

Introduction



The Three Leaps of Wang Lun was Alfred Döblin's first major work, and the first Western novel to depict a China untouched by the West. It was also the first modern German novel. Written just before the Great War and published in 1915, it was hailed as a masterpiece of the new movement called Expressionism, and won the Fontane Prize. In style and theme it marked a decisive break with the narrative tradition of the nineteenth century, and was to influence Brecht and Günter Grass. Why then is this book today so little known, even in German?¹ The answer lies only partly in the book itself (which is by no means an easy or a comfortable read) and has more perhaps to do with Döblin's own fate and the fate of German literature in the catastrophe of the Third Reich.

Döblin began *Wang Lun* in July 1912, and completed the two-thousand page manuscript in just ten months. He was working all the while as a doctor, "Lots of casualty duty, day and night ... I wrote on steps, in the empty hours of waiting, could write walking or standing."² As a medical student in the first years of the century he mingled with the café society of artists and writers who were creating Berlin's version of the modern movement, later labelled Expressionism. Literary doctors are not rare; in Döblin's case the choice of profession was no mere bread-and-butter one but reflected a profound duality. "I am a medical man," he wrote,

and not just as a sideline ... I studied medicine because I was writing while still at school, but detested literature and still

more those who produced it. I felt towards my own writing something of what a man with a chronic cold feels towards his sniffles ... When I finished studying I was in my mid-twenties and couldn't wait to withdraw from the struggle for so-called existence. I worked as houseman in several mental hospitals. I always felt comfortable among these patients. I realized then there are only two categories of people I can stand, besides plants, animals and stones: namely children and lunatics ... ³

This complexity of themes is rooted in Döblin's family and the disaster that struck in 1888, when he was ten. The father, musically talented but feckless, absconded to America with a young woman employed in his tailoring business, leaving to the mother his debts and five children. Arrival in Berlin, where the family moved to be near relatives, was for Döblin his true birth. The years in Stettin had been a "pre-birth", a "little paradise", marred only by his father's philandering; life in Berlin meant dismal rooms and shared beds, but also a new world: the big city. Small and shortsighted, poor, a provincial Jew, his education delayed some years by the family catastrophe, Döblin left school at 22 with a reputation as a rebel and a loathing for the militarism of the Wilhelmine state. He was also thoroughly at home in the fast growing metropolis which was to provide the matter of his only bestseller, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

His father's family had artistic leanings, while his mother, of shopkeeper stock, had a low opinion of any activity that brought no income. Döblin was drawn to literature and philosophy, yet repelled by the bad example his father set for all that side of life. His early writings were a guilty secret. His mother had coped admirably to raise the family, yet life for her meant duty and little more. How to reconcile literature and duty, how to dig beneath the surface of life without retreating to mere speculation? Medicine on one level was a respectable career, but the choice of psychiatry re-

flected these deeper currents. “Why did I begin to study medicine? Because I wanted truth, but not a truth filtered by concepts and so diluted and frayed.”⁴ He wrote much in these early years: papers in medical journals, a series of dialogues on the meaning of music, some essays (never published) on philosophy, a one-act play, a few short stories; but gave little hint of the imaginative power that was to produce *Wang Lun* and the epic novels of the next four decades. The scientific observation of psychiatric patients may have seemed to him a “withdrawal from the struggle for existence”; but this exposure to forms of human behaviour and states of spirit very different from those of normal society was crucial to the problems he would spend a lifetime addressing.

The damburst of creative energy in 1912, when he wrote this “fat Chinese novel” that broke all conventions of bourgeois fiction, coincided with events on the literary scene and in his personal life which together brought on a sort of crisis. The personal event was his marriage in January 1912, to a woman of his mother’s type—a union stormy from the start, though it lasted to the end of his life. He had now to set up his own medical practice, a change of work he found “odious”. The literary event was Berlin’s first Futurist Exhibition in the spring of 1912, an exhibition of modern paintings (mostly French) that also attracted to Berlin the leading Italian propagandist of Futurism in literature, F. T. Marinetti. Two years earlier Döblin had helped Herwarth Walden, the organizer of the exhibition, to found *Der Sturm*, Berlin’s leading avant garde magazine, and Döblin’s review of the exhibition in the May 1912 issue praised the bold, gigantic style of Futurist painting. He urged German painters, “The horror, the sympathy, the rage, the terror in you—out with it onto the canvas!... Futurism is a great step. It represents an act of liberation.... I am no friend of big inflated

words. But I subscribe my whole name to Futurism and give it a clear Yes.”

Marinetti was a prolific penner of manifestos, extolling with gusto speed and war and aeroplanes and spelling out the rules of good Futurist style: verbs in the infinitive, no adjectives or adverbs, nouns strung together without conjunctions, similes as farfetched as you can make them; the “I” driven out of the novel and with it all psychology, since Man has become a mere cliché in literature.⁵ A number of manifestos were printed in *Der Sturm*. In March 1913, in the middle of his work on *Wang Lun*, Döblin published an open letter to Marinetti in which he acknowledges some of the Futurist’s goals (“You have energy and hardness, masculinity, which should be unleashed with pleasure on the heels of a literature bursting with eroticism, hypochondria, distortions and torments ... We want no prettification, no finery, no style ... What is not immediate, not sated with objectivity, we both reject ...”) but then, in sharp contrast to his own enthusiasm of the previous year, he harshly criticises Marinetti’s abstract aestheticism, his desire to cast words adrift, “the catastrophe of missing punctuation and missing syntax.” Döblin ended his letter, “You tend your Futurism. I’ll tend my Döblinism.”

A few months later, as he was finishing *Wang Lun*, Döblin published an essay⁶ calling for the rebirth of the novel as a work of art and a modern epic. He urges the writer to learn from psychiatry, which has shaken off psychology’s pretence to explain human actions, and limits itself to the “noting of events, movements—with a shake of the head, shrug of the shoulders for the rest, the why and how.” He advocates a prose of “events” in which the motivation is not made explicit, and there are no authorial judgements—a programme realized to some degree in *Wang Lun*. Döblin was taking leave of the Futurists; they responded by ignoring *Wang Lun*

and growing cool towards its author. “Neither Walden nor anyone else from the circle of the orthodox said a word about the novel.... They developed into pure word-artists. I took another path.”⁷ Döblin’s individuality and distaste for cliques emerged stronger from the experience. He became one of the century’s greatest writers of German, while the self-styled Expressionists degenerated into “proclaiming the autonomy of the empty word, of wordshells, soundshells that they called ‘sensuous’. They turned words into mere sounds and noises, steered verbal art onto the cliff of music.”⁸

Did Döblin choose China for his first major work because Marinetti, in his novel *Mafarka the Futurist*, had already done Africa and so he needed somewhere still farther off?⁹ Was he drawing on a generalized “oriental” philosophy that could equally well have used India as a setting?¹⁰ The first view is facile, and the second is refuted by Döblin’s claim to have had “a basic spiritual experience or focus which I guarded with the utmost care; served it, furnished it with everything necessary for its working out.”¹¹ This was his experience of Taoism, that essentially Chinese religion, which he discovered in translations by Martin Buber and Richard Wilhelm.¹² It gave shape to his discontent with the neglect of existential meaning in modern literature. “In our bourgeois society,” he wrote,

doubtless in every society, only a little of us is expressed. We sleep for the most part, a large number of questions are never asked, life plays itself along in a prescribed circle. People curl themselves up like hedgehogs.... Once hunger and cold, love and a place to live and perhaps ambition are taken care of, what is left? Over the remainder of existence—what a vast remainder—a veil is drawn.¹³

While political upheavals in China—the Boxer uprising in 1900, the downfall of the Manchus in 1912—must have nudged Döblin

towards this choice, in the novel there is no overt reference to contemporary events, apart perhaps from one phrase in the Dedication (“In this Earth’s life two thousand years are as one year”). Döblin was no sinologist, and after *Wang Lun* his only work relating to China was an introduction to a selection from Confucius, published in America in 1940. He had not even prepared the ground with extensive reading before embarking on *Wang Lun*. He began to visit the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin and to read travelogues and descriptions of Chinese customs only in the summer of 1912, and in October was still writing to Martin Buber for guidance on source materials. The reading, the writing and the working out of the problem were simultaneous processes. “I went through so many books on China at that time,” he wrote,

but if anyone had asked me an hour after the reading what was in the book I could not have answered. I had more to do than busy myself with Chinese porcelain, with the role of lamaism, with the woman question in China. When I’ve finished my novel, I used to tell myself, I’ll go into such and such a subject that seems really interesting; didn’t get around to it.¹⁴

Döblin’s novel attests to his extraordinary ability to absorb names and ideas and impressions and transmute them into literature. The Afterword to the modern German edition of *Wang Lun* describes how he worked:

His immersion in the Chinese world is reflected in the partially preserved notes of his readings in the relevant literature, recorded in pencil, indelible pencil or ink on multifarious sheets of paper, sometimes even on torn off hospital or library slips, or on envelopes. Döblin took notes, pedantically enough, of animals, plants, precious stones, landscapes, towns, usages of the Confucian religion, priests’ clothing, ritual objects, civil and military costume, dances, games, musical instruments,

medicines, technical expressions from the medical and military spheres. He excerpted descriptions of temples and festivals, religious customs and ideas, noted details of the political administration of provinces, of offices and titles, academic examinations and ranks, of eunuchs at the Emperor's court. We even have a collection of little maps, copied out in ink. Historical and geographical works, individual numbers of orientalist and ethnographic journals as sources for theatrical productions, weapons etc. are named or noticed. One four-page document contains nothing but columns of Chinese personal names, another proverbs, a third sayings from Laotzu, together with quotations from Li Po, Chuangtzu and other Chinese classics. On another sheet we find the poem written by Ch'ien-lung on a teacup and the poem by Tu Fu quoted in Book Three. From an unknown source he excerpted descriptions, complete with sketch plans, of Imperial costume and of the monastery town of Tashilunpo, residence of the Dalai Lama. Döblin collected much more than he eventually used....¹⁵

He was not just adding local colour to a work of fantasy. "So much of the Orient has been assimilated in Döblin's art," writes the only Chinese critic to have studied the novel in depth, "that no clear boundary can be drawn between his sinological learning and his poetic imagination."¹⁶ The book brings to vivid life an alien imagined world—China, the Flowering Middle—during the reign of Ch'ien-lung (1760–1799), one of its greatest emperors. The uprising of the historical Wang Lun in 1774, an obscure episode that Döblin found in de Groot's *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China*, provided only the germ for this story of a fictional Wang Lun, this working out of a problem of meekness against force, spiritual yearning against material existence, a mystical sense of the world against the realities of power. Today the truths which motivate the novel can still shake empires.

Rebellions were endemic in North China. Some were political, seeking the overthrow of the ruling dynasty, others had a religious, millenarian origin. The reigns of Ch'ien-lung and his son Chia-ch'ing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw periodic sectarian uprisings which displayed both patriotic anti-Manchu sentiment and strong millenarian tendencies. Any sect professing unorthodox beliefs came under State suspicion and risked violent suppression, even if not obviously subversive. The Wu-wei sect, the model for the "Truly Powerless", set tablets to the Emperor in its meeting places, but was still persecuted by the Ming (1368–1644) and proscribed in the Ch'ing (1644–1911).¹⁷

The teachings of this sect, expounded by the prophet Lo Huai (1563–1647) and recalled by an aged sectarian early in Book Four, drew on both the ancient tradition of the *Tao Te Ching* and the Buddhist idea of Nirvana. The sect had no saints or deities, no priests or temples, sought perfection and bliss solely in "words of truth uttered by heaven and earth".¹⁸ They did not proselytize, called one another Brother and Sister.

By its nature the Wu-wei sect was not inclined to political action. Quite otherwise the White Lotus sects, or Pailien-chiao, whose protection the Wang Lun of the novel seeks at the end of Book One. These were salvationist and Messianic movements that became widespread in the sixteenth century, but whose origins can perhaps be traced back a thousand years earlier, to a Buddhist group that cultivated religious perfection in order to reach the Western Paradise. The sect was active in resistance to the Mongol Yüan dynasty (1280–1368), proclaiming the outbreak of great disturbances and the coming of Maitreya, the Future Buddha. The founder of the Ming, Chu Yuan-chang, was helped to his throne by the White Lotus (a legend is told of him in Book Four), but at the end of his reign included even this sect in his severe measures

against Buddhists, Taoists and other “exotic” religions. Suppression led to disturbances in the late Ming, but for the first century of the alien Ch’ing dynasty the sect busied itself with sutra reading and other devotional activities rather than rebellion. Then in 1774, with the uprising of Wang Lun, millenarian tendencies again erupted which were to continue sporadically throughout the nineteenth century, one strand evolving into the Boxer movement and the secret societies that helped Sun Yat-sen to topple the Ch’ing dynasty.

The historical Wang Lun was a short, stocky martial arts adept from western Shantung, who taught therapeutic yoga and meditation as well as boxing, and became regarded by his disciples as a White Lotus sect teacher.¹⁹ His 26 direct pupils had pupils of their own, totalling perhaps two or three hundred; they included a travelling actress, peddlars, Buddhist monks, minor yamen employees, possibly salt smugglers. The actress (a detail unknown to Döblin but in keeping with the atmosphere of the novel) was a pretty and accomplished acrobat, who was cured by Wang Lun of a skin infection. Widowed, she was taken by Wang as his “daughter”, mistress in fact; later she brought a dozen women, former associates, into the movement. (During the rebels’ final stand she put superstitious fear into the Imperial troops, whose bullets and arrows left her unscathed. Only when the soldiers fired the severed genitals of a captured rebel at her was she killed.) In 1771 Wang began to talk of “manifesting the Way” and to plot rebellion. His motivation is unclear: perhaps an Imperial tour of the district brought home the contrast between ruler and ruled; perhaps Government action from 1768 onwards against kindred sects, resulting in executions and banishments, led to a stark choice between rebellion or arrest. Millenarian preaching had its own dynamic, as vague predictions became ever more definite preparations for the arrival of the Future Buddha.

Forced to premature action by the leak of their plans, Wang

and his followers rose in the autumn of 1774, attacking several towns in western Shantung before gathering in the city of Linch'ing, where Imperial troops besieged them. Within a month the rebels were defeated, Wang dead. They had numbered just a few thousand. Other sectarian revolts occurred in 1786, 1796–1803, and 1813, the latter far more bloody and widespread.

The empire under Ch'ien-lung was larger and stronger than it had ever been. The learned, energetic Emperor—poet, patron of scholars, lover of the hunt—had done his duty to Heaven and his ancestors. Sinkiang had been conquered by the ruthless Chao Hui; Tibet was under Chinese control. But the Wang Lun uprising was a portent of the long decay that would last until 1911, and the Panchen Lama's death from smallpox, during a visit to Peking of great significance, also rattled the Imperial government. Chao Hui, in the novel the prime instigator of violence, actually died ten years before Wang Lun's hopeless venture, and the Panchen Lama's fatal visit, described in such vivid, tender, horrific terms in Book Three, actually occurred six years later. Poetic licence allows the novel to draw from these events a coherent theme: the theme of earthly power against the power of the Way.

Döblin gave an account of his conception of *Wang Lun* in a 1929 essay, "The Structure of the Epic Work".²⁰ "I have it in mind, for example," he wrote,

to depict a revolutionary ferment in a population, and as a start a harshly lit scene urges itself on me, an attack on a high official, a night scene. This is then felt entirely as an introduction, a kind of muffled drumroll, a single sharp report, then silence. Each individual point is fully worked out from the character of this violent, eerie prelude.... I began a Chinese novel with just such a drum-beat and just such a muffled roll of subterranean revolution.