

## ELEMENTS OF OLD PRUSSIAN MYTHOLOGY IN GUNTER GRASS' "DOG YEARS"

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In his novel *Dog Years* the German author Gunter Grass simultaneously tells about the lives of a sequence of black shepherd dogs and about the lives of several inhabitants of Danzig, Eduard Amsel and Walter Matern. Amsel is an artist and an observer of life, who creates scarecrows modeled after his fellow men or after the demons which possess men. Matern is an activist, a man persistently searching for and embracing some ideology — always with bad results. Grass follows dogs and men from their early childhood to adolescence and adulthood. Indeed, he traces their origins back into the past, where historical facts and legends become indistinguishable.

The parallel between dog and man is not too complimentary for man, but it is fully intended by Grass, for his novel describes a Germany which literally goes to the dogs by accepting Nazism. As the title *Dog Years* itself suggests, Grass writes about a period of dangerous delusions. In German superstition dog days (Hundstage) signify a season of disasters, epidemics, madness, and rabies.<sup>1</sup>

The place of action in the novel is Danzig, which Grass paints with loving detail. People, the variety of nationalities in Danzig, the streets, rivers, events from history, old legends and myths are listed and create a multidimensional image of the city. Danzig exists not only here and now, but also reflects the history and old beliefs of its former inhabitants. Elements from the past, hidden in the subconscious of the people of Danzig, are the old pagan myths, the ancient barbarism which Christianity had managed to drive into hiding but not to annihilate. In Grass' Danzig, pagan deities, among them the Old Prussian gods Perkunos, Pikollos, and Potrimpos, come to life again in the scarecrows which Amsel forms in their images. They fascinate people and symbolize the resurgence of an ancient barbarism in modern times. It should be interesting to examine the depth of Grass' knowledge of Baltic mythology and the use he makes of it in his novel.

The special strain of black dogs had its mystical origins in Lithuania. Grass describes the genealogy of the dogs in biblical language: "Senta of Perkun's line will whelp Harras, Harras of Perkun's line will sire Prinz. Prinz of the Perkun - Senta - Harras line — and at the very beginning the bark of a Lithuanian she-wolf — will make history..." (pp. 35 - 36).<sup>2</sup> Prinz really made history, for he was given to Hitler and became his favorite dog.

Lithuania, the place of the dog's origin, is a spooky and dismal land in Grass' novel: it is trackless, full of bogs inhabited by pagan demons (p. 65). Quite clearly, nothing good could come from there. It is significant that the dog Perkun, who had been brought to Danzig from Lithuania, carried the name of the Lithuanian god of thunder and lightning, Perkūnas.<sup>3</sup>

Dogs have sinister connotations both in German and Baltic superstitions. The Lithuanians believe that dogs can see the souls of the dead.<sup>4</sup> Dogs also announce death by howling.<sup>5</sup> In German superstition black dogs especially forbade evil:<sup>6</sup> the devil was believed to appear in the disguise of a black dog.<sup>7</sup> The final meeting between Hitler and the dog Prinz could be interpreted as the devil's taking possession of him.

Symbols play an important part in Grass' novel, for they express the true significance of the events in Danzig. On the surface human actions just happen without anyone asking whether they are good or evil. People seem to be unaware of their individuality and responsibility. Even when faced with undeniable facts, e.g. the mountain of human bones from the concentration camp near Danzig and its smell, people still do not understand. Indeed, their minds serve as a convenient tool to explain away the horrors of reality. The artist Amsel reveals through the symbolism of his scarecrows the full significance of man's deeds. His scarecrows are created in man's image (p. 32). Man is revealed as an individual responsible for his actions (p. 182). Amsel singles out, identifies the "dear, unassuming citizen of the world" (p. 557) and

forces him to face himself and his responsibilities. The scarecrows reflect, according to man's acts, his harmlessness, his absurdity or the full horror of his deeds.

The style of Amsel's scarecrows goes through three periods parallel to the political developments. During the pre-Nazi era the scarecrows are realistic embodiments of living rustic characters (p. 31) and make the point that behind the great variety of races and faiths all were made of the same material (p. 31). Amsel falls into one aberration, however: he mixes man and trees and produces a scarecrow, half Matern's grandmother and half willow, that is so frightening that he is forced to destroy it (p. 48). It is an old and wise local character, Kriwe, who condemns this creation and warns Amsel about the dangerous nature of willows (p. 41). After such a lesson Amsel returns to reality and keeps man and plant, or man and animal, neatly separate.

(Using willows as a symbol of peril, Grass again takes his material from local superstition. The willow is considered a cursed tree in Germany, for Judas hanged himself from a willow.<sup>8</sup> In East Prussia there is a belief that the branches of the willow turn into snakes.<sup>9</sup>)

The second series of scarecrows reflects the influence of Amsel's teacher, Herr Olschewski, who loved to talk about gods who were and still exist be they Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Germanic, or Old Prussian (p. 55). Amsel mixes again, this time man and the pagan gods (p. 57). Some observers note that Amsel is creating a unique brand of scarecrows consisting of elements of fantasy mixed with immemorial folkways, delightful and gruesome at the same time. They detect a new flowering of the Nordic heritage, the spirit of the Vikings and the simplicity of Christianity in an East German symbiosis (p. 58). But it is not a symbiosis at all, rather an unholy mixture of paganism and Christianity as represented by that new rising barbarism — Nazism. This series culminates in the 'Big Cuckoo Bird,' which is so horrible that it has to be burned (p. 85). The fact that "Kuckuck" is a German euphemism for the devil<sup>10</sup> might throw light on the meaning of this symbol.

The third series of scarecrows consists of mechanical puppets and shows man as created by Nazism: his head is made of pig's bladders and an inner mechanism allows only two actions: march and salute (p. 198).

The Prussian deities play their role in the second series. Perkunos, whom the crusaders had tried to destroy (p. 65) and whose sacred oaks they had felled (p. 5), is revived by Amsel. Amsel makes the glowing fire god of decrepit red ticking obtained from houses where people had died and of split oak. As a tail he attaches the feathers of slaughtered roosters (p. 56).

Grass' description of Perkunos (fire, oaks, death, slaughtered animals) contains all the essential elements of that god as known in Baltic mythology. Perkunos, often compared to Jupiter,<sup>11</sup> was the Prussian and Lithuanian god of thunder and lightning, in that sense a destructive deity. Oaks were sacred to him and perpetual fires burned in his honor in front of such trees.<sup>12</sup> Animals were sacrificed at such sites to procure good crops.<sup>13</sup> The rooster was used as a sacrificial animal by the Baits, e.g. in their purification rites.<sup>14</sup>

Pikollos is described by Grass as the Old Prussian god of death and the underworld (p. 56). He is pale and looks up at the living from below the earth (p. 5). He also survived the Christian attack on the pagan gods and remained unblinded (p. 65). Like Pluto or Hades, he is the bestower of grain and shekels (p. 365). Amsel makes him with materials from an abandoned house: from fusty-yellow and crumbling bridal dresses he turned out a "mortuary-nuptual" scarecrow (p. 56). It is ominous that this scarecrow, symbolizing a love feast with death, fetches the highest price during the time of rising Nazism.

The characteristics of Pikollos are also rooted in Old Prussian mythology, where "Pecols" or "Pickuls"<sup>15</sup> was the god of death and the subterranean realm.<sup>16</sup> Since he inhabited the underground, his relationship to the fertility of the earth is likely. On the other hand, Grass might have simply based that assumption on the analogy between Pikollos and Pluto.

The third Old Prussian god serving as a scarecrow is Potrimpos. Grass describes him as a cheerful boy (p. 56) chewing on an ear of wheat (p. 5). He protects the seed against insects and diseases (p. 56).

In Baltic mythology Potrimpos was the god of the sea,<sup>17</sup> or of the rivers and springs,<sup>18</sup> comparable to Neptune.<sup>19</sup> Snakes were sacred to him. History records the fact that the Old Prussians venerated snakes in Pikollos's honor and fed milk to them.<sup>20</sup> Traditions preserved in Lithuania show that this god and the waters he ruled were believed to possess curing and rejuvenating qualities.<sup>21</sup> His relationship to the fertility of the fields is likely although not documented in the sources used for this paper. In contrast to Perkunos and Pikollos, Potrimpos is the one pagan deity that has no sinister aspects to his personality; unlike Perkunos, Potrimpos is not violent or destructive, unlike Pikollos he does not bring death, but it is significant for the times Grass is describing that the scarecrow of Potrimpos is least popular and fetches the lowest price among the customers from Panzig (p. 56).

Grass' use of the Old Prussian gods to symbolize the reawakening of an ancient paganism and barbarism in Germany during the Nazi era shows that the author has a good knowledge about their meaning in the Old Prussian religion. His comparison of these gods with the pagan gods of classical antiquity, e.g. Pikollos with Pluto, shows Grass following a tradition which was established in the 16th century when some German authors, who described the Old Prussian religion, simply identified the Prussian gods with similar Roman or Greek gods. Modern scholarship has revealed that such an identification distorted the true meaning of the Prussian gods. Of course, for the purpose of this novel Grass did not need

to study all works on Old Prussian mythology, for all he needed was a symbol representing Germany's approaching love feast with death.

In the case of Perkunos Grass indicates only the destructive powers of this god. Modern research into the superstitions and folklore of the Baits revealed that Perkunos was also a beneficial god who awakened the earth in spring [22](#) and was a severe but just judge. [23](#) Again Grass could be influenced by his sources where the "interpretatio Christiana" had identified the pagan gods exclusively with evil spirits or the devil. On the other hand, Grass might have preferred to use only the destructive aspect of Perkunos to illustrate the spirit of the times he described, a time when people became fascinated with violence, destruction, and death, a time symbolized by the resurrected paganism in Amsel's scarecrows.

Since Grass has a background in Old Prussian mythology, one can assume that two more components of his novel, the character of Kriwe and a scene where Kriwe with young Amsel and Matern watch eels creeping from the sea and feeding on milk from the udders of reclining and willing cows in the early morning mist, have their roots in Prussian mythology. Grass must have chosen the name "Kriwe" for the wise old man in the novel purposely: A "criwe" was the highest priest or "sa-crificus" of the pagan Prussians, [24](#) a fact recorded already in 1326. [25](#) It was his privilege to approach the statues of the gods, which were hidden from profane eyes by a curtain, and to lift that curtain occasionally so worshippers could catch glimpses of the statues. [26](#) He tended the perpetual sacred fire, made prophecies, [27](#) and received news from the dead. [28](#) The term also signified an old, wise, and experienced man. [29](#)

The scarecrow modeled on Kriwe stands in the position of an eternal listener with his mouth open and his head to the side (p. 31). Kriwe, the person, hears and knows more than other people. He finds the right word for things, e.g. he recognizes and names Amsel's creations, the scarecrows (p. 31). He gives a name to Amsel's most horrifying scarecrow, the "Big Cuckoo Bird" (p. 81). He finally lights the fire on which the bird is burned.

He also introduces Amsel and Matern to the mysterious side of nature, e.g. he explains to them the dangerous nature of the willows (cf. p. 3) and leads them to the feeding place of the eels. He stops the excesses of Amsel, his mingling of man and tree, and admonishes him to take nature as his primary model (p. 41).

Kriwe is also knowledgeable in folk medicine, for he relieves the pain of his aching teeth by touching them with the index finger of a corpse (p. 83). (The finger of a corpse was considered a talisman in German superstition.) [30](#)

Thus this weathered old man can be seen on two levels: realistically he looks merely superstitious, but his wisdom and his insights into the soul of man and into nature are undeniable; he *is* closer to the truth and its sources than other mortals; he reveals truths and indicates norms of behavior; he lights the purifying fire that burns the "Cuckoo" and in a way officiates at a sacrifice here and at the feeding of the eels, and thus possesses many aspects of the Old Prussian pagan priest.

As mentioned above, the Old Prussians worshipped snakes in the name of Potrimpos. There is a resemblance between snakes and eels and the primitive mind thought eels to be water serpents. [31](#) Thus the eels in *Dog Years* might very well play the role of the Prussian snakes. To the Baits the sacred snakes were the protectors of good health. [32](#) The Old Prussian prayed to them for children. [33](#) The souls of the departed were believed to continue living in snakes. [34](#) The Prussians welcomed the dwelling of snakes in their homes as a good omen and fed milk to them. In pagan times priests fed milk to snakes in special holy places. [35](#) It was also believed that snakes helped themselves to the milk by sucking dry the udders of cows. [36](#)

Like the character of Kriwe the scene with the eels can be interpreted on the realistic level, for it is a biological fact that eels leave the water and survive for a time on dry land. [37](#) but their feeding on milk, their taking the role of the venerated Prussian snakes, must have its origins in Old Prussian mythology which Grass uses here effectively to create an impressive scene where reality borders on myth.

Grass refers to another demonic figure, Tulla, the daughter of the Lithuanian duke Kynstutte. She digs for mice in the dikes on the Vistula according to legend (p. 60). Although the historical Kynstutte (Lithuanian: Kęstutis), born approx. in 1300, died in 1382, had three daughters, Miklausa - Maria, Danutė - Anna, and Ringaila - Elizabeth, [38](#) none of them is known to have ended up as a ghost haunting the environs of Danzig. Most likely Tulla goes back, as Grass says (p. 118), to Thula, a water nymph from Slavic mythology.

As in most of his novels in *Dog Years* Grass delves into recent German history to castigate the "normal, average" citizen for his complacency, which resulted in ruin. For some of his symbols illustrating the influence of a barbaric past on the present, the reawakening of such a past in modern times, Grass uses Old Prussian deities. They appear in Amsel's the artist's interpretation of reality, i.e. his scarecrows. Here they illustrate the full horror of the developments in Germany. Choosing symbols from Old Prussian mythology, Grass uses elements from Danzig's past. He increases thus the local color and authenticity of his novel. (Although he also puzzles most of his readers, to whom the Prussian gods, their priests and ceremonies are unknown quantities.) Artistically, the use of such old myths, their incorporation into modern life, leads to a revealing combination of reality and mythology, and of a realistic level of life and an underlying dark, threatening underground, a barbarism still surviving in man and ready to appear again if given a chance.

- 1 E. Hoffmann-Krayer and Hanns Bachthold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, IV (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1931 - 1932), pp. 495-498. Hereafter referred to as *Hwb*.
- 2 Gunter Grass, *Dog Years*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1965). All pages cited in-the text refer to this edition.
- 3 Jonas Balys, *Lietuvių tautosakos skaitymai*, (Readings in Lithuanian Folklore), part II (Tübingen: Patria, 1948), p. 7. (Hereafter cited as *Balys*.)
- 4 *Balys*, p. 197.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 6 *Hwb.*, p. 472.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 484.
- 8 *Hwb.*, IX (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1938-1941), p. 214.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 10 *Hwb.*, V (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1932-1933), p. 747.
- 11 Kazimieras Būga, *Rinktiniai* raštai, (Selected Works), I (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokytinės literatūros leidykla, 1958), p. 150. (Hereafter cited as *Būga*.)
- 12 James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, II (London: Mac-millan and Co., 1922), p. 366. (Hereafter cited as *Bough*).
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 367.
- 14 *Hwb.*, III (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1930-1931), p. 1329.
- 15 *Būga*, II (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokytinės literatūros leidykla, 1959), p. 78.
- 16 *Būga*, III (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokytinės literatūros leidykla, 1961), p. 132.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 18 *Balys*, p. 70.
- 19 *Būga*, I, p. 150.
- 20 *Balys*, p. 68.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 22 *Balys*, pp. 11 - 12.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 24 *Būga*, I, p. 175.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Būga*, I, p. 170.
- 28 *Lietuvių Enciklopedija*, XIII (South Boston: Lietuvių Enciklopedijos leidykla, 1958), p. 165.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Hwb.*, III, p. 881.
- 31 *Bough*, IV (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), p. 84.
- 32 *Balys*, p. 70.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 36 *Hwb.*, VIII (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1936-1937), p. 1126.
- 37 *Hwb.*, I (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1927), p. 1.
- 38 *Lietuvių Enciklopedija*, XI (South Boston: Lietuvių Enciklopedijos leidykla, 1957), p. 415.