

The Newt. A Berlin Vision

Our old friend Georg has spotted him near the Cathedral, he is willing to confirm that by oath: Out of the black waters of the river Spree a head emerged, gum-skinned like the head of a diver, but brown.

“How do you do?” the newt babbels in pidgin English. He puts his paws on the lowest step leading into the water and fixes his goggle-eyes on George. “We shall take over!” A short spade, subaquarian model, sparkles from his belt.

The Channel, Elbe river, Havel, Spree – we can track back the way of the intruder: Eastward, ho! He, the newt, is a precursor, or more precisely: pre-swimmer; millions of his kind lurk submerged in the oceans of the future.

George, not scared of water, sits down, pinches – first himself, than dashingly the wet brown thing. “You take over? – Na, viel Spass” (Or, in Pidginese irony: Much fun!)

Since we were not present at this close encounter of the third kind, we can only report, what George told us. The newt, more hot-blooded than his slippery amphibian brothers, gets excited, brandishes his spade: Warm Age, Warm Age Above All! Look around: the alpine glaciers start to recede, the Ross Ice Shelf starts to calve, in Brazil, the rain forest burns, the Sahara widens to the South. How long will it take, till the satellites report Thai-land submerged?

“We newts need not dig away your ground. Karel Capek, fine Czeck writer, was wrong, when he wrote about us, unnecessary prop, my spade.”

He is a philosopher, our Mr Newt! Perchance, he even produces a booklet clad in plastic from his water-proof knapsack (if he is shouldering such a thing): *The Revolutions of the Earth*, Cuvier in the n-th edition. Once in 100 million years it happens: continents slither, and sea turns into soil, soil into sea. What means a catastrophe to the genera of saurischia and orthosaura, means a headstart for the mammalian orders.

It is an old story: The dinosaurs slipped too far into the cretaceous period, their misery is chalked up in the sediments; their bones and their eggs abound in one layer, they are missing in the next. Their oceans – deserted, land bridges – broken, swamps – dried up. Was the disaster caused by an asteroid, which – reeling in from the vastness of space – ran smack into the primeval world and swirled up billions of tons of dust? That the heavens darkened, that hoarfrost covered the jungles, that all life in the seas rotted... This was the hour of the mammals. Man – result of a catastrophe. Burdened with doom.

Time for the next Revolution of Earth: tertiary, quarternary, quinternary period. A new age is dawning. The Age of Aquarius? Not quite: The Age of the Newts. For a long time already, homo sapiens is preparing the ground for the beings which will come after him, bulldozing biotops, culling all things that do creep and fly. Scorched earth policy. Terra rasa.

What an optimistic newt! He fishes a test-tube out of his knapsack, scoops up water from the river, offers it to our undaunted friend George. A little taste? – Good lord, no thanks.

Presently, he gulps down the blackish sludge. “We newts, we’re resistant. Adapted. Dedicated followers of industry. We splash around in Sandos sewage as in the Gulf of Danzig. Our cold blood is swirling with quicksilver; our bones put on lead and cadmium; Dioxin and Lindan accumulate in our fatty tissue. Geiger counters, placed near to us, start clicking. Treat ‘em rough, make ‘em tough! We are acid rain-proof, radiation-tempered, all around rubbish-resistant. No sewer stinks to us, no sewage plant fills us with disgust. – Wir wursteln uns durch. We muddle through.”

But, George may have objected, we human beings, the measure of all things (as opposed to clumsy saurians), we are creation's crowning glory for a Christian, the pride of evolution for the atheist. We are – as has been proved – the final point Omega, Supermen & -women, gifted with reason, rationality, foresight, ergo capable of taking our destiny in our own ten fingers.

Newts, however, don't like that sort of reasoning, wet heathens, they are. They rely upon facts, if necessary, future facts. In some thousand years, geological newts will dig with their indispensable spades: the mud of the Early Newt Age. Beneath that lie the layers of the Technocene (Late Human Age). What a plenitude! The new red poisonstone of former waste disposal sites, most valuable raw material of newt industries, the scrap-&-plastics-deposits of former cities, inverted layers within open cast mining areas. Car dumps, mass graves, cemented-in sarchophaguses of nuclear power plants, still hot. Index fossil of the upper layers: the computer chip, index fossil of the lower ones: the cartrigde case. Between them in distinct East West gradation the Cola Can Culture. What a sphere of activity for amphibian hobby archeologists! “God bless you, ladies and gentlemen, for this patrimony, the amended Earth!”

The newt climbs up to the promenade, measuring perhaps quickly and casually the nitrogen oxide concentration in the air, has litte more than a glance at the bridge spanning the river, over which an avalanche of cars is thundering on, young, dynamical, succesful. He, an ancient lemur, clinging to his spade to support himself, foretells gloom: “You, humans, you have already started to withdraw,

putting on your walkmans, watching videos. Why? You don't want to listen, you don't want to see. – You do not need this world any longer. Bestens! Very good! We shall take over. Wir sind das Volk! We are the people, we newts!”

At the latest in this moment, George could have been attacked by murderous thoughts. No policeman near? And militant animal protectors, hidden below the bridge?

The spade swings around. We shall take over. Everything will become our possession, with or without hereditary lease. Subaquarian cafés and subaquarian boutiques. The Berlin underground, hem, underwater. Newt promenades, sea anemone beds, coral-gardens, the Berlin television tower as lift to the air (as long as it withstands storms)...

At what altitude above NN, George wonders, is Berlin situated? How much will the sea level rise? – Land prices following contour lines. Woe betide anyone who lives low, woe to the Netherlands and the English lowlands! All the alpine reception camps will be overcrowded in no time! The wind blows hot and humid against the tarpaulin. – We don't want to learn more about the murderous misery in India, about the rush to the Himalayas. Instead of smoke-resistant pine trees, tried and tested, we plant palm trees, then bamboo, the latter grows more rapidly and provides excellent spears for close combat. And along the Weinbergsweg (the old vineyard way) we will pick grapes, as our ancestors did centuries ago. And on the top of Prenzlauer Berg hill, the sails of the wind mills will be driven around. And on Sundays we will paddle across the reefs of collapsed skyscrapers, by the Mercedes star of the submerged Europe Center, watching newts ploughing through the sea, over to the hill of Kreuzberg. – Long live the Island of Utopia!

That was George's report, coloured in anarchist red-black and in green, as with everything, he talks about. Allegedly, the newt sank down into the obscure waters of the Spree, snorting and shouldering his knapsack with the results of his measurements. May be, George finally wrested the spade from the newt, hit him, fatally we hope, safeguarding the rule of mankind for still another generation, he is capable of that, for sure.

Since that time we avoid going down town, streets are a horror to us: Look, that drain! Don't you see, mud is sloshing through the grid... Don't you see that brown, gum-skinned head? – One dark day... – They shall take over.

(1990)