mushroom cloud« has enforced upon it. This concept of being spat out, the total loss of civilising accomplishments, is the central theme of Marlen Haushofer's post-apocalyptic novel *The Wall* from 1963.

During the 1970s – as awareness of the global ecological crisis was growing following the oil crisis and the first Earth Day – traces of a retrospective discussion of the Great Acceleration are to be found in literature. By conjuring up a vision of the ideal primordial landscape Peter Rosei's *Entwurf für eine Welt ohne Menschen* (1975) *(Draft for a world without humans)*, for example, lays bare the fact that the very same landscape has been irretrievably lost. In Max Frisch's experimental novella *Man in the Holocene* (1979), a retired *homo faber* in an alpine valley in the Ticino canton is cut off from the outside world by a landslide. As a result not only is he confronted by his advancing dementia, but also by Earth's systemic forces which have forged the geology of the Alps, and also by the intrusions of mankind, the consequences of which are on the verge of assuming geological dimensions: »When the Arctic ice melts, New

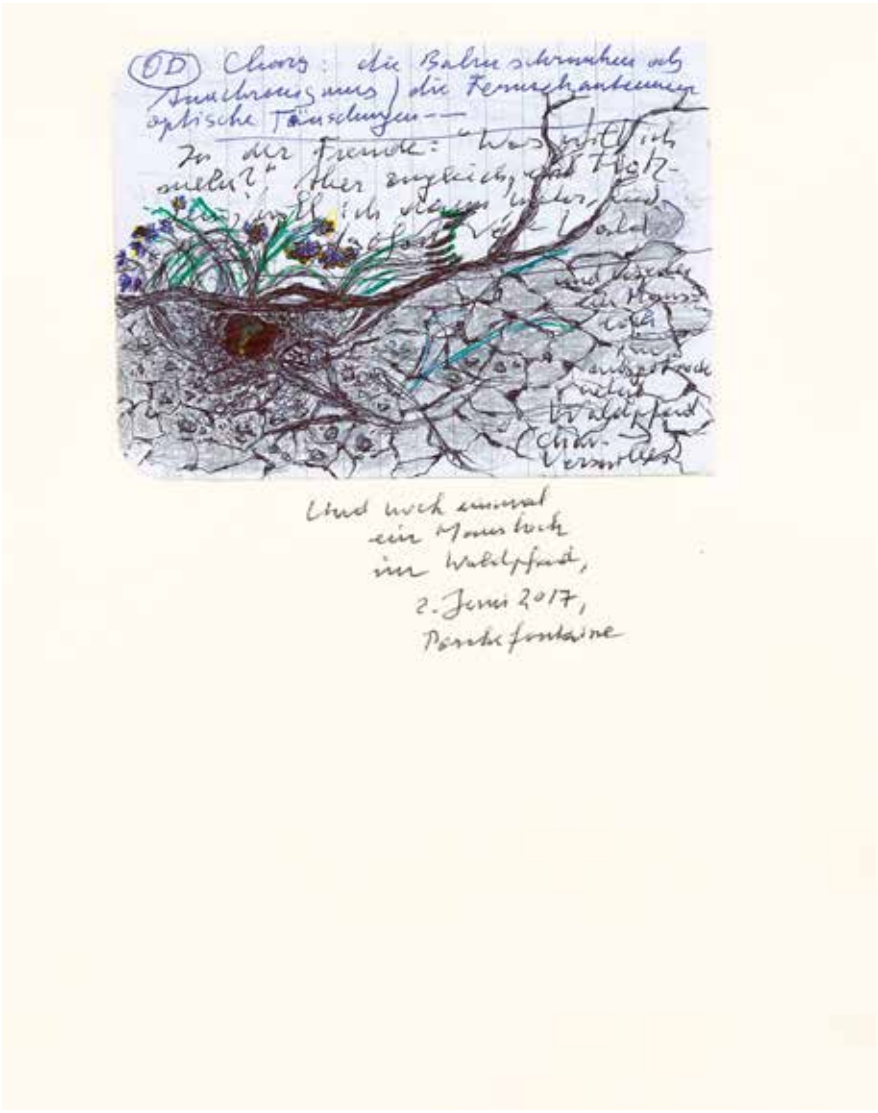
York will be under water.« The novel form itself, the embodiment of bourgeois self-reflection is eroded at the same time: »Novels are no use at all on days like these, they deal with people and their relationships, with themselves and others, fathers and mothers and daughters or sons, lovers, etc., with individual souls, usually unhappy ones, with society, etc., as if the place for these things were assured, the earth for all time earth, the sea level fixed for all time.« (16)

Handke in search of the Earth's own time

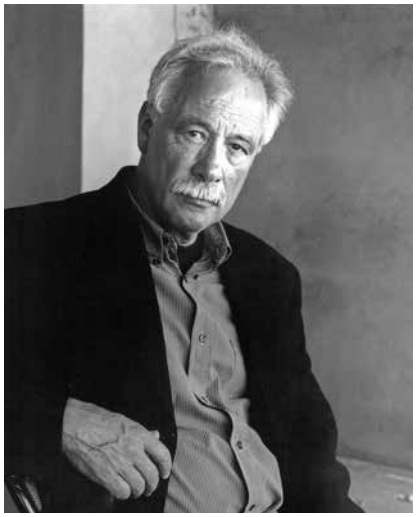
At the same time Peter Handke is endeavouring to write his way out of a creative crisis – in a style which seems to be a reaction to Frisch's existential uncertainty. In his stories *Slow Homecoming* (1979) and *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1980) he sends the geologist Valentin Sorger from Alaska via California, the East Coast, and the south of France to Salzburg. This journey is not just a departure and an arrival; it is also an éducation écologique, slowly accustoming himself to the ability to track down the Earth's own time by sieving through human civilisation: »He was obliged to take the environing world seriously in the least of its forms – a groove in the rock, a change of colour in the mud, a windblown pile of sand at the foot of a plant – as seriously as only a child can do« (15). This »exercise in trusting the world« (17) is also a search for the manner in which to tell the story of the world. The ability to perceive the topography as a sentient being with its own temporality allows for the growth of a new form of narration, which thus knows that the »place« for a tale is not »assured«, but has to be conquered anew every time.

The 1980s are dominated by the debate regarding the apocalyptic dangers of certain technological developments, for instance in Günter Grass' *The Rat* (1986) and Christa Wolf's *Accident. A Day's News* (1987). In haunting texts such as *Old Rendering Plant* (1991) and *The Tidings of the Trees* (1992) Wolfgang Hilbig follows people seeking to flee the Great Acceleration in eastern Germany on the rubbish tips and waste heaps. In *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) W. G. Sebald describes a summer walking tour of Norfolk and Suffolk in eastern England, in the course of which his narrator reveals, layer by layer, the history of violence on the part of the modern age buried deep within our cultural landscape. Like an archaeologist he exposes the tracks of various bursts of industrialisation in this remote swathe of land, and in doing so contrasts the industrial decline in post-war England with the narrative of progress told by the Great Acceleration. The notion of a virtually inexhaustible biosphere, such as that seen in the murderous frenzy of industrial herring fishing, gives way to a growing awareness of the limits placed on ecosystems – limits which man draws ever closer to himself:

»By the seventeenth century, only a few insignificant remnants of the erstwhile forests survived in the islands, most of them untended



Where are we at home? Max Frisch doubts that our world can be narrated (left). Peter Handke meanwhile seeks new forms of narration with an aesthetic of mindfulness (above).



Where have we come from? W.G. Sebald thematises the prehistory to the Great Acceleration. His narrator wanders through the ruined landscape of British imperialism.

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and decaying. The great fires were now lit on the other side of the ocean. It is not for nothing that Brazil owes its name to the French word for charcoal. Our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn.« (202)

Here Sebald was probably harking back to a concept which Theodor W. Adorno had already discussed with Walter Benjamin in a philosophical debate in 1932 and which gained currency in his *Negative Dialectics* (1966): »natural history«. By this he did not mean the evolutionary dimension of nature, but rather that the human illusion, the anthropogenic »second nature«, is independent of the history of life. The world of transformed matter conveys to mankind the impression that it is independent of nature and can impose its own laws upon itself. As soon as we can no longer hold together the structures of »second nature« with meaningful narratives, they return – believe Benjamin and Adorno – to their state of natural history and become ruins of their former meanings. Sebald tracks down the ruined landscape of British industrial imperialism and sensitises us for the future ruins, whose foundations we are already laying with our desire to shape the world.

Adorno continues to follow this train of thought in his unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*: »No sublimation succeeds that does not guard in itself what it sublimates.« (145) During extensive summer vacations in the mountains of Switzerland he develops his theory of »natural beauty«, through which he would like to transform man's flight from the world as described by Arendt into a utopia of »a communal recollection of nature in the subject«. (224) The »natural beauty« does not convey »the simple experience of nature«, but »that of a ›cultivated landscape‹, the epitome of successful mediation between the world of humans and nature.«(224) This presupposes that humans are prepared to marvel at nature – as when Döblin stood by the Baltic Sea and was plagued by the worrying question: »What will become of humanity if it keeps on living like this?« ●

The author

Bernhard Malkmus is Professor of German Studies at Newcastle University in England. He is currently a Humboldt Fellow at Goethe University as a guest of Professor Roland Borgards. He seeks to understand modernisation processes from the perspective of History and Philosophy of Science. In this respect he is particularly interested in the change to key concepts such as »life«, »environment«, »nature«, »landscape«, with which humanity seeks to conceptualise its relationship to the surrounding contemporary environment, and the epistemological and aesthetic reflection of these changes. Malkmus is the co-head of the Anthropocene Research Group at Newcastle University.

bernhard.malkmus@newcastle.ac.uk