From Modernist Catastrophe to Postmodern Survival: Technological disaster in Georg Kaiser's 'Gas' trilogy and Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Untergang der Titanic*

Axel Goodbody

[Prepublication manuscript for A.G, *Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in Twentieth-Century German Literature: The Challenge of Ecocriticism*, Palgrave Macmillan 2007, 87-126.]

1. Apocalypse, cultural pessimism and the literary debate on technology in Germany

Few things grasp the public imagination like technological disasters. Events such as the dramatic collapse of the railway bridge over the Firth of Tay in 1879 (at the time the longest in the world, and hailed as a triumph of modern engineering), the sinking of the luxury liner *Titanic* on its maiden voyage across the Atlantic in 1912, the spectacular launch failure of the space shuttle Challenger in Cape Canaveral, and the reactor meltdown in Chernobyl in 1986, have exercised a powerful and lasting fascination. Shaking our faith in our ability to conquer nature with the aid of technology, and reminding us of wider uncertainties inherent in modern civilisation of which we normally suppress awareness, they exemplify the continuing incursion of chance into a world which we had long since thought under our control.

In recent years, the boundaries between such man-made disasters and other natural catastrophes have become increasingly blurred, with growing acceptance that we are involved in exacerbating certain meteorological phenomena. We have also come to recognise that circumstances under our control contribute significantly to the disastrous impact of natural events: the deaths and suffering resulting from earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis and hurricanes are often a consequence of warnings which have been ignored and inadequate preparation. Both kinds of disaster are commonly related to risks which were at least partially known previously. They result not only from chance and human error, but also from strategic economic decisions. Unsurprisingly, this explanation is customarily ignored in initial responses: too

strong is the desire, in the face of shock and grief over the loss of life, to seek scapegoats (who absolve us of our own complicity as members of a society whose aspirations and value systems provided the context for their actions). However, there is also a powerful tendency to invest events which are in reality part of the programmed logic of technological progress with greater meaning. With major disasters, a process of myth-construction sets in, adapting the facts to correspond to familiar narratives. The very word 'disaster' was originally an attempt to offer a metaphysical explanation for the event, signifying as it did a disadvantageous positioning of the stars. Where the hand of God is not invoked, technological disasters are typically interpreted as the result of hubris, or excessive human self-confidence. "Tand, Tand, / Ist das Gebilde von Menschenhand", the witches from Macbeth cry in Theodor Fontane's ballad 'Die Brück' am Tay', which, written in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, became a canonical text for generations of German school children.[1] Fontane's personification of technology in the Edinburgh train which plunged from the bridge in a December storm, with the loss of life of all 75 passengers and crew, and in the person of the passenger Johnie, who cries with confidence in the ability of his age to subject nature to human will: "Die Brücke noch! / Aber was tut es, wir zwingen es doch. / Ein fester Kessel, ein doppelter Dampf, / Die bleiben Sieger in solchem Kampf, / Und wie's auch rast und ringt und rennt, / Wir kriegen es unter: das Element", reinforced the popular understanding of the disaster as a "Mene Tekel of human presumption" (Schneider et al. 1987: 324 and 328).

Alternatively, the pressure to transform the disaster into a triumph is often irresistible. Journalistic and literary accounts of disasters frequently focus on the noble composure of the victims and the heroism of those who rescued the survivors. The accident is presented as an Act of God, awesome, inexplicable and incapable of prediction. Hence the popular myth that, as the *Titanic* sank, the band bravely played on, calming the anxieties of the drowning passengers, and closing (by this time, rather implausibly, on a steeply sloping deck) with the hymn 'Nearer my God, to Thee' (see Howells 1999: 120-35). The need to make sense of major disasters is reflected in the two terms commonly used to describe them: 'catastrophe' and 'apocalypse'. The Greek word 'catastrophe' meant a 'sudden (downward) turn' or

‘overturning’. A technical term in classical drama for the dénouement, that is, the change which produced the (usually unhappy) final event, it has come to mean any sudden and violent physical change leading to a subversion of the order or system of things. Describing an event as a catastrophe thus implies that it invalidates received understandings and patterns of behaviour, and forces us to rethink our value systems. Technological catastrophes trigger critical reflection on scientific and technological progress, and inaugurate a paradigm shift with wider implications for the materialism and instrumental rationalism underlying western modernity (see Delisle 2001: 13f. and Teusch 2005: 205).

The implications of the word ‘apocalypse’ are more far-reaching, complex and problematic. The term originally signified a ‘revelation’ or ‘un-concealing’: apocalyptic texts were visions of divine punishment at the end of time, involving violent destruction. The primary function of the Old Testament and early Christian apocalypses was to provide consolation and hope to the oppressed, for terrifying destruction was to be followed by a rewarding of the righteous, who would triumphantly enter the New Jerusalem. In the nineteenth century, these religious apocalyptic narratives were coopted into secular philosophies of history. First appropriated by the Romantics, in a trajectory of aesthetic redemption, they were later adopted by Marxists in the context of political revolution. The apocalyptic structure of thinking is problematic for several reasons: its adherents are typically less concerned to seek to ameliorate their situation than to suffer it passively in a spirit of resignation, or even actively further its deterioration, in order to hasten the longed-for reversal of fortune. It also totalises what may be a valid explanation of local and temporal circumstances, and presumes the inevitability of large-scale, often total destruction. Further, apocalypse is associated with a psychology of paranoia and violence, and a perspective of extreme moral dualism. While the emotionally charged scenarios of apocalyptic writers, which reduce long-term issues to monocausal crises involving conflict between recognisably opposed groups, are capable of galvanising activists and converting sceptics, they do so at the price of leaving others despairing and disempowered. Finally, there is the problem that apocalyptic rhetoric is often not so much a response to existing crisis as an agent in its production.[2]

The depiction of apocalyptic events in literature commonly reflects a desire to warn readers: extrapolating the negative trends and developments in modern society in fictional scenarios is intended as a dramatic appeal for change before it is too late. However, such shock therapy can have the opposite effect, desensitising readers through depictions of violence, and accustoming them to the prospect of global annihilation. It can thus actually serve to bring the disastrous end nearer. The motives driving modern apocalyptic authors are likely to be complex: their texts frequently betray an ambivalent fascination with global destruction. Derrida and other recent theorists have deconstructed apocalyptic thinking as a mechanism for the alleviation of guilt, detecting in visions of apocalyptic disaster 'phantasms', or imaginary scenarios signifying an unconscious wish on the part of the author to be reborn, cleansed of guilt (Derrida 1983). These considerations are all pertinent to the understanding and critical assessment of public perceptions of technology in twentieth-century Germany, and of the depiction of technological disaster by German writers and artists.

Georg Kaiser's play *Gas*, and his apocalyptic *Gas – Zweiter Teil* are key texts in a German tradition critiquing technology which has been traced back to the late eighteenth century. Jean Paul and E. T .A. Hoffmann were among the first to ask, in their reflections on automata, that is, the novelty machines of the age which imitated human movements and activities, what challenges scientific and industrial development would present, and more specifically, what impact it would have on traditional assumptions about the difference between humans and machines (see Schneider et al 1987: 13-45). Goethe and Immermann were further precursors of the critique of technology and industrialisation which began in earnest with commentaries by Justinus Kerner and other conservative writers on the railway, machines and manufacturing in the 1840s. The theme preoccupied many later nineteenth-century writers, and found radical expression at the beginning of the twentieth century in the poems of Johannes R. Becher, Karl Otten and others published in Kurt Pinthus's classic Expressionist anthology *Menschheitsdämmerung* (1919). It is reflected in Alfred Döblin's great dystopian novel *Berge, Meere und Giganten* (1924) and mid and late twentieth-century works such as Bertolt Brecht's play *Leben des Galilei* (in the passage criticising contemporary

scientists which he added after the first atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki), Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Die Physiker* (1962), prose writing from Max Frisch's *Homo Faber* (1957) to Christa Wolf's *Störfall* (1987), and the poetry of Günter Kunert and Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

Klaus Vondung and others have noted that technological disasters in German writing have commonly featured within a framework of cultural pessimism relishing downfall and destruction, and that this pessimism is understandable as a response to specific social developments and political events. Catastrophic/apocalyptic writing is concentrated in two main phases in the twentieth century, the first around the end of the First World War, and the second in the nineteen-eighties. Expressionist apocalypticism was the most spectacular of the responses to the current of disillusionment with reason, progress, civilisation and technology which featured prominently in public debate at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, forming a counter-current to the popular technological euphoria of the age. In the years leading up to the First World War, it is already to be found in the poetic visions of Georg Heym, Jakob van Hoddis and Georg Trakl, and the paintings of Ludwig Meidner. The machine appears as a juggernaut, and the city as an Old Testament Moloch, crushing the individual – well-known examples of the latter include Georg Heym's poems 'Die Dämonen der Städte' and 'Der Gott der Stadt' (Heym 1977: 186f. and 192). As David Midgley notes (2000: 307f.), expressions of hostility to the world of the factory intensified as Expressionist poetry entered its agitatory phase 1916-18. The plays of Kaiser, Ernst Toller and others also reflected the shock of realisation of the terrible consequences for the individual soldier of technological advance and the organisational perfection of the military machine, and later the experience of military defeat, the collapse of the State and the dashing of hopes for revolutionary renewal.

Cultural pessimism experienced a revival in a parallel, but less pronounced period after the Second World War, when Arno Schmidt's novels and Günter Eich's poems and radio plays were among many works containing apocalyptic scenarios of the future. A second major phase of apocalypticism came, however, in the second half of the nineteen-seventies and eighties, with works by Thomas Brasch and Tankred Dorst, Günter Grass and Günter

Kunert, Heiner Müller and Christa Wolf. Political factors such as fears that West German democracy was being undermined by the hunt for terrorists and the heated public debate on the upgrading of American nuclear weapons on German soil converged here with ecological ones: the seeming impotence of the anti-nuclear movement and the discovery of acid rain and *Waldsterben* precipitated a general crisis of faith in modernity and progress which lasted for over a decade.

Since the middle of the nineteen-seventies, a quite extensive body of writing on the history of literary images of technology in Germany has examined the formulation of shifting attitudes in fictional narratives, variations of myths, dramatisations and poetic images, and charted the reservoir of ideas contained in texts problematising and presenting alternatives to contemporary reality.[3] Relatively few studies of representations of technology, of the practical application of science in industry and commerce, and of the impact of scientific and technological advances on the individual, society and the environment have, however, considered the link with authors' explicitly formulated conceptions of nature, or explored their implicit understanding of our relationship with the natural environment.[4] In Germany, as in the English-speaking world, C.P. Snow's famous lecture on the Two Cultures (1959) provided a focus for discussion of the potential contribution of creative writing to public debate on technology. Snow painted a picture of enthusiastic espousal of progress by the scientific establishment and its pessimistic rejection by the cultural elite. Arguing that only a minority of writers had been prepared to respond creatively to industrial reality, most having preferred to withdraw to rural idylls or dream worlds, that technology had all too often been demonised, and even that aesthetic protest had led via anti-social sentiments to fascist politics, he denied the competence of writers to describe and interpret the processes of technological advancement, and diagnosed a schizophrenic dysfunction in modern Western societies.

However, Snow's picture of a world in which scientists had the future in their blood, while intellectual and literary figures were Luddites and opponents of democracy, is a drastic over-simplification. More recent commentators such as Odo Marquard have suggested that the social function of the arts is one of *compensation*, and that writers seek to cushion the impact of the pressures of

rationalisation, rather than actually stem the tide of modernisation.[5] This too ignores the fact that writers tend, by virtue of their position of relative independence from power elites, to be sceptical of contemporary society, and to serve, as Saint-John Perse put it in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize in 1960, as “the guilty conscience of their age” (quoted in Schneider et al. 1987: 994). It fails to acknowledge that critics of the destructive tendencies of civilisation and progress typically constitute a minority voice responding to a dominant culture, whose relatively untroubled view of the future may overlook genuine dangers. Provided fears of disaster are subject to the necessary self-reflection, literary encodings of popular environmental anxieties may then perform a useful social function, by subverting consensus based on a false sense of security.

In denying writers any insight into the processes of technological and industrial development, and effectively precluding the possibility of constructive literary engagement with contemporary society, Snow and Marquard ignore those writers who have supported technological advance and modernisation. In Germany these ranged from liberal-progressive mid-century figures such as Heinrich Heine, Gottfried Keller and Ferdinand Freiligrath to later authors like Arno Holz and Kurd Laßwitz, the father of German Science Fiction. In the years preceding the First World War, Marinetti’s Futurism found only a limited following in Germany, but the work of Josef Winckler, Ernst Stadler, Marie Holzer, the ‘Werkleute auf Haus Nyland’ and Brecht express enthusiasm for technology, and exhilaration at the possibilities it afforded for personal fulfilment. The thrill of speed offered by planes and cars was experienced as a means of intensifying experience and participating in the life force, permitting escape from the oppressive monotony of everyday existence and affording respite from the painful “dissociation of the self” which characterised modern urban life (Vietta and Kemper 1975: 18f. and 21f.). At the same time, socialist poets such as Ivan Goll and Johannes R. Becher celebrated grand technological projects leading to the brotherhood of man.

Raymond Williams is one of a number of theorists who have sought to meet the need for a different model, accommodating the fact that, historically seen, literature has accentuated political and technological scenarios through

symbolic configuration in ways which have sometimes cemented the status quo, but at others led to change. Williams describes novelists as participating in the processes of social and cultural change by giving expression to *residual*, *dominant* or *emergent* "structures of feeling". By articulating emergent structures of feeling at the very edge of semantic availability, writers can, he argues, anticipate shifts in social practice (1977: 121-35). From an ecocritical standpoint, the most significant writers are likely to be those who have been most successful in redirecting the processes of modernisation by informing, warning and mobilising their readers. However, critical analysis of other literary representations of technology and nature may also be instructive where these articulate collective thought patterns and embody popular attitudes. As a sphere of simulation, literature facilitates imaginary experiences, which can (however indirectly and unquantifiably in everyday life) influence public attitudes and views. An understanding of the visions of the future consequences of new technologies in past fictional narratives, Harro Segeberg has therefore argued, can contribute usefully to contemporary debates, by helping us understand and engage with popular assumptions (1987a: 1-11).

In approaching the question what part individual writers have played in the discourse on technology, a convenient starting point is to attempt to classify their positions along a continuum between the extremes of anthropocentrism and biocentrism. Close to the first are those who trace the emancipation of humankind from drudgery (or, through the railway, the car, flight or space travel, from the limitations imposed by the laws of nature and our physical attributes), and celebrate the achievement of engineers in a heroic struggle against nature. Writers stressing the alienation from nature which has accompanied modernisation and progress, lamenting the loss of organic structures and 'poetry', and demonstrating the dangers of relying solely on instrumental reason without regard for the intrinsic value of all living beings by dramatising the destructive potential of technology, are situated towards the biocentric end of the scale.

The standpoints of individual nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers are in practice seldom as clearcut as this implies. While Goethe shared his contemporaries' anxieties about "das überhandnehmende Maschinenwesen",

or mechanisation getting out of control, in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (VIII 429), we have seen that he ultimately endorsed the process of modernisation and expressed enthusiasm for engineering projects including the Panama Canal. Ambivalence characterised the response of many writers to technological developments in the eighteen-forties and fifties, when the railways were built in Germany (see Schneider et al 1987: 46-94 and Hädecke 1993: 188-207). By the *Gründerjahre*, it was generally acknowledged that the changes now sweeping across the country, bringing new wealth and improved living standards, could not simply be halted, despite the losses incurred by certain groups of contemporaries. Wilhelm Raabe and Max Kretzer drew attention to the cultural and social as well as ecological consequences of rapid late nineteenth-century industrialisation in their novels, noting with concern the disruption of traditional ways of working and forms of community living, and the erosion of values which followed, together with pollution of the environment, from the concentration of production in large factories. A powerful sense of loss of the good old days is eloquently expressed in *Pfisters Mühle* (1884) and *Meister Timpe* (1888), but within the context of recognition of the need to move with the times.

The First World War was a decisive factor in radicalising critiques of technology, enhancing as it did awareness how society as a whole was being organised in order to meet the demands of industrial processes. The cultural scene at the end of the war and after the failed revolution of 1918-19 was dominated by fears of the future and longings for a *tabula rasa* as a prerequisite for a new beginning. This supremely pessimistic moment, to which the Kaiser's 'Gas' plays belong, lasted until about 1923. From then on, however, the Weimar Republic was characterised by a more balanced debate, in which technology was a territory disputed by adherents of the belief it either enslaved or emancipated the individual. In the early 1930s, the perspective that a heroic social elite was necessary to prevent technological progress from imposing terribly on future generations was taken up with enthusiasm by right-wing thinkers such as Ernst Jünger (see Midgley 2000: 305 and 339-43), and the hitherto essentially open process of questioning was subordinated to ideological and political ends in the Third Reich (Wege 2000: 25).

Carl Wege has disentangled the arguments encountered in Weimar writing and formulated a set of dichotomies which goes beyond the crude anthropocentric/biocentric distinction outlined above:

- man controls machines, just as he has subjugated nature (an anthropocentric standpoint), vs. man is dependent on machines (a technocentric standpoint)
- man can assert his authority in the face of the new order and retain control (voluntarism), vs. man must accept his technological fate (determinism)
- man and machine belong to different spheres, the spiritual/intellectual and the mechanical/material, vs. these complement each other harmoniously, entering into alliances, symbioses or organic constructions
- technology releases new, aggressive, chaotic forces in Western society, vs. it provides a new, structured, order of work
- technology deprives the human soul of substance and leaves it empty, vs. it opens up new dimensions of being
- quantity triumphs over quality, the masses over the individual, vs. civilisation and progress abolish outdated educational privileges and contribute to a homogenous popular national culture. (Wege 2000: 13ff.)

Ideological persuasion, it seems, had only an indirect bearing on the positions adopted and those taking up a defensive stance on one count could prove surprisingly confident and optimistic on another.

It is, however, well to bear in mind that cultural representations of technology cannot always be taken at face value, and are frequently additionally or even primarily a symbolic reflection of social situations. Fears that we are being, or are about to become, dominated by machines often derive from an experience of social structures which leaves no space for individual autonomy, and from a resultant loss of confidence in our ability to control our lives. The machine, be it in plays such as Kaiser's *Gas* (1918), Karel Čapek's *RUR* (1920, in which the word 'robot' was coined), Ernst Toller's *Masse Mensch* (1921) and *Die Maschinenstürmer* (1922), in films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), or in Nicolas Born's essays on *Die Welt der Maschine* (1980), is typically a symbol for the disempowering process of social standardisation and regimentation associated with modernity. With this caveat in mind, and the general context of public attitudes to and cultural representations of technology in the twentieth century which I have attempted to outline, I now examine a key work from each of the two periods in which, as mentioned above, apocalyptic scenarios flourished in twentieth-century Germany.

Bearing in mind the distinctions and insights arrived at by Wege and others, I ask what contribution Kaiser's plays and Enzensberger's long poem have made to enlightened debate on technology and our relationship with nature.

Georg Kaiser's 'Gas' plays are centred on an escalating series of explosions in a vast industrial complex which supplies the energy for the national economy. Their end in a great battle leading to the global annihilation of humanity reflects the widespread disillusionment of the time with the political and socio-economic structures that had brought forth the industrialised slaughter of the First World War. Typifying Expressionist polarisation, demonisation of technology and idealisation of nature, they might appear initially to merely reinforce clichés and have no more to offer today's reader or theatre audience than a dramatic expression of irrational fears. Kaiser's conception of nature and naturalness as an alternative to technological modernity,[6] which draws on Rousseau and Schopenhauer, and seeks to reconcile them with Nietzsche, is also, as we shall see, fundamentally problematic, and fraught with contradictions. However, this is not to wholly deny his achievement as a dramatist. For in his 'Denk-Spiele', fictional experiments with conflict solution models, he created a unique dramatic form with which to address philosophical, political and social problems. Abstract but highly suggestive allegories, his plays use a theatrical "aesthetic of terror" (Segeberg 1978a: 227) to trigger change and renewal by bringing audiences to reflect on the dangers inherent in the process of modernisation.

The disaster which befell the RMS *Titanic* on April 14, 1912 has served literally dozens of writers and film directors as an event on which to hang morals of the hubris present in faith in technology, of the corrupting influence of affluence, and of the iniquity of the class society. For Enzensberger, the ship serves as an allegory of progress and political and technical modernity. As previous commentators have shown, the fate of this largest and most luxurious transatlantic liner of its time stands not only for that of capitalist society, but also of the Marxist project: it reflects the poet's disillusionment with left-wing politics after the collapse of the student movement and the evaporation of the revolutionary fervour of 1968. However, the poem is at the same time quite literally concerned with our relationship with nature: as the

inexplicable other of human reason, civilisation and progress, the iceberg is as important a symbol as the *Titanic* itself. Kaiser is already ambivalent in his faith in the ability of socialism to create a better world. Enzensberger, however, breaks not only with socialist utopianism, but also with the 'negative utopia' of apocalypticism, by including counter-narratives of survival in his account of the disaster. Modernist pessimism is replaced by a philosophy of postmodern pragmatism. Despite his fascination with disaster, ironic detachment is more to the fore than tragedy.

My focus in the following is on the meanings with which Kaiser and Enzensberger invest their respective disasters, and the conceptions of nature and naturalness which underpin their critique of technology and modern civilisation. In terms of asethetic form, I ask how they complement the abstraction of logical argument by evoking experiences, constructing dramatic narratives and crystallising issues in symbols, thus moving the audience or reader, and facilitating a change of attitude. Finally, I examine the role of self-reflexivity and humour as distancing mechanisms from the dangerous naivety of the core apocalyptic tradition, which enable a more powerful symbolic representation of the complexity of the issues concerned.

2. Kaiser's critique of technology in the 'Gas' trilogy

Coming after the end of the first phase of Fordist optimism,[7] Kaiser's three 'Gas' plays, *Die Koralle*, *Gas* and *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, articulate age-old anxieties about human hubris (over-stepping boundaries set by the gods or nature), which are archetypically configured in the myths of Icarus and Prometheus. They resonate, by means of Biblical allusions, with the sense of loss of innocent, harmonious union with nature incurred by individuals in the psychological process of individuation and by communities in the development of human civilisation, which is encapsulated in the Biblical story of the Fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But above all, they voice the critique of *modern* civilisation first expounded by Rousseau, and recast by Nietzsche, Klages and Spengler. Kaiser's disillusionment with machines, technology and complex social organisation was motivated at least in part, as noted above, by the experience of the First World War. The beginning of *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, written 1918-19, directly reflects the situation in Germany

during the last year of the war, when the entire economy was geared towards a war effort with which fewer and fewer of the population genuinely agreed.

Do these doom-laden scenarios of the future have any insights into technological development to offer? Kaiser's critique of technology was a central concern of research into his work in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, and I shall be drawing on the final chapter of Harro Segeberg's *Literarische Technik-Bilder* (1987a: 224-62), which remains the most perceptive account of this aspect of *Gas* and *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, though Kaiser has been revisited by Vietta (1992) and Midgley (in the chapter 'Technology versus Humanity', in Midgley 2000). However, neither Segeberg, Vietta nor Midgley discusses the playwright's conception of technology in the context of his understanding of nature. I shall therefore also be examining the contemporaneous, thematically related plays *Die Koralle* and *Hölle Weg Erde*, and the later play *Rosamunde Floris*.[8]

The industrial complex around which the three 'Gas'-plays revolve produces gas, which was replacing water and coal at the time as a relatively new energy source. Kaiser anticipates gas providing the basis for a new era of unprecedented productivity in the national, indeed the global economy. It serves as a symbol for both the achievements and the dangers of technology. On the one hand, it is a force driving industrialisation, capital accumulation and power centralisation: "Unser Gas speist die Technik der Welt!", the clerk announces proudly at the beginning of *Gas* (II 12).[9] On the other, as a product of frenetic activity ("Hetzjagd", II 23) and unnatural exertion ("Raserei der Arbeit", II 36), it intensifies the negative aspects of modernisation. The relentless drive towards greater productivity leads to ever-increasing regimentation and exploitation of the individual. This is a direct reflection of early Fordism, with its monotonous assembly-line production, and the increase in work tempo brought about by the introduction of piecework pay and productivity bonuses.

Gas is a power to destroy as well as to create. *Die Koralle* and *Gas* are punctuated by industrial accidents causing loss of life and destruction of property. The reason for the devastating gas explosion in Act 1 of *Gas*, in which thousands of workers lose their lives, remains a mystery: it stands symbolically for problems inherent in capitalist production, industrial society,

and modernity in general. (The real historical phenomenon it corresponded to most closely was in fact the catastrophic loss of life in trench warfare, where the military 'machine' seemed out of control, devouring men.) Kaiser attacks the coldly rational, materialistic world view behind the economic calculation of the cost of such accidents by engineers, industrialists and politicians. The captains of industry have no qualms in continuing production with the formula which led to the explosion, for technology and industry "cannot stand still" (II 35). In *Gas – Zweiter Teil* the industrial sphere becomes indistinguishable from the military. The production of gas is superseded by the invention of poison gas – a reflection of actual developments in the First World War, and an anticipation of the atomic bombs which were dropped on Japan twenty-five years later, in order to hasten the end of the Second World War. Kaiser's plays then show technological advance as driven by capitalist profit-making and competition, and as leading not only to the ruthless exploitation of labour and the calculated risk of human life, but also to endangerment of the future of humanity, through the development of weapons of mass destruction. Whatever the limitations of his pessimism, he grapples with issues of political power, social justice and the ethics of science which are no less important a century after they were written.

The protagonists of Kaiser's three 'Gas' plays, which were written between 1916 and 1919, form four generations of one family. *Die Koralle* introduces us to the Billionaire, a first-generation capitalist, the founder of a great industrial empire; *Gas* to his son, a socialist reformer; and *Gas – Zweiter Teil* to his great-grandson, the so-called 'Billionaire Worker', an idealist who looks beyond material conditions to a world of the spirit. In *Die Koralle*, the machine is the epitome of laissez-faire capitalism, crushing the workers. In *Gas* too, the unremittingly bleak industrial world is presented as one of spiritual deprivation and the brutal reduction of the individual to a unit in the work force. Young men are maimed, reduced to a hand on a lever, a foot on a brake, or an eye on a pressure gauge. The explosion at the beginning of the play is only the logical culmination of processes crippling the workers, who are represented as performing the same task all their lives. The process is taken to its logical conclusion in *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, where they are reduced to robotic slaves.

At certain points, for instance in Acts 2 and 3 of *Die Koralle*, the thrust of Kaiser's critique is unmistakeably directed at the capitalist exploitation of the working class. However, he also anticipates the co-opting of technology by the military-industrial complex which was to characterise communism as well as twentieth-century capitalism. At the end of Act 5 of *Gas*, the government compels the Billionaire's Son to allow his works to be rebuilt, because the gas he produces has become indispensable to the national defence. The interruption of production jeopardises military strength when they are on the point of going to war. The socialist form of production he has introduced is openly discredited, alongside capitalism, through this association with armed aggression and the lust for power. The conflation of industry with militarism heralded in *Gas* is complete at the beginning of *Gas – Zweiter Teil*. The armed conflict in the offing at the end of the previous play has been in full swing for years, and the war against nature has logically developed into one against a human enemy. The creeping rationalisation of society and disempowerment of the individual reflected in *Gas* and *Gas – Zweiter Teil* are not, then, associated with any particular ideological orientation. Kaiser reveals a shrewd understanding of contemporary socialists' enthusiastic embrace of technology, which was to take the exploitation of human and material resources to new limits.

The juxtaposition of such perceptive reflection of contemporary developments with elements of seemingly irrational phobia and apocalyptic pessimism in Kaiser's plays is a feature which demands explanation. Technology is repeatedly demonised. The factory machine in *Gas*, a thing of flesh and blood (the engineer describes the gas as "bleeding" in the inspection glass), is represented as a savage beast with a destructive will. After the explosion, a traumatised worker expresses a horror vision of a great cat which sets buildings alight with its eyes and bursts them apart by arching its back: "Weiße Katze gesprungen – – rote Augen gerissen – gelbes Maul gesperrt – – buckelt knisternden Rücken – – wächst rund – – knickt Träger weg – – hebt das Dach auf – – und platzt in Funken!!" (II 17). The demonic image exemplifies the dynamisation, animation and personification of inert objects which have been identified by Vietta and Kemper as the corollary of the reification of the subject in Expressionist writing. Kaiser's sinister

animation of the machine expresses the widespread feeling of being at the mercy of a social structure beyond our control.

Industrialism is conceived as a social experiment incapable of respecting the integrity of the human individual (II 37). In pursuit of total control of nature, by means of reason and abstract mathematical formulae, we have suppressed those aspects of ourselves associated with the unconscious. These are now projected onto the machine, which 'takes revenge'. Kaiser's explosions reflect the diffuse destructive forces, latent brutality and aggression in modern urban industrial civilisation.

The question of the benefits and dangers of scientific and technological progress is raised in a dramatic debate between the Engineer and the Billionaire's Son in Act 4 of *Gas*. The former is the proponent of technology, while the latter advocates a de-industrialised society as an alternative. Work in the power plant has come to a standstill after the explosion. First the workers, who have rediscovered themselves as human beings and individuals now they are no longer subjected to the rhythms of the regular working day, evoke the mental and physical consequences of factory work in a stylised indictment of its alienating effects. Then the Billionaire's Son speaks, outlining his plans for a new 'colony' in resonant phrases.

When the Engineer is finally heard, he speaks with surprising eloquence. Technology is the crowning achievement of humankind, it transforms beings weaker than many an animal into global victors. Tower blocks, telephone and power cables, cars and planes are witness to the greatness of human endeavour. Technology is a heroic undertaking, in which man takes charge of his destiny and rules the world. The Billionaire's Son presents his plans for the future as offering space to people who had lived their whole lives in the narrow confines of industrial production. But the Engineer describes them scornfully as exchanging world power for an existence huddled together like animals in a pen, timorously eking out a living through subsistence farming, in short, becoming "peasants" (II 49). Not surprisingly, it is his arguments which win over the workers, rather than those of the social reformer.

In *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, Kaiser again highlights the tedium of monotonously repeated actions in industrial production, and the destructive

potential of invention, as problematic aspects of modernity. However, the discussion of technology undergoes a decisive shift in perspective. Act 3, another set-piece debate, this time between the Billionaire Worker and the Chief Engineer (Großingenieur), an ice-cold *Übermensch* described as "the petrefaction of fanatic working energy" (II 63), echoes the dialectic structure and themes of Act 4 of *Gas*. But the focus has altered: invention is now presented as essentially destructive and aggressive, and Kaiser appears to have lost faith in the existence of any alternative other than renunciation. Paradoxically, the Engineer and the Billionaire Worker adopt positions diametrically opposed to those of their predecessors in the previous play. The Chief Engineer calls on the workers to follow him on strike. He has invented a new, all-powerful weapon: poison gas. This, he believes, will cow the enemy into surrender. Born of hatred and shame, it epitomises, in the eyes of the Billionaire worker, the "powers of destruction", and is a logical consequence of the distortion of the forces of progress in contemporary society.

The workers are presented with an impossible choice: if they are not to be masters ("Rächer", "Kämpfer", "Sieger", II 84) through the use of this gas, they are to be slaves. The perspective offered by the Billionaire Worker is one of saintly acceptance of their lot and withdrawal into an inner, spiritual realm. Their options are summed up in the couplet: "Gründet das Reich – Zündet das Giftgas!" (II 87) By demonising technology, Kaiser mystifies it, and naturalises the situation in 1918 as an ahistorical one. His perception of the future as one in which individuals will become a faceless 'workforce' and be reduced to a collective apathy, out of which even charismatic leaders will fail to shake them, leaves him with a deeply pessimistic view of history. The strain of cultural pessimism in his plays reflects a weakness which is characteristic of the whole Expressionist generation's critique of technology. Kaiser's conception of nature is equally representative of his time in attempting to fuse different currents of nineteenth-century nature philosophy.

3. Nature and naturalness as alternatives to industrial civilisation

The alternatives to industrial civilisation which Kaiser hints at in his plays have usually been dismissed as mere clichés (see Willeke 1995: 53 and 89). An interest in contemporary experiments in social reform is evident at the

beginning of *Die Koralle*, where he alludes briefly to “Landkolonien” (I 657) – the agricultural cooperatives which sprang up in various parts of Germany at the end of the nineteenth century as social and cultural experiments (see Linse 1983). A related idea is aired at greater length in Acts 2 and 4 of *Gas*, where the Billionaire’s Son unfolds his vision of a new society, in which the workers are to become “über grünem Grund Siedler” (II 26). His sketches for a new town on the site of the destroyed factory recall the Garden City idea, which was popularised by Ebenezer Howard in *To-Morrow. A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), and enthusiastically promoted in Germany by the Gartenstadt-Gesellschaft founded in Berlin in 1903.

Here and elsewhere, Kaiser is indebted to his friend Gustav Landauer, who was one of the principal theorists of the Land Commune Movement, and a founding member of the Gartenstadt-Gesellschaft. In the preface to the 1919 edition of *Aufruf zum Sozialismus*, Landauer called for a return to rurality or “Ländlichkeit” (1919: xvi), an idea which he developed in the essay ‘Die Siedlung’:

> Das sozialistische Dorf mit Werkstätten und Dorffabriken, mit Wiesen und Äckern und Gärten, mit Großvieh und Kleinvieh und Federvieh – ihr Großstadtproletarier, gewöhnt euch an den Gedanken, so fremd und seltsam er auch im Anfang noch anmuten mag, daß das der einzige Anfang eines Wirklichkeitssozialismus ist, der übriggeblieben ist. Der Sozialismus ist die Rückkehr zur natürlichen Arbeit, zur natürlichen, abwechslungsvollen Verbindung aller Tätigkeiten, zur Gemeinschaft von geistiger und körperlicher, von handwerklicher und landwirtschaftlicher Arbeit, zur Vereinigung auch von Unterricht und Arbeit, von Spiel und Arbeit. (1924: 71)

This picture of the future socialist society as one consisting of village communities in which people found time for leisure and education, while alternating freely and ‘naturally’ between different kinds of work in handcraft, agriculture and small-scale manufacturing, is reminiscent of William Morris’s utopian vision of the London of the future in *News From Nowhere* (1890). However, the Billionaire’s Son’s words in Kaiser’s play amount to nothing more than poetic pathos and rhetorical phrases: “Raum ist euer – und Allheit im Raum, der euch beherbergt! […] In euch braust der Himmel und flutet die Fläche mit Farbe der Gräser!” “Menschen in Einheit und Fülle seid ihr morgen! Triften von Breite in Grüne sind neuer Bezirk!” (II 47) Kaiser’s green ideals seem naïve and regressive: whereas Landauer calls for a partial de-

industrialisation through detachment from the capitalist world market and the embedding of industry in the context of a revival of the crafts and agriculture, Kaiser seems to exclude industry from his vision of the future. He ignores Landauer's careful distinction between genuinely emancipatory technologies and merely competitive ones (Segeberg 1987a: 241f.).

In Act 2 of *Gas – Zweiter Teil*. the theme of an alternative form of existence is taken up again in poetic speeches evoking the dawn of a new existence. A life of harmonious self-fulfilment and love is conjured up in images of light, colour and flowing water. In words reminiscent of both Christianity and Taoism, the Billionaire Worker calls on the factory workers not merely to avoid (destructive) technology, and to renounce material wealth for non-material aims, but to embrace an existence of patient suffering. His vision of the future is one of other-worldly inwardness: "Baut das Reich, das ihr seid in euch mit letzter Befestigung" (II 86). Echoing the words of Christ to Pilate when asked whether he was King of the Jews, he exclaims: "*Nicht von dieser Welt ist das Reich!!!!*" This renunciation of all earthly things is hard to reconcile with Kaiser's previous allusions to the Garden City and Landauer's communitarian socialism, and we are left asking ourselves whether any of the figures expressing such ideas can seriously be taken for a mouth-piece of the author.

The play *Hölle Weg Erde*, which was written at the same time as *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, provides a curious contrast. *Hölle Weg Erde*'s optimistic narrative of the New Man succeeding in persuading the masses to embark on a new life is diametrically opposed to the dystopian perspective of technology leading to disaster in Kaiser's other plays written between 1916 and 1919. The three acts of the play represent respectively the *hell* of contemporary capitalism and modern alienated society, the *journey* towards change, and finally the beginnings of a new life, one which is *natural*, simple, healthy and moral. At the beginning of the third Act, 'Erde', dawn breaks over a barren plain. Spazierer, the semi-autobiographical artist-protagonist, appears, leading a multitude, who, like the People of Israel, have left the fleshpots of the city in search of a better existence. Echoing the words of the Billionaire Worker in *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, he calls on them to build a "new creation" on the land, and realise their true human potential (II 142). Here humankind will enter

into a mystical union with the earth: “Euer Blut braust – – denn ihr seid die Erde!!” (II 143).

The new Jerusalem is envisaged here, a gleaming citadel with white towers and splendid gabled houses, confirms Kaiser’s reliance on poetic vision to evoke alternatives to contemporary society, and raises the question how this stance of desperate hope can be reconciled with the Taoist passivity, Schopenhauerian pessimism and Nietzschean self-realisation encountered elsewhere in his work. At the end of *Gas – Zweiter Teil*, the Billionaire Worker pleads, as we have seen above, not for a life in harmony with nature, but for a renunciation amounting to voluntary slavery. His message of passivity reflects the heart of the cult of Far Eastern philosophy and spirituality in Germany around the turn of the century, which was an integral part of his contemporaries’ critique of civilisation. Hesse and Zweig, Klabund and Döblin, Brecht, Loerke and Eich were among those who sought in Chinese culture a source of spiritual renewal for Europe (see Chu 2002: 127-40 and Bergner 1998: 106-8). Taoism, the Rousseauistic ideal of return to a life of simplicity, purity and health, and Schopenhauer’s renunciation alls appeared as alternatives to Western materialism.

Die Koralle is dominated by Schopenhauer’s conception of human life as suffering, and by a wish to reverse the process of evolution, which has resulted in a one-sided development of and reliance on intellect and reason, suppressing the instincts and the unconscious, and to regress to a simpler form of existence. At the end of the play, the Billionaire rejects the Christian promise of an afterlife in favour of a return to the bliss of origin: “Am Ende findet man es [das Himmelreich] nicht – im Anfang steht es da: das Paradies!” “Ich habe das Paradies, das hinter uns liegt, wieder erreicht”, he enthuses: “Ich […] stehe mitten auf holdestem Wiesengrün. Oben strömt Himmelsblau” (I 710).

Somewhat confusingly for today’s readers, Kaiser grafts his fascination with Taoism’s ‘inaction’ and Schopenhauer’s renunciation onto the ideas of Nietzsche and contemporary *Lebensphilosophie*. He was, however, by no means alone in doing so: Alfred Döblin’s conception of nature was, for instance, similarly syncretist.[10] Nietzsche’s conception of ‘Leben’ as a dynamic process of growth and development which modern man contravened

at his peril was of central importance for the Expressionist generation in their efforts to go beyond mechanistic causality on the one hand, and mystical longing and metaphysical speculation on the other, in explaining the laws of nature (see Martens 1974).[11]

Nature and an active life overcoming all obstacles had been idealised by Nietzsche as yardsticks for human behaviour. In *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the prophet calls (unlike the historical Zoroaster, who sought the meaning of life in an afterlife) for a return to the earth: “Ich beschwöre euch, meine Brüder, *bleibt der Erde treu* und glaubt Denen nicht, welche euch von überirdischen Hoffnungen reden!” (1980, IV: 15). His cult of the body and the instincts, as a substitute for Christian other-worldliness and the enforced sublimations of modern civilisation, involves demanding of his followers a mix of ascetic self-sacrifice, individual subordination to the good of the species, and ruthless hedonism. They are to blend passive contemplation with instinctive action, self-effacement with aggressive self-assertion at the expense of others. The artistic genius is placed above conventional morality: “Was gut und böse ist, *das weiss noch Niemand* – es sei denn der Schaffende! – Das aber ist Der, welcher des Menschen Ziel schafft und der Erde ihren Sinn giebt und ihre Zukunft” (p. 247). Nietzsche envisages natural human existence as a ruthless struggle for survival, in which the moral norms traditionally deemed necessary for social existence must be overturned: “Alles, was den Guten böse heisst, muss zusammenkommen, dass Eine Wahrheit geboren werde […] Das verwegene Wagen, das lange Misstrauen, das grausame Nein, der Überdruss, das Schneiden in’s Lebendige – wie selten kommt *das* zusammen! Aus solchem Samen aber wird – Wahrheit gezeugt!” (p. 251).

Nietzsche’s conception of nature and his perspective on the future have been compared to those of today’s Deep Ecologists. In ‘Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne’, he writes of human existence in the universe as a fleeting, peripheral and insignificant phenomenon. Human intelligence and reason are pitiful, shadowy, meaningless and arbitrary (1980, I: 875-7). His approach is nevertheless ultimately less biocentric than anthropocentric, for though he implies that that which enables and affirms life and freedom is good, and calls for a new German culture which works

towards the “completion” of nature, he privileges the human race above other species. The “meaning of the earth” is the Superman, a supreme predatory animal. Only the Superman is capable of the Dionysian embrace of existence preached by Zarathustra and described in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* as “amor fati” (i.e. loving one’s life, with all its flaws, just for what it is).

The unresolved tension between the passivity of Laotse and Nietzschean assertion of the individual will, as precepts for human behaviour, which runs through Kaiser’s work is clearly encapsulated in his late play *Rosamunde Floris* (written 1936-7). The eponymous protagonist is a New Woman, who is associated with the Earth, plant life, growth, vitality and reproduction. Breaking out of stifling social restrictions, she reasserts nature over culture. The passion and purity of her quasi-religious love for her partner William are presented as a force capable of warming and regenerating the cold urban surroundings, and uniting the atomised individuals in society. Rosamunde also exemplifies a new partner-relationship with nature. Her empathy with animal life is extreme: she dreams that birds fleeing from monsters seek refuge in her, and she is chosen to protect them (III 392).

The play is prefaced by a motto from Laotse: “Perfect purity is true simplicity” (III 363). However, Rosamunde’s actions are less acts of simplicity, purity and relinquishment than of ruthless self-assertion. She takes to a new extreme the ambivalence of the Billionaire in *Die Koralle*, who practises philanthropy, and seeks peace of mind in union with nature, but is at the same time a ‘tiger’ of a self-made man. Rosamunde shows callous disregard for others, murdering an innocent man, a woman, and finally her own child. Kaiser’s evident admiration of her savage immorality can be understood as appreciation for the behaviour of a trapped animal, single-mindedly following its instinct for survival. Once she has succeeded in clearing suspicion and is no longer in danger, the claims of society get the better of her: she confesses her guilt, and is executed.[12]

Kaiser had already expressed his regard for inner independence, rejection of accepted norms and morals, and orientation towards the future in *Die Koralle*. Rosamunde takes the consequences of Nietzschean self-assertion to the extreme, exemplifying the vital force of nature in a play characterised by images of rigidity and irksome restriction. The playwright’s

intentions seem summed up in the words of the Police Commissioner: “Die Macht, die wir nicht kontrollieren, hat gewaltet – das Schicksal. In seiner Unerbittlichkeit erhaben – es ist Tragödie und aus ihr kommt Trost” (III 420). Kaiser has Rosamunde redeemed by the moonlight streaming into her prison cell, in a quasi-religious apotheosis (III 429), before paying final homage to the all-powerful life force in the closing lines: the natives’ drums in the jungle where her lover, William, works sound “eigentümlich und beständig wie der unbesiegliche Herzschlag alles unvergänglichen Lebens” (III 431). Humanity is, it appears, caught tragically between the primeval urge to self-realisation and the imperative of civilisation, with its sublimations and accommodations to communal living.

4. Kaiser’s contribution to the debate on technology

The ultimate aim of contributors to the Expressionist debate on technology such as Kaiser was, Harro Segeberg observes, to return technology to its role of serving man, rather than driving him (1987a: 212). The essay ‘Das Drama Platons’ (written 1917) is the first indication of the conception of the drama as a vehicle for developing arguments which was to be Kaiser’s distinctive achievement. Kaiser conceived his plays as ‘Denk-Spiele’, or literary experiments dramatising philosophical debates: “Ins Denk-Spiel sind wir eingezogen und bereits erzogen aus karger Schau-Lust zu glückvoller Denk-Lust.” The abstract nature of the action, his rejection of realism and neglect of scenic decor are consequences of his focus on the dialectic of point and counterpoint (IV 544).

Segeberg gave a new turn to Kaiser research by pointing out that the technique of abstraction in Kaiser’s ‘Gas’ plays mimicked the logic of contemporary science and technology. Kaiser’s dramatic scenarios present hypotheses concerning future social developments, at which he has arrived by isolating and generalising from empirically observed patterns of behaviour. These are then recombined in new artificial realities, in a fictional thought-experiment (1987a: 226). His conception of the drama as a vehicle of intellectual emancipation, not necessarily providing answers, but stimulating independent thought, was a precursor of Brecht’s epic theatre. The ‘Gas’

plays investigate the consequences of pursuit of progress regardless of the risks involved (p. 242).

Judged as open-ended experiments to fathom the future of industrial civilisation, they have, as we have seen, undoubted weaknesses. It is not merely that Kaiser leans towards what Carl Wege describes in the passage from *Buchstabe und Maschine*, summarised above as the poles of technocracy, determinism, dualism, aggressive technology, spiritual emptiness and cultural pessimism. The thought patterns through which he induces us to see technology, in particular his many biblical images and resonances, which imply that shifts in value must follow a model of quasi-religious awakening or conversion, are not conducive to envisaging practical alternatives to the path taken by modern society. Aggression and destruction are also presented as anthropological constants. Kaiser undercuts the perspectives of change championed by New Men and Women in the 'Gas' plays, *Hölle Weg Erde* and *Rosamunde Floris*, and their alternatives to technology, industry and the regimentation of human life, with a world view of radical pessimism, in which human existence is presented as incarceration, guilt and suffering.

Kaiser's catastrophes are warnings, reminders of our vulnerability. His aim is, as Ulrich Teusch has put it, to shock spectators into preventing the things which happen on stage from happening in real life (Teusch 2005: 220). However, if the overwhelmingly negative outcome of all the plays examined here (with the exception of *Hölle Weg Erde*) is intended as a provocative challenge to the audience, there is a real danger that it may demotivate viewers rather than empower or inspire them to resistance. Kaiser's apocalypticism thus runs the risk of conjuring up the very developments he sought to warn against.

The conception of the stage expounded in Kaiser's essays is, however, not that of a pulpit, but of a battleground of ideas (IV 545). The 'Gas' plays are less concerned with expounding a philosophy of unremitting pessimism than with asking, as Midgley puts it, "what *would* happen if all social development *were* to be subordinated to the goal of unleashing an ever increasing technological potential" (2000: 310). As Willeke has observed (1995: 116), Kaiser responds to an existential crisis by evoking a series of positive ideals

as bulwarks against the threat of nothingness and meaninglessness: natural sensuality, community, the mystical union of lovers, and artistic creativity. He is not, however, satisfied with any of these for long: most of his plays end by demonstrating their failure.

Kaiser's plays have kept their place in theatre programmes not least because of their unique linguistic reduction and stylisation. Arranged in contradictory configurations, his protagonists sling arguments at each other like verbal ordinance, igniting each other with powerful telegrammatic detonators (Segeberg 1987a: 233). Explosion is in fact central to the playwright's theatrical shock strategy, which seeks to spark insight in the audience, to shake them into recognition of the necessity of change, rather than to inform, explain or provide conceptual solutions. The abstraction of Kaiser's plays has also meant that, as parables, they have been able to take on a new significance for each generation. Segeberg notes that the most effective productions since the Second World War have not sought to be realistic or to foreground relevance to a contemporary issue, but to preserve the plays' suggestiveness (pp. 249-58). As early as 1947, theatre critics were already suggesting the message of *Gas* and *Gas – Zweiter Teil* could be updated by substituting 'atom' for 'gas'. In 1958, a year after the apogee of the debate on the atom bomb and the founding of the *Bundeswehr*, the legendary Weimar experimental producer Erwin Piscator put on a monumental production in Bochum, telescoping both 'Gas' plays into one. When public concern shifted from the atom bomb to nuclear power, another revival followed in the late 1970s. While a production in Essen, which alluded explicitly to the anti-nuclear movement, was dismissed by the critics as "a pamphlet supporting the protestors in Gorleben" (see Segeberg 1978a: 250), Peter Schlapp's production in Marburg avoided the temptation to cast the action in the present. A third production in Hamburg also maintained the element of dramatic stylisation and abstraction, merely alluding in passing to the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Kaiser's distinctive mix of pathos and cool stylisation, passionate commitment and ironic scepticism is still capable of arousing resonances in audiences today. We shall see how Enzensberger, while avoiding some of the

more problematic aspects of the ‘Gas’ plays through critical awareness of the apocalyptic mindset, similarly juxtaposes emotional identification with detachment in *Der Untergang der Titanic*.

5. Titanic myths

“Why are the activities aboard the *Titanic* so fascinating to us that we give no heed to the water through which we pass, or to that iceberg on the horizon?”, the American ecocritic Glen Love asked in a conference address in 1990 (Love 1996: 229). Pleading for an ecologically oriented literary criticism seeking “to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (p. 237), he proposed reading the *Titanic* disaster, which has been invested with such diverse political and social meanings in the past, as a cautionary tale illustrating our blindness to the environmental situation. Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s epic poem *Der Untergang der Titanic* (1978)[13] is a work which is, for all the attention it devotes to activities aboard the ship, centrally preoccupied with the ‘water’ and the ‘iceberg’, and the need to rethink our conceptions of technology and progress.

This complex metaphorical text was initially either dismissed as a disaster scenario in keeping with the pessimistic cultural trend which pervaded the late nineteen-seventies in Germany, or attacked as a cynical postmodern work overburdened with cultural allusions, playing nihilistically with catastrophe (see Dietschreit 1986: 115-7 and McGowan 1990: 12). More attentive readings have since explored the dimension of critical self-reflection in the poem, which reviewers either failed to recognise, or misunderstood, and focused on the poet’s philosophical reflections on truth and representation (Koch 1997 and Delisle 2001). The *Titanic* is examined in the following as an image of modern industrial society, and the narrative of its sinking as a vehicle for reflection on self-destructive tendencies present in modernity. Starting with a brief contextualisation through reference to some of the many myths and cultural representations of the *Titanic*, and an indication of the political and metaphysical dimensions of meaning in Enzensberger’s poem, I trace continuities with concerns with technology and ecology expressed in his earlier work, and discuss key passages from the poem that give metaphorical expression to anxieties concerning nuclear holocaust. Arguing that the

philosophy of pragmatism which runs through the poem as a counter-current to apocalyptic pessimism remains, a quarter of a century on, a useful position in environmental debate, I then reflect on the extent to which the poem may be called a postmodern work, and how it differs from Kaiser's plays as examples of Modernism.

The imagination and representation of the scenes as the *Titanic* disappeared beneath calm but freezing waters off the coast of Newfoundland on the evening of 14 April, 1912, with nearly 1500 persons still on board, have mobilised timeless anxieties and fantasies, many of which had already been encapsulated in images and accounts of previous sea voyages and catastrophes. The first sets of slides and newsreels relating to the disaster were released within days, and within a month, a short feature film had been made (see Mills 1995). Documentary accounts of the disaster remain popular reading today, *Titanic* enthusiasts' societies flourish,[14] and the events of that fateful night continue to be treated in novels[15] and films. James Cameron's *Titanic* film starring Leonardo di Caprio and Kate Winslett was no less than the ninth feature film on the subject (see the filmography in Mills 1995: 126-30). "The thrill of the affair has been great enough to sustain two revivals (1950s-60s, 1980s-90s) and innumerable novels (mostly middlebrow romances) as well as plays, films, paintings, dance, opera, musicals", notes John Wilson Foster, editor of one of several recent anthologies of Titanica (Foster 1999: xiv).

Over the decades, the story has revealed an elasticity which has permitted an astonishing range of strands to be taken up – narratives of heroism, rites of passage, inner development, failure and redemption, of romance and the triumph of American masculinity over British effeminacy. In his instructive account, Richard Howells shows how stories about the disaster can be understood, like the myths of primitive societies, as cultural devices by which abstract values have been encoded in concrete form, and random, arbitrary events made meaningful. From the beginning, he points out that attempts to derive uplifting lessons from the disaster were accompanied by perceptions of a punishing hand of fate. Through the (retrospective) dubbing of the ship as 'unsinkable', its lot became a tragic example of the consequences of hubris.

After the Second World War, the sinking of the *Titanic*, which had already signalled to conservative contemporaries the precipitous decline of Western civilisation and the traditional moral values that had kept it afloat, came in Walter Lord's bestselling account, *A Night to Remember* (1956), to symbolise the end of a golden era, the beginning of the end of the British Empire. Steven Biel has read Lord's book as a narrative of nostalgia for an age of security (see Foster 1999: 296-301). In a world in transition to the atomic age, the *Titanic* was both like and unlike the bomb, a far cry from its threat of instantaneous destruction, yet its ancestor in terms of misplaced assurance. The appeal of Lord's story, which was several times reprinted, adapted for television and filmed, lay in its correspondence with the anxious counter-current to the belief in progress and nuclear technology which swept the fifties, and more broadly, with feelings of ambivalence about the achievements of the 'affluent society' and social security. Cameron's film of 1997 continues, despite its primary focus on the nature of love and the meaning of sacrifice, to prompt questions about society's divide between rich and poor, and modernity's faith in, and obsession with technological prowess and mastery over nature.[16]

For Germans, the *Titanic* story has also possessed a certain appeal, perhaps because of its echoes of their own experience of political and economic disasters in the twentieth century. German literary versions of the story could be said to have preceded the event: *Atlantis*, a novel on maritime disaster by Gerhart Hauptmann, was being serialised in the press when the accident happened. The artist Max Beckmann painted a huge canvas, 'The Sinking of the *Titanic*', within months of the disaster, and a feature film was released called *In Nacht und Eis*. The Marbach exhibition catalogue *Literatur im Industriezeitalter* (Schneider et al. 1987) presents further responses, including Karl Krauss's satirical montage of text fragments celebrating the ship and exposing the materialism, conventional piety and blind faith in technology of its builders, and novels by Bernhard Kellermann (1938) and Josef Pelz von Felinau (1939). In 1929 *Atlantic*, the first talking film on the *Titanic*, was directed by a German, and during the Second World War a spectacular propaganda film *Titanic*, based on a Robert Prechtl's novel *Titanensturz* (1937), sought to persuade viewers of the imminent demise of

the decadent Anglo-Saxon world. Enzensberger was probably initially attracted to the *Titanic* story as one encapsulating his own misgivings about developments in contemporary society. His poem, begun in the late sixties, but only completed in 1977, predated the second world-wide revival of interest sparked off by the discovery of the wreck of the *Titanic* in the 1980s. It reflects extensive research into a wide range of historical sources and works of popular culture, including films. The 1953 Hollywood melodrama *Titanic*, starring Barbara Stanwyck and Clifton Webb, is mentioned more than once, and several scenes are described in cinematic terms.

6. Dimensions of meaning in Enzensberger's *Untergang der Titanic*

Der Untergang der Titanic, which unites elements of epic, lyric, drama and philosophical fragment, must be one of the most complex and ambitiously imaginative accounts of the disaster. The dimension of political allegory, which provided the initial focus for critical analysis of the poem, is in itself complex: Enzensberger describes it as his initial intention to depict the ship as a microcosm of capitalist society, foundering on the iceberg of revolution. However, the events of 1968-9 lead him to invert their polarity. Cuba, the island of socialist experiment and the repository of his hopes for the future at the time of the Student Movement, becomes the *Titanic*, a vessel swaying under the poet's feet and destined to go under. The iceberg undergoes a similar semantic transformation, ending up as the symbol of a historical reality indifferent to the Marxist perspective of social and political progress. The poem is thus a reflection of the author's disillusionment with socialism and utopian anarchism, though traces of remaining political commitment are present in references to the fate of the steerage passengers, to blacks, stokers, the unemployed and emigrants, and in Enzensberger's vision of the Bedouins from the wall-painting in the lounge coming alive and swarming over the ship (pp. 5, 54f., 59, 66f., 80). The *Titanic* represents the whole of Western civilisation, culture and philosophy, and Dante, Engels and Bakunin are among the passengers in the poet's "forty-six thousand gross register ton head" (p. 80), but it also stands for capitalist society in particular, with the wealthy and powerful living at the expense of "Wogs, Jews, camel drivers and Polacks" (p. 63), "Chicanos, Eskimos and Palestinians" (p. 78).

Enzensberger's principal target is a society living in relative affluence and a false sense of security, blind to its injustices and self-destructive forces. Within the context of a broad critique of modernity, individual passages in the poem link the *Titanic* with scientism and technological hubris, luxury and capitalism, class conflict and the exploitation of the Third World. The central themes of sinking and drowning, and the motif of water creeping, trickling and rushing in link the text with earlier poems of Enzensberger's such as 'Schaum' and 'An alle Fernsprechteilnehmer', which provide extended metaphors for the situation of the individual in the affluent society, subjected to the repressive, life-threatening effects of nuclear and other technologies.

This is not to deny that the poem possesses a metaphysical dimension of meaning. The iceberg embodies the unknown, the incalculable, the 'other' of civilisation; it reminds us of the limitations of human reason, the residual risk in a modern world under technological control, and the ultimate dependence of humanity on the laws of nature. Slicing open the ship's side like the blade of a hidden knife, it is a mysterious elemental force. Cruel and at the same time awesomely beautiful, the iceberg and the sea recall the "delightful horror" of the eighteenth-century sublime and the darker side of Romantic pantheism. In its radiant perfection, it echoes the whiteness of the "spirits of the north" in the Norwegian landscape of his earlier poem 'lachesis lapponica' (Enzensberger 1964a: 76-9), and evokes the void, the non-linear course of history and the cyclical principle of nature, denying existence of meaning.

In this context, however, the political and metaphysical dimensions of meaning are less important than the narrative of contemporary technological and environmental self-annihilation: "Is it just a matter of a few dozen passengers", the poet/narrator asks, "or do I watch the whole human race over there, haphazardly / hanging on to some run-down cruise liner, fit for the scrapyard / and headed for self-destruction?" (p. 97). Suffocating, drowning in water, being buried in snow and standing on the brink of disaster, soaked to the skin in the downpour (pp. 35f., 40f., 60, 97f.) are metaphors for the modern predicament behind which lurk above all fears of nuclear holocaust.

Nuclear apocalypse has been identified by Arrigo Subiotto as one of a number of long-term environmental concerns in Enzensberger's work,

alongside the extinction of species, pollution and the population explosion (Subiotto 1998). He traces Enzensberger's development from the "unfocussed repudiation of modernity" evident in "incipient unease with the potential damage a developing post-war industrial society was likely to inflict on the world" and "romantic nostalgia for an unspoilt primitive life" in his first poetry volume *Die Verteidigung der Wölfe* (1957), to elegies on the potential extinction of the natural world through man's destructive activities in *Landessprache* (1960). In the wake of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when the world stood on the brink of nuclear warfare, Enzensberger's admonitions of the danger of catastrophe, fundamental doubts about progress, and mistrust of man's ability to control and survive his own technological inventions appeared to culminate in *Blindenschrift* (1964), in which references to radioactivity served as a symbol for nature unleashed by man against himself, totalitarian capitalism and botched enlightenment.

Subsequently, Enzensberger's attention shifted from bourgeois consumerism and the nuclear threat to denunciation of monopoly capitalism and industrial imperialism. However, he returned to the environment in 1973, with the essay 'Zur Kritik der politischen Ökologie'. While acknowledging ecological imperatives, this engaged in an ideological critique of Green politics. Enzensberger rejected the false consciousness of pretending we are all in the same boat – denying, as he put it in an indirect allusion to the *Titanic*, the difference between first class and steerage, between the bridge and the engine room (1973: 18). The confidence with which he argued that socialism is a precondition for survival was, however, already waning.

His next major poetic work, *Mausoleum*, which was ironically subtitled 'Thirty-seven Ballads on the Future of Progress', portrayed protagonists and opponents of the Enlightenment from the fourteenth century up to the present. Inventions, discoveries and innovations were shown to have been won at the price of repeated errors, accidents and losses. There is a direct link between these poems, in which scientific and technological advance is celebrated as dogged human endeavour, but stripped of any perspective of teleological fulfilment, and Enzensberger's interrogation of progress and technology in *Der Untergang der Titanic*. In the Eighth Canto, an engineer on board the *Titanic* first holds it is "quite out of the question" the ship is about to go down, only to

muse that “at the root of all innovation there is catastrophe”. He ends by accepting the possibility of his own demise, and envisaging humanity’s self-destruction (pp. 26f.).

The “incredible calm” of Enzensberger’s passengers in the face of disaster (p. 37) and their silent inability to understand the exhortations of agitators (p. 17) reflect not only the ebbing of political activism, but also a public protest seemingly too weak to have any impact on the German government’s energy policies, in respect of both nuclear power (“For years we have been playing around / with the afflictions / that were in store. / Residual risk, we used to say, / leak, we called it, fail-safe threshold” – p. 87) and global warming: “the glaciologists / have brought their microcomputers along for the worldwide / symposium on climate research, printing out on-line / iceberg simulations for the next hundred and fifty years” (p. 77).[17]

Der Untergang der Titanic coincided with other German works envisioning approaching disaster in the form of freezing to death or an Ice Age in the late nineteen-seventies (see Grimm 1980). Snow and ice, flooding and darkness were poetic images not only for the political disillusionment of the mid to late seventies in Germany, but also for environmental disaster in general and nuclear winter in particular. The protest of the German citizens’ action groups against the building of a new generation of nuclear power stations in the 1970s was motivated by a conflation of legitimate concerns for safety and individual freedom with an abhorrence of nuclear weapons which was rooted in part in the wartime experience of destruction and suffering. Enzensberger participated in this national trauma, but distanced himself from it at the same time. His biographer Jörg Lau has argued that the preoccupation with nuclear holocaust which is evident in Enzensberger’s poems and essays since the late 1950s, when the ‘Kampf dem Atomtod’ movement was at its height, and which resurfaced in the long poem ‘Die Frösche von Bikini’ (Enzensberger 1980: 37-52), goes back to his childhood experience of the Allied bombing raids on Nuremberg (Lau 1999: 19). Continuity does not, however, preclude development, and *Der Untergang der Titanic* marks a shift towards a position of more relaxed detachment.

7. Enzensberger's postmodern adaptation of the 'mentality of catastrophe'

Interwoven in the narrative of the *Titanic* being holed by the iceberg and its passengers drowning in the sub-zero sea are references to other catastrophes and natural forces threatening humankind – the darkness at noon at Christ's crucifixion, the conflagrations, lightning, earthquakes and shipwrecks in paintings of the Apocalypse, the extinction of the dinosaurs, the volcanic eruption in the poem 'The Reprieve', the Flood in 'Keeping Cool', and the city of Berlin becoming submerged in a snowstorm in the Twenty-second and Thirty-first Cantos. Such images are the stock in trade of cultural pessimism. The very title *Der Untergang der Titanic* echoes Oswald Spengler's influential work on the cyclical rise and fall of human cultures, prophesying the end of Western civilisation, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Spengler 1918/1922). Yet Enzensberger's poem cannot simply be located within the German tradition of apocalyptic thinking touched on in Chapters 1 and 3. Moray McGowan has commented that images of existential and cultural negativity, even despair, coexist in Enzensberger's work from the start with an aggressive political stance. Negation and pessimism are, he argues, abiding elements in his work, but they are practised and celebrated as signs of an active human intelligence. There is a dialectical relationship between cultural pessimism and an anarchistic impulse driven by a positive ideal of a free humanity. If *Der Untergang der Titanic* invites the reader to jump to certain conclusions, it does so only to subvert them. It "belongs to a certain contemporary German cultural climate but also resists it" (McGowan 1990: 11).

Warnings of doom are already placed within a context of intellectual detachment from the apocalyptic mindset in the essay 'Zur Kritik der politischen Ökologie'. In the ecological movement, he proposes, scientific arguments have entered into a confused alliance with diverse political motivations and interests, some manifest, but others concealed. Among the latter are dubious "socio-psychological needs" such as hopes of conversion and redemption, delight in the collapse of things, feelings of guilt and resignation, escapism and hostility to civilisation (Enzensberger 1973: 8). The "conversion rhetoric" of the environmentalists has the effect of reducing

visions of catastrophe to a “pleasurable frisson” (p. 33). The essay ‘Zwei Randbemerkungen zum Weltuntergang’ (Enzensberger 1978b), published in the same year as *Der Untergang der Titanic*, at first continues in this vein, dismissing the “mentality of catastrophe” so widespread among contemporaries, only to paradoxically reassert the political “reality” in their irrational pessimistic visions of the future.

Enzensberger opens by noting that the apocalypse, which is omnipresent in contemporary culture, is no longer conceived of as an act of vengeance of the divine, beyond human understanding. The police state, paranoia, bureaucracy, terrorism, economic crisis, the arms race and environmental destruction – i.e. the “methodically calculated products” of modern civilisation – are today’s seven-headed monster. Apocalypse is no longer a unitary event, it has lost its finality and its universality. Once conceived of as sudden and unexpected, it is now widely predicted. It has become a creeping phenomenon, affecting some countries, classes and parts of the world while others look on in comfort. His second “gloss on the end of the world” (p. 1) is addressed to a former comrade in arms, who is struggling to reformulate a political vision of utopian socialism. However well-meaning this may be, he must, Enzensberger argues, accept that the age has lost its faith in the future (p. 7). What is needed is a new Leftist theory, getting away from crude cold war ideological analysis, and recognising the utopian elements present in popular visions of apocalypse. Back in the nineteen-twenties, Marxists had interpreted the fascination exercised by Spengler’s *Decline of the West* as an indication of the impending collapse of capitalism. The progressive erosion since the nineteen-sixties of the socialist utopia of a new world order has been accompanied by a parallel loss of validity of the “negative utopia” of apocalypse. However problematic today’s expressions of apocalyptic pessimism may be, we must understand that such imaginings are to the future what scientific analysis is to the past and present: theory must be accompanied by acknowledgement of collective wishes and fears (p. 6). Like utopian longings, popular apocalyptic fears are fluctuating energies capable of undermining the existing social order. Images and narratives of destruction, despair, panic and fear harbour the impulse for revenge and the quest for

justice, the traces of relief and hope. Herein lies the “realism” of literary and filmic visions of atomic disaster, floods and epidemics (p. 8).

The position formulated here, which takes equal account of Enzensberger’s disdainful scepticism and the pessimistic proclivities we have noted above throughout his work, is reflected in the ‘post-apocalyptic’ perspective of *Der Untergang der Titanic*.[18] The apocalyptic narrative is repeatedly interrupted by observations by the poet/narrator that the disaster in 1912 was not, in fact, a catastrophe heralding radical change, and that “the dinner is going on”. “What were we talking about?”, he asks in the Twenty-ninth Canto: “Ah yes, the end! / There was a time when we still believed in it” (p. 81). “Let us stop counting on the end!” he calls (p. 83), for “in actual fact”, as he had noted earlier in the poem, “the rich have remained rich, and the Commandantes / Commandantes” (p. 77). “People are rather too eager for Doom to come, / like suicides looking for an alibi” (p. 26), an engineer comments in the Eighth Canto.

Der Untergang der Titanic is a work of personal reorientation: abandoning the comfortable ideological positions of Leftist politics, Enzensberger adopts a stance of detachment, cultivation of aesthetic pleasure as a life-enhancing activity, and paradoxical optimism. The catastrophe in the main narrative is subverted by counter-narratives of seemingly quixotic action by individuals in the face of technological and natural disasters, celebrating self-preservation against all the odds. The Japanese *Titanic* survivor who lashes himself to a door like Christ on the cross in the Nineteenth Canto, and the five Chinese stowaways who emerge from a bundle of rags in one of the lifeboats the morning after the disaster (pp. 72f.) are models of a courageous pragmatism. The poem ‘The Reprieve’ (p. 34) is the most striking illustration of this new vision of the way forward for humankind. Enzensberger’s “elderly man in braces”, calmly turning from his vegetables to point his garden hose at the molten lava which is threatening to engulf his home, may be fiction, but the success of the people of Heimaey in averting this natural disaster and saving their town was reality. “The 1973 eruption on the island of Heimaey was a classic example of the struggle between man and volcanoes”, we read on a website describing the event, which took place fifteen miles south of Iceland:

> With a heroic effort the people of Iceland saved the town of Vestmannaeyjar and the country's most important fishing port. This eruption is famous because the Icelanders sprayed sea water on the lava to slow and stop its movement. It was the largest effort ever exerted to control volcanic activity. More than 19 miles (30 km) of pipe and 43 pumps were used to deliver sea water […] Not only did the tremendous efforts save the port, they actually improved it. The residents returned to rebuild their town and even used the heat from the cooling lava to construct a district heating system.[19]

This parable of flexibility, stubborn ingenuity and prudent use of technology exemplifies a pragmatic stance mindful of the precariousness of civilisation, and thankful for its provisional survival.[20] It prompts the questions to what extent Enzensberger's post-apocalyptic position equates to Postmodernism, to whose substitution of media images for reality 'The Reprieve' seems to allude, in representing the poet as watching the event from the comfort of his sitting-room, and how Enzensberger's position relates to Georg Kaiser's as a representative of literary Modernism.

Though a consensus has yet to be reached over the precise definition of Postmodernism, that multi-faceted movement in cultural theory and the arts reflecting and critically engaging with postindustrial society and social postmodernity, it is clear that there are important parallels (and differences) between *Der Untergang der Titanic* and Postmodernism, in terms of the accounts of the movement in standard works,[21] which can clarify what separates Enzensberger from Kaiser. A first point to note is that, as Manfred Koch, Manon Delisle and others have pointed out (Koch 1997: 289-94; Delisle 2001: 234-40), Enzensberger was not significantly influenced by postmodern theory.[22] *Der Untergang der Titanic* and 'Zwei Randbemerkungen' appeared prior to or simultaneously with what are commonly regarded as the key texts of Postmodern theory (e.g. Lyotard 1979, Baudrillard 1981, Jameson 1984). Enzensberger has never written of the 'postmodern age'. In the essays collected in the volumes *Politische Brosamen* (1982) and *Mittelmaß und Wahn* (1988), he rather describes the new German society emerging in the 1970s as one of 'normality' and 'mediocrity'. Whereas Lyotard and other proponents of Postmodernism regard postmodern society predominantly as a liberation from the constrictions of modernist ideology and identity formation, Enzensberger's perspective on the change is thus more critical. They also differ in that while Lyotard rejects the idea of a social function for utopian or

critical visions in art, Enzensberger shares Adorno's belief in the moral and political impetus of culture (see Kang 2002: 170-82, especially p. 173).

There are nevertheless significant similarities between Enzensberger and Lyotard, which are grounded in their critiques of modernity. Both build on Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the dialectic of Enlightenment, and their conviction that an originally emancipatory development had become a repressive force. The shift in Enzensberger's thinking around 1975-80, in works from *Mausoleum* on, which focus on the critique of progress and modernity, paralleled central arguments in Lyotard's study of the 'Postmodern Condition' such as the loss of legitimation for the "grand narratives" or total explanations of reality which had, since the decline of Christianity, been the driving force behind modernity – above all Marxism and the "myth" of the progressive liberation of humanity through science. The poems 'Model Toward a Theory of Cognition' and 'Department of Philosophy' in *Der Untergang der Titanic* reflect the same perception of a crisis in the legitimation of science. Going beyond this, the work as a whole is a recognisably postmodern response to the twin modernist narratives of progress and catastrophe.

At this point, Silvio Vietta's conception of "literarische Moderne", a term which places Modernism (the movement traditionally seen as at its peak between 1880 and 1925, with a second phase in the nineteen-fifties and sixties) at the centre of a much broader current of modern literature and culture, will be helpful in refining our understanding of the characteristic conceptions of technology and nature associated with Modernism, and explaining the links between Kaiser's plays and the Romantics' opposition to Enlightenment rationalism. "Literarische Moderne" extends back not only to Baudelaire, in whom the roots of Modernism are often located, but to the Romantics, and forward almost up to the present: he regards many of the works of the nineteen-seventies and eighties as participating in the logical development of key modernist themes and forms.

According to Vietta, the "Moderne" begins in the late eighteenth century, with Hölderlin and the Romantics, as a response to historical developments: 1793 saw the first expressions of disillusionment by German writers with the French Revolution (Vietta 1992: 10). This political dimension

is accompanied by a fundamental critique of early modern rationalism, and of scientific, technological and economic modernity. In the arts in general and literature in particular, which now begins to constitute an autonomous sphere free of theological, moral, and political functions, a counter-discourse emerges, opposing modern man's claim to power over nature and one-sided anthropocentrism. From now on, literature and art present utopias of their own, and simultaneously explore the factors preventing their realisation in contemporary society. They develop new languages and forms, formulating visions of reconciliation with our fellow men and with nature, but at the same time retaining an awareness of the status of these as wish-projections.

The "Moderne" combines the critique of rationalist modernity and progress with the quest for an alternative form of progress. What distinguishes it from pre-modernist critiques of instrumental rationalism (for instance in Herder) is its use of utopias to move on to another perspective on the future: empathy with nature takes the place of domination over it, reconciliation replaces exploitation, a holist perspective that of egocentrism (p. 28). Modernist writing in Vietta's sense formulates an alternative relationship between humankind and nature, a utopia of community based on love for others and appreciation of natural beauty (p. 52). But the great literary utopias of Modernism (works such as Hölderlin's *Hyperion*) simultaneously record the failure of the attempt – which distinguishes them from the many merely idyllic works of the last two hundred years. At the same time, the more powerful and complex statements are not depictions of industrialisation and pollution, but critical reflections on the philosophical foundations of modernity, in particular its groundedness in the subject and its anthropocentrism.

These issues are already explored in depth in what Vietta calls Early "Moderne" (Hölderlin and Novalis), present in many of the major nineteenth-century writers, and continue to be articulated in the twentieth century in the works of the Expressionists and postwar authors such as Ingeborg Bachmann, who fuses a critique of modernity with that of fascism and patriarchy. By the late twentieth century, the focus has shifted to a critique of industrialisation and the consumer society as promoting self-destruction and destruction of the environment, in warning utopias. At the core of modernist

writing in Vietta's understanding of it are a capacity for critical self-reflection and an alternative consciousness (p. 15).

From the start, images of apocalyptic destruction, of the abyss, coldness and darkness have characterised Modernism. These reflect the experience of the loneliness and alienation of the subject which results from modern man's self-understanding as separate from nature, having gained knowledge about it in order to exercise control over it, in ways which lead to material benefit, but also to destruction. Vietta includes depictions of technological disaster in this field of images and narratives linked with the 'end of the world', suggesting that the end of the nineteenth century witnessed a shift from individual disasters to the fate of collectives, and a narrowing of the focus towards technological disasters.

Kaiser's plays, with their perceptive diagnosis of the dangers of the technological-industrial "system", based on the objectification and rationalisation of nature, thus constitute a key modernist response to modernity. On the one hand, they adapt and dramatise earlier images of the end of the world, and make use of traditional metaphors to represent (ultimately self-destructive) exploitation and consumption of the natural environment. On the other, they anticipate, with their insight into industrialisation as the anonymous subject of history, the Risk Society as described by Ulrich Beck:

> Kaisers Dramen zeigen erstmalig die innere Problematik einer Gesellschaft, die ihren Habenszuwachs durch Risiken und immer höhere Risiken ihrer eigenen Produktivität erkaufen muß. […] Daß Kaiser die Gattung des Dramas mit dieser spezifischen Dialektik der durch die moderne Industriegesellschaft selbst erzeugten Katastrophengefahren konfrontiert hat, ist – bei allen dramaturgischen Schwächen seiner Dramen – das große Verdienst dieses Autors. (p. 254)

In a brief concluding chapter, Vietta locates the difference between Modernism and Postmodernism in the shift from elegiac lament, despair and a tragic world view (as reflected for instance in Dürrenmatt and Bernhard) to indifference, deconstruction and a comic world view. (By 'deconstruction' he means the overt rejection of patterns of thought but their underlying retention as principles structuring the discourse, as for instance in parody, satire and irony.) The utopia of a non-exploitative interaction with nature which is central

to literary Modernism is, according to Vietta, missing in Postmodernism (p. 323). This understanding of Postmodernism and its conception of nature and technology is, however, an oversimplification in need of differentiation and correction.

Wolfgang Welsch has argued convincingly that *plurality* is the key to understanding what distinguishes Postmodernism from Modernism (pp. xvii, 4f., 30f., 34). Characteristics of the former such as the end of metanarratives and the decentring of the subject can be seen as aspects of plurality, introduced where Modernism imposed unity and uniformity. However, plurality is by no means the same thing as indifference, or an 'anything goes' attitude. In fact, Postmodernism, as a theory defending and explaining the radical plurality of our age, is crucially concerned with democracy, morality and the emancipation of minorities. Similarly, while Postmodernism is predisposed against technology, because of the latter's regimentation of the individual, it is not so much anti-technological as rather critical of scientific rationalism's exclusive claims to validity, of its tyrannical monopoly in society. Postmodernism calls for an end to the hegemony of scientism, but foresees a continuation of scientific-technological rationality (p. 222).

Postmodernism actually extends the critique of modernity and technology in Modernism which has been described above by Vietta – but no longer in a nostalgic lament for lost unity: euphoria and relief have taken the place of melancholy over the loss of totality. Modernist counter-discourses to Enlightenment rationalism have remained characterised by a pursuit of innovation and totality, radicality and universality. The crucial break comes, according to Welsch, in the early twentieth century, when plurality and particularity, discontinuity and antagonism appear in scientific theory, with Einstein and Heisenberg. Postmodern literature and philosophy follow much later in the wake of this counter-current from within.

Welsch's distinction between modernist totality and postmodern plurality goes some way towards explaining what distinguishes Kaiser's *Gas* plays from Enzensberger's *Titanic* poem. The difference between the two is bound up with the modernist and postmodern conceptions of catastrophe and apocalypse they exemplify. Kaiser is typically modernist in his response to the crisis of bourgeois society and culture, in that he reflects the experience of

shock and disorientation, and breaks with the artistic conventions associated with Realism and Naturalism. His plays reflect a fundamental ambivalence of modernist apocalypses, which herald widespread destruction, even (in the case of *Gas – Zweiter Teil*) global annihilation, but are at the same time capable of bringing release from the stifling restrictions of bourgeois society. Offering liberation from the domination of instrumental reason, they symbolised for many of the Expressionists (not least Georg Heym), a dangerous, but exciting and vital way of life, as opposed to the stifling normality of everyday bourgeois existence. (See Huyssen and Scherpe 1986: 272.)

We have seen that Kaiser's visions of technological disaster were the subject of new interest in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, when the anti-nuclear movement was at its height. New productions alluded directly to contemporary fears of the consequences of both nuclear warfare and accidents in power stations, and echoed the apocalyptic environmental scenarios of Rachel Carson and Paul Ehrlich, who envisaged humanity's self-destruction through the misuse of science and population growth. This operative type of disaster narrative, seeking to shake readers out of their indifference to social developments (see Lilienthal 1996 and Bullivant 2002), was in essence a continuation of the modernist position, inasmuch as it perpetuated the notion of a definitive end or turning point in human existence.

The postmodern apocalypse similarly shows two faces, reflecting on the one hand a pessimistic world view and the loss of confidence in a better world, and on the other a euphoric liberation. However, there has been a shift to playful self-referentiality and aesthetic fascination with disintegration. Apocalypse is no longer an event which gives meaning to life: it has become a spectacle of images, narratives and explanations taken eclectically from biblical, literary and psychoanalytical sources. Writers such as Ulrich Horstmann and Peter Sloterdijk have been accused of cynical celebration of nuclear destruction as the prelude to a perfect posthuman world. However, critics such as Stadelmaier (1986) and Uecker (1997) have stressed the value of irony, ambiguity, and above all the suspension of the finality of apocalypse in postmodern apocalyptic works such as Tankred Dorst's *Merlin* (1980) and Günter Grass's *Die Rättin* (1986). Enzensberger's poem is in any case neither

an expression of resignation nor a cynical aestheticisation of catastrophe. For all his scepticism regarding technology and modernisation, he is, as we have seen, wary of the spurious "socio-psychological needs" driving much civilisation criticism, and he skilfully integrates critical reflections on the ambivalence of indulging in artistic depiction of disaster.

Der Untergang der Titanic can be described as a non-trivial postmodern work in terms of content and form. First, it closely parallels Postmodernism's understanding of meaning as fundamentally unstable, its blurring of fact and fiction (the loss of the 'original' poem and his querying whether it ever existed imply there is no actual truth, only memories, fragments and palimpsests), and its questioning of identity and authenticity (for instance in the Twenty-Third Canto and 'Identity Check'). Linked with this is Enzensberger's narrational self-reflexivity, which is present in the many passages commenting on the process of writing. The unreliability of artists and writers and the deception and untruth necessarily present in all representation and reconstruction of the past are recurrent themes. However, Enzensberger's negation of epistemological certainty does not reduce the poem to the 'flatness', 'depthlessness' and 'superficiality' described by Fredric Jameson (1984) as typifying Postmodernism – or to the triumph of hedonist individualism, abandonment of political commitment, treatment of images as more important than reality, and debasement of art through commercialisation and plagiarism that critics of Postmodernism on both the left and the right have seen as constituting its essence.

In terms of literary form, central aspects of *Der Untergang der Titanic* also correspond to Postmodernism. We find in it the breaking down of the barriers between elite, high culture, with its cultural pessimism, and the more entertaining and affirmative mass culture, which observers such as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler initially identified in American literature in the late nineteen-fifties and theorised as postmodern. Enzensberger also makes extensive use of intertextuality, Dante and Edgar Allan Poe being among his most prominent literary points of reference.[23]

Finally and most importantly, the ending of *Der Untergang der Titanic*, with its tales of survivors and its implication that life will go on despite such disasters, breaks with the modernist tradition of apocalypse as a decisive

turning point, and corresponds to the postmodern acceptance of the fragmentation and uncertainty of the age as a joyful liberation, rather than the expression of anguish, which typified classic works of Modernism such as Eliot's *Waste Land* or the poetry of Ezra Pound. Environmental disaster and Spenglerian decline of Western Civilisation can, it seems, be indefinitely postponed. One by one, we read in 'Keeping Cool', the prophets of Doom, who "know exactly the moment / When", are having to leave their posts and return reluctantly to everyday life. Their gloomy prognostications are exposed as "a tranquillizer of sorts, / a sweet consolation for dull prospects, loss of hair, and wet feet" (pp. 57f.).

At the height of the environmental movement in the Unites States, Joseph Meeker had published a book, *The Comedy of Survival. Studies in Literary Ecology*, in which he called for a careful and honest examination of literature, in order

> to discover its influence on human behaviour and the natural environment – to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction?[24]

It can be no accident that *Der Untergang der Titanic*, with its focus on survival rather then extinction, bears the subtitle 'A Comedy'. Enzensberger's choice of genre attribution is usually explained as an echo of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but may also have been prompted by Friedrich Dürrenmatt's description of comedy as the one mode of writing relevant to our age. Already in 1954, Friedrich Dürrenmatt had argued that comedy and the grotesque were the sole genres appropriate in an age of totalitarian power structures, under the shadow of atomic destruction:

> Die Tragödie setzt Schuld, Not, Maß, Übersicht, Verantwortung voraus. In der Wurstelei unseres Jahrhunderts, in diesem Kehraus der weißen Rasse, gibt es keine Schuldigen und auch keine Verantwortlichen mehr. […] Wir sind zu kollektiv schuldig, zu kollektiv gebettet in die Sünden unserer Väter und Vorväter. Wir sind nur noch Kindeskinder. Das ist unser Pech, nicht unsere Schuld: Schuld gibt es nur noch als persönliche Leistung, als religiöse Tat. *Uns kommt nur noch die Komödie bei.*[25] (My emphasis)

Enzensberger's choice of the comic genre also corresponds to Meeker's conception of comedy as a mode that values traits that humans share with non-humans – species survival, adaptation to circumstances, community, veniality, and play – as opposed to tragedy's anthropocentric haughtiness towards the natural order. *Der Untergang der Titanic* is an example of what Greg Garrard has described (drawing on the rhetorician Stephen O'Leary) as the comic 'frame of acceptance' in apocalypse (2004: 86-8). Whereas tragedy conceives of evil in terms of guilt, involving sacrifice and leading to redemption, comedy reflects an understanding of it as error, which can be followed by recognition and the exposure of fallibility. While tragic time is predetermined, careering towards a catastrophic conclusion, comic time is open-ended and episodic. Tragic actors choose a side in the conflict of good and evil, but have little impact on outcomes, but comic actors have a real agency, though it is typically flawed and morally ambiguous. The comic frame of acceptance hence avoids the radical dualism of tragic apocalypse, its determinism, and its typical issue in suicidal, homicidal or even genocidal frenzies (p. 88). Its narratives, in Garrard's words, "emphasise the provisionality of knowledge, free will, ongoing struggle and a plurality of social groups with differing responsibilities" (p. 107).

Enzensberger's pragmatic philosophy and comic form are diametrically opposed to the apocalyptic polarisation of responses to the crisis in our relationship to the environment expressed with such clarity by Kaiser. Sooner or later, he implies, humanity will disappear. It is up to us in the meantime to make the most of the 'reprieve' offered. Kaiser had confronted his audience with the challenge of recognising the crisis and taking radical action. Disillusioned with such revolutionary thought patterns, Enzensberger is more concerned with his readers taking responsibility for the present, and with the quest for a managed solution that might reconcile techno-economic advancement with human environmental welfare in awareness of the limits of earth's resources. His playful, ironic approach encourages detachment from and critical reflection on the discourse of catastrophe. *Der Untergang der Titanic* combines, in the words of Manon Delisle (2001: 239f.), modernist Enlightenment with elements of Postmodernism.

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the poem see Chapter 14, on “Die ersten Technik-Schocks”, in Schneider et al. 1987, vol. I (pp. 323-48), and Wolfgang Hädecke’s section on ‘Technikkatastrophen’ in Hädecke 1993 (370-8, here p. 373).

[2] See Garrard’s helpful summary in the chapter ‘Apocalypse’ of his book on ecocriticism (Garrard 2004: 85-107). Similar points are made in German studies of apocalyptic writing, e.g. Grimm, Faulstich and Kuon 1986, Vondung 1988, Lilienthal 1996 and Bullivant 2002.

[3] Karl Robert Mandelkow was one of the first to give insight into the Expressionists’ understanding of technology with his essay ‘Orpheus und Maschine’ (1967). In addition to the anthologies Bullivant and Ridley 1976, Schneider et al. 1987, and Krause 1989, see Segeberg 1987a and 1987b, Schütz 1988, Großklaus and Lämmert 1989, Wagner 1996, Platen 1997, Heimböckel 1998, Korber 1998, Midgley 2000: 304-52 and Wege 2000. The educational significance of the topic is reflected in Peter Bekes’ introductory anthology for use in German secondary schools, *Mensch und Technik* (Bekes 1990).

[4] In America, Leo Marx, one of the most important precursors of the ecocritical movement, published his landmark study of the nineteenth-century American adaptation of the pastoral tradition, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, in 1964. German studies approaching representations of technology in the context of nature and the pastoral include some of the essays in Seeber and Klußmann 1986, Kaiser 1991a, Detering 1992 and Bergner 1998.

[5] See Odo Marquard, ‘Verspätete Moralistik. Bemerkungen zur Unvermeidlichkeit der Geisteswissenschaften’, in Marquard 1995: 108-14, here pp. 108f. Also Wege 2000: 24.

[6] Like many of his contemporaries, Kaiser participated in what Götz Großklaus has described as a specifically German post-Romantic nature discourse, whose one-sided critique of modernity can be seen as a form of psycho-social loss management: “Thematisiert wird immer die affektiv-emotionale Linie des Emanzipationsschmerzes: des Verlustschmerzes, des Heimatverlustes als Naturverlust, als Verlust ursprünglicher Lebenseinheit.” (Großklaus 1990: 195)

[7] The Ford Model T was launched in 1908, and the first moving assembly line was built for its production in 1913. It was some time before such production methods became common in German industry, but the concepts of Fordism and Taylorism were already familiar to the German public in the years leading up to the First World War.

[8] Considerably less has in fact been written about nature in Kaiser’s plays: it is one of many themes touched on by Audrone B. Willeke (1995); Mikyung Chu provides further insights in her study of women in Kaiser’s plays (2002).

[9] Here and in the following, volume and page number references to Kaiser’s plays refer to the six-volume edition of Kaiser’s works edited by Walther Huder (Kaiser 1971-2).

[10] Klaus-Dieter Bergner has shown how Döblin, who expounded his nature philosophy discursively in a series of extended essays in the nineteen-twenties, after representing it in fictional narratives from the story ‘Die Ermordung einer Butterblume’ (1910) on, fused

elements of Romantic pantheism and Schopenhauerian pessimism with Nietzschean vitalism (see Bergner 1998: 102-9).

[11] Gunter Martens has traced echoes of *Also sprach Zarathustra* in *Gas* and the essay 'Formung von Drama' (Kaiser 1971-2: IV, 573). The structure and central motifs of *Hölle Weg Erde* (Erde and Aufbruch) are manifestly indebted to Nietzsche – see Martens 1974: 147-52.

[12] The figure of *Rosamunde Floris* may have been partly inspired by Helene Stöcker, founder of the Deutscher Bund für Mutterschutz in 1905, who drew on Nietzsche in support of her radical campaign for women's emancipation. She argued for women's right to vote, work, choose their sexual partners (including extra-marital), and control their own reproductivity by employing contraception and abortion. These demands were in her view, like everything which strengthened and intensified life, 'natural' – see Bergner 2005: 197-205.

[13] Enzensberger has published a translation of the poem which is as elegant as it is faithful to the original. In this chapter, I therefore depart from my practice elsewhere in this volume of citing primary German texts in the original, and merely translating phrases and shorter passages embedded in the text, so as to avoid the distraction of code-switching. Page numbers given in brackets refer to Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Sinking of the Titanic. A Poem. Translated by the author* (1981), rather than *Der Untergang der Titanic* (1978a).

[14] Richard Howells has estimated a membership of some six thousand worldwide (Howells 1999: 2).

[15] For instance in Beryl Bainbridge's *Every Man for Himself* (London: Duckworth 1996), which was short-listed for the Booker Prize.

[16] Lubin 1999: 12. Lubin shows how the film celebrates technology and social modernisation at the same time as expressing anxieties about them.

[17] Experts were already concerned about global warming in the nineteen-fifties, and research began in earnest in the seventies, although it only became a matter of broad public concern in the late eighties.

[18] I use this term, like Thomas Kniesche in his study of Günter Grass's *Die Rättin*, to signify an apocalyptic text which is directed against apocalypse, that is, which belongs to and engages with apocalyptic tradition, but in order to subvert the ideological instrumentalisation of apocalyptic scenarios (see Kniesche 1991: 52f.).

[19] See <http://volcano.und.nodak.edu/vwdocs/volc_images/europe_west_asia/heimaey/heimaey.html>.

[20] In his article on Enzensberger's "utopian pragmatist politics", Jonathan Monroe writes of the celebration of a similar cluster of positive values in Enzensberger's later poetry associated with a position "outside ideology": resilience and endurance, personal honesty and integrity, calm acceptance of the limits of knowledge and self-knowledge, and a caring yet thick-skinned way of seeing and being (1997: 69).

[21] I draw in the following on Tim Woods's *Beginning Postmodernism* (1999) and Wolfgang Welsch's *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (2003) as convenient introductions to and overviews of Postmodernism.

[22] German literary critics have tended to doubt that French postmodern theory had a significant influence on writing in the Federal Republic in the 1980s. In the introduction to his book *Pluralismus und Postmodernismus*, for instance, Helmut Kreuzer discusses the arrival of postmodern theory in 1985-6, and presents Heiner Müller and Patrick Süskind as postmodern authors. However, listing the principal characteristics of the decade, he concludes there is no reason to see these as aspects of literary Postmodernism. (Helmut Kreuzer, 'Pluralismus und Postmodernismus. Zur Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft der 80er Jahre im westlichen Deutschland', in Kreuzer 1996: 11-27) Thomas Kniesche on the other hand suggests that the rediscovery of apocalyptic thinking in the nineteen-eighties was itself a German equivalent of French Postmodernism, both being responses to the resignation which followed the decline of the Student Movement (1991: 36).

[23] Dante's *Divine Comedy* is echoed formally in the division of the poem into thirty-three Cantos (like each of the three sections of Dante's work), and the use of tercets in the first Canto. Both works also combine autobiographical elements (self-examination of the poet in middle age, in a spiritual journey leading to self-recognition) with timeless questions concerning the meaning of human existence. Edgar Allan Poe's fictional character 'Gordon Pym' is among the other passengers on Enzensberger's doomed liner: as in *Der Untergang der Titanic*, a sequence of shipwrecks provides the framework for the author's reflections on the truth and deception of literary representation in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

[24] Meeker 1972, quoted from the chapter reprinted in Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: 228.

[25] 'Theaterprobleme (1954)', in Dürrenmatt 1980: 62.