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Günter Grass’ *Hundejahre*: A Realistic Novel About Myth

SCOTT H. ABBOTT

Günter Grass’ novel *Hundejahre* begins with the phrases “Erzähl Du. Nein, erzählen Sie! Oder Du erzählst.”¹ This exchange would remind a Freemason of the passage in Freemasonic ritual—“. . . you begin. No, begin you. You begin.”² The novel ends with the pointedly Freemasonic initiation of Walter Matern into the mysteries of Brauxel’s underground factory.³ And between the Freemasonic beginning and ending, very near the mathematical center of the novel, we are told that Studienrat Oswald Brunies, the teacher of the novel’s three narrators, was a Freemason (p. 337). Roughly parallel to this Freemasonic structure is a numerological structure: the novel begins with thirty-two “Frühschichten,”⁴ ends with a visit to the thirty-two rooms of Brauxel’s mine, and has its high point when Amsel’s thirty-two teeth are knocked out as he is brutally transformed in the snow scene. And between these Masonic and numerical beginnings and endings, surrounding their centers, are innumerable references to astrology, myth, superstitition, magical transformation, divination of the future, and other supernatural activities of the most varied sort.

Given this profusion of related motifs in *Hundejahre*, the modes of interpretation most often resorted to are naturally theological, mythical, numerological, or masonic.⁵ Readers conditioned by novels such as Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* (which likewise makes extensive use of symbolic numbers, contains lengthy descriptions of Freemasonic ritual, and features a mythical revelation in the snow), are especially apt to rummage through *Hundejahre* with delight. But these striking similarities, far from inviting similar interpretations, should warn the reader (unless one is dealing with an obviously epigonal work), that the novels should be read differently.

In a speech given in West Berlin at the opening of the exhibition “Menschen in Auschwitz,” a speech he called “Schwierigkeiten eines Vaters, seinen Kindern Auschwitz zu erklären,” Grass commented on the history intervening between Mann’s work and his own: “Adornos Wort, nach Auschwitz könne man keine Gedichte mehr schreiben, hat so viele Mißverständnisse provoziert, daß ihm zumindest versuchsweise die Interpretation nachgeliefert werden muß: Gedichte, die nach Auschwitz geschrieben worden sind, werden sich den Maßstab Auschwitz gefallen
Grass’ Hundejahre

lassen müssen.” The strikingly similar themes and motifs used in Mann’s Zauberberg and Grass’ Hundejahre—the Freemasonry, the numerology, the supernatural phenomena, the mythology, and the magical transformations in the snow—must, according to Grass, be measured against different criteria. But just what is the new perspective from which we must view this postwar parody of Der Zauberberg?

To answer this question I would like first to examine several of Grass’ nonliterary statements on the general subject of myths, ideologies, and symbols, and their relationship to history. Then I shall discuss the narrators of the novel, showing that the similarities between Hundejahre and Der Zauberberg are due to the propensity of Hundejahre’s narrators to interpret events in their lives magically, mystically, and mythologically. The point I want to make is that when we fail to recognize the narrators as the producers of the novel, when we think in the same categories through which they view the world, if we interpret the novel mythically or numerologically, if we view it the same way we do Der Zauberberg, forgetting Auschwitz, we are abetting the very tendency Günter Grass would subvert.

First, then, Grass’ statements about myth and history. When asked about his flounder as a personification of Hegel’s Weltgeist, Grass answered: “Yes, I was considering a satire on the German preoccupation with assigning hidden meanings to history. History to me is chaos, plain and simple.” In a letter published in Der Spiegel Grass addresses another facet of the same problem. After referring to Idealism as Germany’s basic problem, whether used to support rightist or leftist absolute claims, he writes: “... es sind jeweils idealistische Schwierigkeiten, die es den Heilsaposteln unmöglich machen, die Widersprüche der Wirklichkeit auszuhalten und dem eigenen Unvermögen konfrontiert zu bleiben.” In other words, Grass is concerned with the fact that men, faced by the contradictions of reality and conditioned by Idealism, turn all too quickly to an ideology, to a mythic history promising a millennium, or to a heroic leader. Grass is not alone in seeing in myth an attempt to reconcile historical contradictions. Indeed, two of the twentieth-century’s leading theoreticians of myth—Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ernst Cassirer—touch on this very point.

In his Structural Anthropology, after pointing out that “myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of aesthetic play, or as the basis of ritual,” Lévi-Strauss offers the following as a definition of myth: “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real).” Although the attempt to overcome a contradiction with such a logical model is, on Lévi-Strauss’ view, a much more positive activity than on Grass’ view, the basic concept is the same; and indeed, the parenthetical comment on a “real” contradiction seems very close to Grass’ own position. In addition, Lévi-Strauss makes a comparison between “myth and what appears to have largely replaced it in modern societies, namely, politics.” Here he contrasts the historian’s view of the French
Revolution ("a sequence of past happenings, a non-reversible series of events the remote consequences of which may still be felt at present") with that of a politician, who sees in the same events a pattern from which he can infer future developments. This is the very patterning which Grass fears.10

A second view of myth comes from Ernst Cassirer, who, in Volume II of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, defines myth positively as "a unitary energy of the human spirit: as a self-contained form of interpretation which asserts itself amid all the diversity of the objective material it presents."11 But after having witnessed the political manipulation of myths also described in *Hundejahre*, Cassirer writes of another aspect of myth in *The Myth of the State*:

> In the times of inflation and unemployment Germany's whole social and economic system was threatened with a complete collapse. The normal resources seemed to have been exhausted. This was the natural soil upon which the political myths could grow up and in which they found ample nourishment. . . . Myth reaches its full force when man has to face an unusual and dangerous situation.12

Both Lévi-Strauss and Cassirer, then, see in myth an attempt to overcome a contradiction or dangerous situation, often political, and Cassirer specifically refers to the political myths of Nazi Germany as natural attempts to establish order in a chaotic environment.13 And this is the tendency of which Grass would make us aware. Before turning to *Hundejahre* let me quote Grass once again, speaking about the problem from yet another perspective:

> Only ideologists need symbols to manifest themselves. Nazis with their swastikas, Communists with their hammers and sickles, the Roman Catholics with their arsenals full of images, the capitalists with their trademarks. I am even afraid of turning anti-ideology into an ideology. I just know what I want and don't want—the danger is when these things become a system.14

We see here a position diametrically opposed to that of Thomas Mann, whose work is, among other things, a magnificent system of symbols and myths. In the subchapter "Schnee," for example, confronting the contradictions between Naphta's radical irrationalism and Settembrini's enlightened rationalism, Hans Castorp achieves a synthesis through the mediation of myth. Of course the undercutting irony of *Der Zauberberg* must be taken into account; but the opposition between Mann and Grass set forth here, despite simplification, is nonetheless productive. But the question remains: if Grass, as we have just seen, distrusts ideologies, symbols, and mythical histories, how is one to interpret *Hundejahre*, an extraordinarily complex novel bristling with astrology, numerology, symbols, myths, and ideologies?

*Hundejahre* is named after a family of German shepherds. They are
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all black, and fatefully attach themselves to whoever espouses the kind of mystical, mythical, barbaric thought which allowed the Nazis to come to power and which, according to Grass, still flourishes in the postwar world. Further, the novel is a collection of three accounts of life in a small suburb of Danzig. Eddi Amsel (also known as Brauxel) describes pre-war Danzig in his “Frühschichten,” Harry Liebenau tells of the war years in his “Liebesbriefe,” and Walter Matern reports on postwar Germany in his “Materniaden.” Amsel, a half-Jew, is an artist whose medium is scarecrows, creations which most often depict mythological figures. Matern is Amsel’s friend and protector who turns against him in the Nazi years and knocks out his teeth in a bloody attack in the snow (a parody of Mann’s “Schnee” scene). And Harry Liebenau, a younger acquaintance of the other two narrators, in a bizarre public discussion, brings Matern to trial for his misdeeds as a Nazi. From the very beginning Grass focuses on these three narrators as narrators.

Even the opening sentences of the novel (“Erzähl Du. Nein, erzählen Sie! Oder Du erzählst”) leave no question as to the primacy of the problem of narration. In the first paragraphs the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the fact that he is the narrator: “Der hier die Feder führt, wird zur Zeit Brauxel genannt. . . . Der Federführende schreibt Brauxel zumeist wie Castrop-Rauxel. . . . Der hier die Feder führt”—all on the first page! Grass wants to make sure that we are aware that we are dealing with a narrated text. Such an emphasis should lead us to examine the narrators a little more closely. Who are these three men through whose eyes we are viewing a crucial era in Germany’s history? How were they educated? And what was the result of that education?

Eddi Amsel, Harry Liebenau, and Walter Matern—the three members of the *Autorenkollektiv* who write the novel—grow up in Danzig in an atmosphere saturated with myth. In their accounts they refer specifically to three men who exert powerful pedagogical influences on them. Herr Olschewski, a “reformsüchtiger Junglehrener niedriger Schule,” teaches *Heimatkunde*; but when Eddi asks him about the origin of the name Pluto he lectures for weeks on mythology—Germanic, Greek, and especially Polish myths—about “die Götter die es früher mal gegeben, heute noch gibt, damals schon gab. . . . Seitdem,” Brauxel reports, “hat sich Amsel der Mythologie ergeben” (p. 68). A second teacher, Oswald Brunies, is, on the one hand, a grand old humanist who refuses to have anything to do with the Nazis. But on the other hand, he is an absured rooster, scratching in the schoolyard for rare pebbles. “Nichts ging bei ihm natürlich zu, überall witterte er verborgene Mächte. . . . Er gab sich wie ein altkeltischer Druide, wie ein pruzzischer Eichengott oder wie Zoroaster—man hielt ihn für einen Freimaurer” (p. 144).15 This *Studienrat*, who is supposed to teach history and German, is addicted to sweets and Romanticism. His students do not learn how to spell, nor do they learn history; but they do know some Eichendorff, they come to see ballet shoes as magical objects, they can write essays in which they fantasize about marriage customs of the Zulus, they get a large dose of the mystical geology found in Schubert’s *Ansichten von der*
Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft, and there are some indications that they adopt Brunies' Freemasonry. They certainly do not learn his aversion to the Nazis.

Oskar Matzerath, the hero of Grass' first novel, Die Blechtrommel, is referred to as a third teacher: "Brauxel und seine Mitautoren gingen bei jemandem in die Schule, der zeit seines Lebens fleißig war auf lackiertem Blech" (p. 117). This is no recommendation, for near the end of Die Blechtrommel, Oskar, having reached the fabled age of thirty, contemplates various problematic courses of action: "ich mime ihnen den Messias, den sie in mir sehen, mache, gegen besseres Wissen, aus meiner Trommel mehr, als die darzustellen vermag, laß die Trommel zum Symbol werden, gründe eine Sekte, Partei oder auch nur eine Loge." Oskar has been guilty of making his drum into a symbol, of using art to promote mythical thinking, of setting himself up as a messiah; and the narrators of Hundejahre learn his skills well.

Walter Matern, for example, is described by Grass as an addicted disciple of ideologies: "In dem Roman Hundejahre ist mir, so glaube ich, in der Figur des Walter Matern ein deutschidealitischer Ideenträger gelungen, der innerhalb kürzester Zeit im Kommunismus, im Nationalsozialismus, im Katholizismus, schließlich im ideologischen Antifaschismus jeweils die Heilslehre sieht." While living with his father, who can hear flour worms predicting Germany's economic future, Walter Matern develops his own economic/historical theories and speaks "von der Geschichte als dialektischem Wurmprozeß . . . [Matern] verbreitet marxgenährte Wurmmythen, welche die These von der Zwangsläufigkeit aller Entwicklung stützen müssen" (pp. 507-08). This is clearly the ideological patterning of history, or the combination of myth and history Grass so vocally opposes. And Matern is not alone in his beliefs.

Harry Liebenau is in love with barbarous Tulla, and, like Matern, also demonstrates a strong interest in mythical history. Liebenau is "ein Vielwisser, der Bücher mit historischem und philosophischem Inhalt durcheinander las." He is "ein Melancholiker," a category Grass describes along with "Utopist" in Aus dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke as being opposed to the rational attitude of doubt. In addition, Liebenau is "ein Phantast, der viel log, leise sprach, rot wurde wenn, dies und das glaubte und den andauernden Krieg als Ergänzung des Schulunterrichts betrachtete." His list of heroes includes Hitler, whose mythical history brought the Nazis to power, and the historian Heinrich von Treitschke, whose ideologically slanted and anti-Semitic history of the early nineteenth century powerfully affected the historical consciousness of the German citizen. Martin Heidegger, whose concepts of Geworfenheit, Sein, and Zeit find their way into every facet of Liebenau's already hazy thought processes, is another hero. "Mit Hilfe dieser Vorbilder," it is said, "gelang es ihm, einen tatsächlichen, aus menschlichen Knochen erstellten Berg mit mittelalterlichen Allegorien zuzuschütten." He calls this pile of human bones at the Stutthof concentration camp an "Opferstätte, errichtet, damit das Reine sich im Licht ereigne" (p. 375, as also the preceding quotations).
Liebenau is a fantas in love with barbarism and mythical histories and Matern is a violent Idealist; but what about Eddi Amsel, who, as Brauxel, heads the Autorenkollektiv?

Amsel has often been seen as the quintessential postwar writer who vigorously struggles to overcome Germany's past. John Reddick, for example, writes that where Matern attempts to mask reality, Amsel always sees clearly. Reddick even identifies Amsel at times with Grass himself. But if we look at Amsel from the same perspective from which we have just observed Matern and Liebenau, we find a problematic figure.

In the account of Olschewski's teaching and Amsel's turn to mythology, mythical thinking is identified with a series of violent and mystical figures, including a black and pregnant German shepherd. Following this terrifying list comes the phrase "Aber auch Eddi Amsel" (p. 68). Later in the book, when Walter Matern is asked in the public discussion to name several "wichtige, ihn pragende Kindheitserlebnisse," he begins with the names of three gods of Prussian mythology. He lists the same violent and mystical figures we saw before, and again ends with "aber auch Eddi Amsel" (p. 604).

Eddi Amsel, the artist whose work could lend support to a rational acceptance of historical contradictions, instead intensifies Matern's mythical thinking. His mythical scarecrows frighten away birds; but some are birds themselves and strengthen the superstition of the villagers. During the Nazi period his mechanical figures reinterpret history on the basis of Nazi myths and Romantic heroes. His scarecrow ballet has some promise, but he agrees to change it to fit Nazi taste. Eddi also sponsors miller Matern in his economic divination. As Brauxel, he predicts the end of the world astrologically and dabbles in numerology. And most telling of all, he takes over the care of Pluto in the end, leaving the black dog ("SS schwarz, priesterschwarz, Amselschwarz") to guard his factory.

Eddi Amsel, Harry Liebenau, Walter Matern—the three narrators of Hundejahre, victims during the dog years, are also responsible for the dog years. The relation of these three would-be Vergangenheitsbewältiger to the past is manifest by the Erkenntnisbrille used during the public discussion of Matern's guilt. This ubiquitous postwar symbol for the overcoming of the past is produced in Hundejahre by Brauxel and Company. "Qualifizierte Optiker, in Jena ausgebildet" (p. 548) act as consultants for the glasses. Jena is not only famous for lenses, of course, but also for German Romanticism. The glasses' secret ingredient is micah, collected by "Romantic" Oswald Brunies. Looking through the glasses one can indeed see the horrors of the past; but the Romantic lenses distort the view, and the viewers demonize Hitler and Matern, having no insight into their own guilt.

Thus, the glasses made to overcome the past are themselves products of the past. Postwar writers (or at least Hundejahre's postwar narrators), seeking to overcome Romantic thinking, use tools forged by the Romantics. Mythical histories are replaced by more mythical histories. Eddi Amsel is a black bird attempting to scare off black birds. Walter Matern
attacks fascism with fascist methods. And Harry Liebenau tries and convicts Matern as a Nazi while himself praying to the black German shepherd. Or, as it says in the novel, “Im Wurm ist der Wurm” (p. 491).

*Hundejahre*, then, is not a Romantic/mythical/occult novel, it is a realistic novel about Romanticism, myth, and the supernatural. On the one hand, the “Frühschichten,” “Liebesbriefe,” and “Materniaden” written by Amsel, Liebenau, and Matern are mythical interpretations of a segment of twentieth-century history, interpretations of a sequence of events in which all three narrators have vested interests. And the three accounts, beyond any nominal Vergangenheitsbewältigung, are an admitted attempt to establish a monument to “Romantic” Oswald Brunies.¹⁰

On the other hand, however, the novel *Hundejahre* is about its narrators. We, as readers, must resist the tendency to think in their categories. We must recognize the accounts for what they are—confessions of misled, defensive, and representative minds. After recognizing the myths, Freemasonry, and numerology, we must then step back from the seemingly systematic but ultimately chaotic mass of supernatural and suprahistorical phenomena depicted and read the novel as a realistic account of a common and dangerous flight from reality. We must, as did Walter Benjamin for Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften*, “read these symbolic objects to the second power.”²¹

Thus aware of the patterns and systems on which the narrators of the novel rely to overcome the contradictions of history they have experienced, we should return to Grass’ statement: “I am even afraid of turning anti-ideology into an ideology. I just know what I want and don’t want—the danger is when these things become a system.” We have just worked through *Hundejahre*, pulling out passages which express sentiments similar to those Grass has expressed in interviews, and ironically, have woven them into a system. But ultimately, even this system which teaches us to distrust the novel’s narrators and see their irrational methods of coping with reality as dangerous, is undercut.

For how do we know that the novel is about its untrustworthy narrators? Because they themselves have told us. They are the ones who describe the “marxgenährte Wurmmythen,” they laugh at Oswald Brunies and his Romantic foibles, they describe each other and themselves as violent idealists, as mythical historians, as irrational artists. They themselves are aware of their untrustworthiness. Grass undercuts his narrators, but he also undercuts a systematic apperception of the narrators’ unreliability. To fail to do this would be to demonize the narrators for their demonization of the Nazis. Grass is skeptical even of his own skepticism. And it is this thoroughgoing skepticism that he places in opposition to irrationalism of any sort. Or, as it says in *Hundejahre*:

The scenes in which Matern is initiated into the mysteries of this underground factory draw heavily on Masonic ritual. Each of the following details has its direct counterpart in Masonic initiation rites: Matern, referred to again and again as the "BerBfremde" (and thus in need of initiation), is led past a doorkeeper, receives instruction, signs a statement affirming his intention to go into the mine, must take off his clothing and exchange it for "zunftige Kluft," and descends in an elevator hung by a mystical cable while a bell is rung three and then five times. During the descent Brauxel instructs Matern as to the makeup, care, and importance of the cable. The lesson ends with the statement "also Licht" as the elevator arrives and Matern is led into the mine.

For comparison of these actions with Freemasonic initiation rites compare *Revised Freemasonry Illustrated* or the account of Pierre's initiation into Freemasonry in *War and Peace*.

Of such criticism, Michael Harscheidt's *Günther Grass: Wort-Zahl-Gott* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1976), a 758-page numerological/theological interpretation, is the most conspicuous.


"Of the Fisherman and His Wife": Günther Grass's 'The Flounder' in Critical Perspective (New York: AMS Press, 1982 [projected publication date]).

The narratively serious but ultimately satirical worm dialectic has an analogue in Stortebeker's use of Heideggerian language in speaking of and to rats: "Die Ratte entzieht sich, indem sie sich in das Rattige entbirgt. So beirrt die Ratte, es lichtend, das Rattige mit der Irre. Denn das Rattige ist in der Irre ereignet, in der es die Ratte umirrt und so den Irrtum stiftet. Er ist der Wesensraum aller Geschichte!" (p. 367)


"Studienrat Oswald Brunies—das Autorenkollektiv hat vor, ihm ein Denkmal zu bauen—" (p. 108).
Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 66-67. The context of the quoted passage follows: "It is the originality of Benjamin to have cut across the sterile opposition between the arbitrary interpretations of the symbol on the one hand, and the blank failure to see what it means on the other: Elective Affinities is to be read not as a novel by a symbolic writer, but as a novel about symbolism. If objects of a symbolic nature loom large in this work, it is not because they were chosen to underline the theme of adultery in some decorative manner, but rather because the real underlying subject is precisely the surrender to the power of symbols of people who have lost their autonomy as human beings. 'When people sink to this level, even the life of apparently lifeless things grows strong. Gundolf quite rightly underlined the crucial role of objects in this story. Yet the intrusion of the thinglike into human life is precisely a criterion of the mythical universe.' We are required to read these symbolic objects to the second power: not so much directly to decipher in them a one-to-one meaning, as to sense that of which the very fact of symbolism is itself symptomatic." This passage, as has been shown here, can be applied almost word for word to Hundejahre. And it should be noted, finally, that in Die Blechtrommel, along with Rasputin und die Frauen, Oskar reads Wahlverwandtschaften.


Der mit 10.000 Mark dotierte "Große Preis" ist zum ersten Male in der 30-jährigen Geschichte der internationalen Filmwoche von Mannheim (Baden-Württemberg) an einen deutschen Regisseur verliehen worden. Die internationale Jury vergab am 10.10. zum Abschluß des Festivals die begehrte Auszeichnung, die Regisseure ausschließlich für ihre Erstlingsspielfilme erhalten, an George Tabori für seinen Film Frohes Fest. Diese "Entleerung des Weihnachtsfestes" wurde von der Jury unter Vorsitz von Istvan Szabo als "satirisches Spiegelbild der heutigen Bundesrepublik" bewertet und als "einziger Beitrag der diesjährigen Filmwoche, der sich um eine neue Form bemühte."