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Lesabéndio. An Asteroid Novel, by Paul Scheerbart, translated by Christina Svendsen.

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Cambridge, Ma.: Wakefield Press, 2012.

Alexander Gelley, University of California, Irvine

Although he died in 1915 Paul Scheerbart's impact in various areas of European thought extended into the Weimar Period and beyond. The significance of his *Glass Architecture* for Dada, Surrealism, and, more widely, architectural design has been documented.¹ And the high regard in which Walter Benjamin held his 1914 novel *Lesabéndio* is well-known though not yet fully understood. Christina Svendsen's fine translation now makes this work available in English for the first time.

Lesabéndio deserves our interest both in its own right and in light of Benjamin's attachment to it. I will begin with the latter. Benjamin was "converted" to Scheerbart by Gershom Scholem who had made a gift of the novel to the Benjamins on their marriage in 1917. An essay that Benjamin was preparing in the following years, "The True Politician," would have included a major section on the novel, as Benjamin wrote to Scholem in a letter in 1920. (The significance of this essay has been explored by Uwe Steiner.²) The essay has not survived, but a treatment of *Lesabéndio* from that period as

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¹ See Detlef Mertins, "The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass," *Assemblage* 29 (April, 1996): 6-23.

² "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political," *New German Critique*, 83 (2001): 43-88.

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well as an expanded version in French of 1939 have.³ Benjamin's strong interest in the novel is further attested by allusions to it in various writings. Thus "Zum Planetarium," the last text in *Einbahnstraße* (1923-1926), while not explicitly citing Scheerbart's novel, outlines the relation of technology and "mankind's contact with the cosmos" that is strongly related to it, as is the enigmatic sentence, "Men as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his."⁴

In a letter of 1935 to Werner Kraft Benjamin draws on metaphors from *Lesabéndio* to characterize his current work on the arcades project: "I am busy pointing my telescope through the bloody mist at a mirage of the nineteenth century that I am attempting to reproduce based on the characteristics it will manifest in a future state of the world, liberated from magic."⁵ What this last point signifies may be glossed by the way Benjamin links Scheerbart with other writers and artists (Klee, Brecht, Loos) as proponents of a "poverty of experience" (*Erfahrungsarmut*) and "a new kind of barbarism." This "positive concept of barbarism," outlined in the essay "Experience and Poverty" (1933),⁶ would cleanse the mythic residue left from the nineteenth century. What is distinctive about Scheerbart's creatures (*Geschöpfe* not *Menschen*) is their absence of inwardness and, coordinately, the proximity of their nature with the material conditions of the asteroid they inhabit. This allows a form of technology to come into play altogether different from what is normally understood by that term.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), vol. 2: 618-620; 630-632. An English translation of the French version in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Ma. and London, 2003: 4: 386-388.

⁴ *Selected Writings*, 1: 487.

⁵ October 28, 1935, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910 - 1940*, tr. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, Chicago and London: The Chicago Univ. Press, 1994: p. 516.

⁶ *Selected Writings*, 2: 731-736, here 735.

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This edition reproduces Alfred Kubin's drawings for the first edition of the novel. This is justified in light of their artistic merit, but, as Svendsen rightly points out, Scheerbart was not pleased with them, and wrote to Kubin that they are in many respects too anthropomorphic.⁷ Indeed, it is not easy to visualize these creatures, and Scheerbart does not tire of inventing extraordinary physical features for the planet itself (called Pallas) and its inhabitants. Their eyes can be adapted to both microscopic and telescopic vision; when they sleep they shrink and become enveloped in a web of skin that encloses them; they relax by smoking a bubble-weed that grows on an arm; they are sexless and do not generate organically but come into existence in nuts that have to be cracked open. At the same time they are sociable, peaceable, industrious, and mutually cooperative. Their labor is devoted to decorating their asteroid and then gradually, under Lesabéndio's leadership, to the construction of an immense tower that is intended to pierce a vast cloud that had hidden the astral system in which the little planet was situated. Finally

Lesabéndio ascends out of the asteroid and is transformed into an element of that system.

Scheerbart imagined a complex material and social system which has some analogies to the earth and human existence but which functions in terms of quite different laws. What is normally understood by concepts like ecology, technology, and society would need to be radically revised. In Benjamin's words, "This idea - or rather, this image - was of a humanity which had deployed the full range of its technology and put it to humane use. To achieve this state of affairs, Scheerbart believed that two conditions were essential: first, people should discard the base and primitive belief that their task was to 'exploit' the forces of nature; second, they should be true to the conviction that

⁷ Letter of September 7, 1912, in Paul Scheerbart, *70 Trillionen Weltgrüsse. Eine Biographie in Briefen 1889-1915*, ed. Mechthild Rausch, Berlin, Argon Verlag, 1991, p. 442-3.

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Comment [1]: How were they all absorbed into the system? A black hole? The feared Cloud?

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technology, by liberating human beings, would fraternally liberate the whole of creation."⁸

It is not easy to find analogues for this work. Benjamin names Lichtenberg, Jean Paul, and Fourier. Ulrich Stadler, in an illuminating essay on Scheerbart's *Jenseitsgalerie*,⁹ a 1907 collection of drawings and texts (one of which is reproduced in the present volume), adds other names, notably E. T. A. Hoffmann. (It would be worth exploring Scheerbart's language not only for its mythic fantasy but also, as Benjamin notes, its humor.) Stadler is especially helpful in showing how Scheerbart in this earlier work is able to draw on multiple optical media – telescope, microscope, photography – in producing drawings that blur the distinction between representation and invention. The sensibilities of the Pallasian creatures in *Lesabéndio* offer a means of illustrating this capacity.

Christina Svendsen has caught the spirit of Scheerbart's frangible undertaking - a fabrication verging on parody or pretence. It would have been easy to lapse to an artless, puerile level or, at the other extreme, to overload the data with arcane terminology. She has avoided both and stayed faithful to the tone of Scheerbart's imperturbable narrative.

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⁸ Selected Writings, 4: 386.

⁹ "Arbeit am Instrument II: Die Verwandlung von Technik in neue Natur oder Paul Scheerbarts astrale Phantasien," in Ulrich Stadler, Der technisierte Blick. Optische Instrumente und der Status von Literatur. Ein kulturhistorisches Museum, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003.