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**Crisis of the Mythological?  
The Melting of the Polar Ice in Greenland in  
Alfred Döblin's *Berge Meere und Giganten***

Translated from German by James Lattimer

**I Introduction**

The novel *Berge Meere und Giganten* was written in 1924. I would like to focus my attention on the 7th book in the novel, whose title is *Die Enteisung Grönlands* (The Melting of the Polar Ice in Greenland). To begin with, I will give a short summary of what the novel is about. The project to melt Greenland's polar ice forms the culmination of a history of the whole of humanity running from the 20th century all the way until the 27th century. Using all their military and technological might, the heat of the Icelandic volcanoes is captured in solid form and transported by ship to the Arctic. With the help of a gigantic net, this heat is then unloaded on to Greenland, thus melting its ice. Greenland 'strikes back' however, firstly by casting a magical spell upon its conquerors, and later by unleashing "elemental forces"<sup>1</sup>, which civilisation is not capable of matching.

My central thesis is that Döblin's Greenland fiction is about the destruction of the myth of Greenland and that this ultimately documents a crisis of the mythological itself. Döblin fills his text practically to bursting point with Western clichés and stereotypes of the polar landscape and with numerous topoi and myths of literary polar fictions. All of this is intended to lead to a new myth in relation to the melting of the Arctic – an attempt which, however, fails on a literary level. To begin with, I would like to

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Döblin: *Berge Meere und Giganten*, ed. Gabriele Sander, München, 1980, p. 341.

detail the structure of my presentation. In the second and third parts of the presentation, I will sketch the central myths and mystifications of the polar landscape as they appear in Döblin's novel. The second part deals with the myth of a mystical polar nature. The third part concerns the only real set of character relationships in the Greenland book, whereby the characters in question represent particular cultural types. The focus here is a short episode about the relationship between the Western engineer Holyhead and the Bedouin Bou Jeloud. In the last part, I will then discuss the image of the melting Arctic and present my central thesis about the crisis of the mythological in Döblin's text.

## **II The antagonism of civilisation and nature**

Döblin's novel centers on the antagonism between a technocratic civilisation and a mystical natural polar landscape. However, this antagonism is only partially maintained, as the mystical natural areas in question also carry the signature of the trauma of civilisation. Döblin's civilisation attempts to transform Greenland in an artificial manner. At the same time though, the conquerors of Greenland are themselves transformed by the effects of the mystical Arctic, which attracts them in a magical way. At this point, I want to make the following general assumption: polar fictions imagine on the one hand confrontations between an external area of the unknown, while on the other simultaneously staging an encounter with the self; in other words, the conquerors of the pole are confronted with strange 'shadows' of their own selves as they near the polar region. In Döblin's novel, it is the elemental aspect of nature which stands for an alien region beyond the limits of civilisation. At the same time, nature also represents the area which modern man has both lost and become estranged from. Döblin's conquerors of Greenland experience their deepest feelings and longings when under the influence of the Arctic. The motif of a previously unknown internal shift transmitted via the landscape appears very often. Sexual urges are unleashed, but with them a strange drowsiness and weakness. Such a sudden weakening of the conqueror's will to conquer is a typical motif in polar fictions and can already be found in Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative*

of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838) or Georg Heym's *Tagebuch Shakletons* (1911). The characters in Döblin's novel, however, experience the internal conflict between iron hardness and complete weakness in a far more fundamental way. Döblin's characters are completely at the mercy of their changing states.

Man's experiences in the mystical arctic reveal the trauma of civilisation: it is only there that Döblin's characters become aware of the extent to which they are alienated from themselves. Once in the Arctic, their own civilisation and the Greenland project begin to seem like a bad dream, something completely unreal; "what sort of people have we left behind? We don't want to think about it. Keep sailing the sea. Greenland, to Greenland"<sup>1</sup>. But even in the seductive, shimmering polar landscape, the conquerors only manage to free themselves from the constraints of civilisation in a very shallow way. The following quote provides a good example of how 'shallow' their escape proves to be:

A violent sensation of lust ran through them. The men trembled in the frost of arousal; the women shook and their movements slowed. Their every limb was loaded with lust, every movement brought them closer to the emerging frenzy. They embraced each other and after their bodies had combined and left each other again, they still remained unsated.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of genuine liberation, we witness only a tortuous state; mechanical movements rather than a true shift to the natural; an inability to love in place of love itself; instead of satisfaction, a permanent pressure and ongoing sexual drive; instead of inner peace, an external slackening of the body. The motif of a cold, internal frost is of particular importance, and I would like to use it as exemplary of the general metaphoric imagery relating to the cold, the mechanical and the metallic in the novel. But,

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Döblin: *Berge Meere und Giganten*, ed. Gabriele Sander, München, 1980, p. 419.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Döblin: *Berge Meere und Giganten*, ed. Gabriele Sander, München, 1980, p. 423.

interestingly, the metaphors of the cold do *not* characterise the polar landscape, but rather civilized mankind. In fact, it is the Arctic which appears as a warm landscape even *before* its ice is melted. The narrator talks about “landscapes in which (...) the clouds extended themselves outwards, began to dissolve, warm droplets falling out of the sky”<sup>1</sup>.

In his study *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte*<sup>2</sup> (this title was translated into English as *Cool Conducts*<sup>3</sup>) the literary theorist Helmut Lethen examines the coldness discourses in German culture in the 1920s. Lethen predicts the rise of a dominant ‘cult of the cold’ which celebrates analytical scientific methods, the development of the machine, the ability to distance oneself and even social alienation. It is the urban conglomerations of civilisation that function as ‘training rooms for the cold’: the cities. I see Döblin’s novel as forming part of this discourse and read it as a reaction to the cult of the cold. In *Berge Meere und Giganten* a ‘cold’ civilisation enters a ‘warm’ polar area – and that in several different respects. First, Greenland is a utopian, ‘warming’ wilderness in the novel. Second, the conquerors of Greenland move through a fascinating and threatening terrain marked above all by a relentless organic fecundity. They have to overcome attacks from the animal and planet world, while micro-organisms overrun their ships. Third, the rosy, warm light of the Arctic exudes a mesmerising power, melting away the ‘hardness’ of the conquerors once and for all. Fourth, Greenland is, in the end, *artificially* heated, becoming an apocalyptic furnace of flame. This shows that the relationship of cold civilisation to warm nature is not simply antagonistic. It is ultimately the ‘cold’ civilisation that transports the heat of the volcanoes to the Arctic, thus triggering a great flood which ushers in a new type of evolution. But this metamorphosis arises from the symbiosis of technological and natural forces; from the reaction between heat

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 422.

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Lethen: *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte. Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen*, Frankfurt am Main, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Lethen: *Cool Conduct: the culture of distance in Weimar German*, Berkeley/CA, 2002.

and cold, fire and ice. In all of these respects it is worth considering how Döblin`s text can be viewed as a commentary on the cult of the cold. Its view of humanity remains ambivalent. Civilisation is, through technology and science, clearly able to change the world; or even the cosmos; man is thus clearly putting himself on the level of a Godlike creator. Since Dante Alighieri`s *Divina Commedia*, this type of human hubris has been associated with reaching the poles.<sup>1</sup> Döblin`s civilisation, however, no longer has to suffer God`s judgement (as Dante`s Odysseus had to), but rather destroys itself due to the compulsive nature of its own development. The world cosmos remains indestructible despite this; it renews itself from its own core.

### **III The episode about Holyhead and Bou Jeloud**

The characters in this episode within the Greenland book represent paradigms for different cultural types. The conquest and destruction of Bou Jeloud by Holyhead can be read as an allegory for the conquest of the Arctic. Holyhead is an English engineer and Western scientist working on the Greenland project. The name "Holyhead", which is the same in the original German version of Döblin`s text, already alludes to the hubris associated with the polar conquest mentioned above. Holyhead represents the archetype of the 'cold' civilised man and his ambivalences. He is a researcher, works with machines and cold metal. He is described as internally silent and lame. He is melancholy or even depressive, and has a slack body. Although he is responsible for pushing on with the Greenland project, he is simultaneously disgusted by it.

The other cultural type is embodied by the Bedouin Bou Jeloud. Holyhead`s encounter with Bou Jeloud unleashes a similar intensity of feeling in Holyhead as Greenland does in its

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Metzner: *Persönlichkeitszerstörung und Weltuntergang. Das Verhältnis von Wahnbildung und literarischer Imagination*, Tübingen, 1976, pp. 3-8, 24-27; Bettine Menke: „Die Polargebiete der Bibliothek. Über eine metapoetische Metapher“, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift* 4/2000, pp. 560-563.

conquerors: he develops a strong love for Bou Jeloud which is solely based on his ability to dominate him. Holyhead seeks to control Bou Jeloud's feelings through technology and seeks to destroy him in the same way. It is also Bou Jeloud's natural characteristics which provoke Holyhead's ambivalent attitude. Bou Jeloud comes from the Arabian steppe. He travels with his wife Djedaida and the tribal community, purely out of curiosity, in order to observe the European's Greenland project. The Bedouins are given various other cliché-ridden and idealising attributes in addition to curiosity. They are described as proud children of nature: as enthusiastic, sensual, graceful, friendly and tender. Above all, they are in harmony with themselves and their own feelings. They are also very close, all forming part of a mutually 'warming' community. The relationship that Bou Jeloud and his people have towards Greenland is thus also an entirely different one. The Arctic Sea is familiar to them in its elementary natural form. They identify the polar sea as "another desert"<sup>1</sup>; the fact that it seems to follow similar laws makes them happy. This sort of metaphorical identification with the desert and the polar landscape is a known topos of polar fiction<sup>2</sup>, but it is connotated in a different way here. For the Bedouins, the polar landscape does not represent painful solitude or a dangerous wilderness, but rather a lively natural habitat.

The European Holyhead actually ends up destroying Bou Jeloud *by changing* his attitude towards the Arctic, converting him into a sort of grotesque polar conqueror. In doing so, Holyhead alienates Bou Jeloud from both his tribe and his wife Djedaida. Holyhead manages to seduce Bou Jeloud into leaving the ship and riding his horse towards Greenland. The chief of the Bedouins

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Döblin: *Berge Meere und Giganten*, ed. by Gabriele Sander, München, 1980 p. 430.

<sup>2</sup> A systematic investigation of this metaphorical identification has yet to be undertaken. Jochen Schütze provides several basic ideas with respect to this; see Jochen K. Schütze: „Alaska oder Der Aufschub des Fremden“, in: „*Die andere Stimme*“. *Das Fremde in der Kultur der Moderne*. *Festschrift für Klaus R. Scherpe zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. Alexander Honold & Manuel Köppen. Köln/Weimar/Wien, 1999, pp. 82-96.

rides off to certain death, but before that, Holyhead manages to make him look completely ridiculous by presenting the proud and naïve Bedouin to the people onboard the ship. Bou Jeloud becomes Holyhead's plaything, combining melancholy with love, and finally the victim of Holyhead's destructive urges. In the end however, the Arab Greenland rider Bou Jeloud holds up a mirror to the Western polar conqueror: his fate is tragic, pointless, masochistic and full of delusions of grandeur.

The Holyhead Episode exposes the grotesque internal workings of the Western polar conqueror, thus illuminating the sadomasochistic relationship to all the things they desire. This idea also becomes explicit through the entire context of intercultural relations and colonialism. Later in the story, Djedaida (Bou Jeloud's wife) ends up as Holyhead's slave. Both Bou Jeloud and Djedaida demonstrate a clear movement towards the cold: Bou Jeloud, the "glowing"<sup>1</sup> chief disappears into the ice. Djedaida's warm cheeks become "cold"<sup>2</sup>; as a slave, she bears a "piece of metal between her soft, dark eyes"<sup>3</sup>. The figure of Djedaida can be also seen in relation to the 'feminine' landscape of Greenland in Döblin's novel. During the melting process, Greenland is said to have "a pure white face"<sup>4</sup>, which gradually darkens under a huge veil of heat. Djedaida also reacts to Holyhead's attacks by veiling herself until she eventually has to remove the veil and submit to him completely. Both the Syrian Djedaida and the 'white' Greenland are conquered, their essence transformed – a conquest by Western men, which also has a sexual connotation.

#### **IV Crisis of the Mythological?**

To what extent does Döblin's *Berge Meere und Giganten* evince a crisis of the mythological? The novel deals with the myth of

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Döblin: *Berge Meere und Giganten*, ed. by Gabriele Sander, München, 1980, p. 439.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 434.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 480.

Greenland and its subsequent destruction. At the same time, the text also attempts a remythologisation of Greenland under new conditions, that is, *after* the ice has melted. This can be seen, for example, at the following point in the text; “Greenland was an enchanted princess, surrounded by dragons. The mountains would sink; something proud, an image from a fable would emerge.”<sup>1</sup> The mythic Greenland is thus supposed to be conquered and destroyed, while *behind* it a still unknown image is supposed to appear. This new mythic image would need a new mythology. But this attempt to remythologise Greenland is the expression of a fundamental crisis of representation, which cannot be overcome in the end.

The melting of Greenland’s polar ice becomes a myth of the destruction and recreation of the world. But there do not seem to be any new images for this recreation. Döblin’s text returns again and again to old, conventional ideas of Genesis and apocalypse, invoking archaic images. However, as the myth stakes a claim to be ‘new’, it thus needs to produce new images. The author attempts to create a science fiction vision which shows the new world in a “different light”<sup>2</sup>. It is worth remembering that this new creation seems to be lacking any sort of divinity. While mankind is associated with the idea of a new creating power, this power actually ends up failing. Only the movements of the elements, the vital forces, the interactions of matter are eternal and powerful. The natural elements are described as so-called “entities which emerge from the core of the earth in a glowing light”<sup>3</sup>. The cold is dubbed the “queen of immeasurability”<sup>4</sup> and “mother of forms”<sup>5</sup>. But Döblin’s text does not, in the end, make clear exactly what these mystical powers are that are able to ‘touch’ both the humans and glaciers in such a strange way and make them melt. There is, however, one entity that functions in a similar way to a form of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 487.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Döblin: *Berge Meere und Giganten*, ed. by Gabriele Sander, München, 1980, p. 481.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



divinity: the narrator of Döblin's text, who gives the text its mythical qualities. The white polar landscape has always been considered as a place from 'beyond', as a realm of the imaginary and fantastic. It is used as a forum of literary experimentation, where new representational forms can be found or new individual creation fantasies explored. But in 1924, when Döblin's book was published, it seemed as if the fantastic terrain was no longer an unconquered Arctic, but rather a *conquered* one. The myth of a melting Arctic appears in Döblin's book to replace the text's original myth of the unexplored Arctic. There are three fundamental aspects of the melting Arctic which go beyond the scope of Döblin's text alone; they provide material for discussion in relation to what the melting of the polar regions could mean for our society, our culture and the way in which we see the Arctic. These aspects are: the melting of Greenland's polar ice as a fundamental restructuring of the world; the Arctic as an ecological and cultural archive; the melting of the polar ice as a dissolution of fixed ideas.

**1. The melting of Greenland's polar ice as a fundamental restructuring of the world.** This restructuring consists initially of a change in the ecological balance, but it is also supposed to imply a much more fundamental restructuring: the complete destruction and recombination of *all* previous forms, whether organic, historical, narrative or semantic. The melting polar landscape does not just represent the destruction of old myths, but also a new myth of change and reordering. **2. The Arctic as an ecological and cultural archive.** Even before the melting of its ice, Greenland is seen as an inexhaustible pool of forms and images. It is likened to a tree which continually bears new fruit. Döblin's text imagines the Arctic as an archive of world forms, as a secret centre that houses all the various global relationships. This point is of particular interest for research into Arctic discourses. But with the melting of Greenland's ice, Döblin's text imagines the *dissolution* of this archive. All which lay conserved in the Arctic ice, is reactivated and changed as it melts. It is perhaps of greatest interest that it does not just refer to an ecological archive. The

archive is also a cultural archive of images and discourses. Archaic images are mixed and reactivated with science fiction clichés, mythical vocabulary with geological and biological discourses. New beings emerge from the arctic depths: animals from the Cretaceous period, mythical medusas and so-called “carriers of living forms” (“Riesenlager an Lebendigem”<sup>1</sup>). At the same time though, the ‘carriers of cultural ideas and description patterns’ are disintegrating. **3. The melting of the polar ice as a dissolution of fixed ideas.** On the one hand, the melting of the ice in Greenland is a vision of the end of the world and, as such, connected to fear. On the other, however, it also evokes a fantasy of liberation from fixed relations and forms. The melting ice stands for a longing for dissolution through which a new start becomes possible. The attempt to create new forms of speech, to arrive at new literary forms and to bring all these together is obvious. But these disparate elements consisting of different myths and discourses do not coalesce into a literary or mythical whole. The text is too overloaded, too teeming with stereotypes, containing too often superficial descriptions of so-called ‘ancient creatures’ and ‘primeval beings’.

My conclusion is that Döblin’s attempt to remythologise the Arctic ends up evincing a crisis of the mythological itself. Despite this, Döblin makes one prescient diagnosis in imagining a melting Greenland. His fiction shows one thing above all: a fundamental inability to foresee what might appear after the destruction of Arctic and its myths. Destruction on such a scale is quite simply unimaginable.

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Döblin: *Berge Meere und Giganten*, ed. by Gabriele Sander, München, 1980, pp. 484.

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