

VOLK, JEW AND DEVIL: IRONIC INVERSION IN GUNTER GRASS'S *DOG YEARS*

LYLE H. SMITH, JR.
Biola College

In *The Danzing Trilogy of Günter Grass*, John Reddick points out the fact that *Dog Years* has remained in a kind of critical limbo since its publication in 1963. This is ironic in light of Grass's fondness for the third member of the «Danzing trilogy,» and puzzling in light of the richness and sweep of the novel, clearly a more ambitious and, I think, more existentially relevant work than either *The Tin Drum* or *Cat and Mouse*. Reddick's treatment of *Dog Years* is thus timely and immensely satisfying to one who finds this oddly neglected book the most moving of the Grass canon. An index of the novel's richness is its generation of multiple and mutually reinforcing patterns of significance, one of which is explored by Reddick in his treatment of the love-hate relationship between Eddi Amsel and Walter Matern. Walter's aimless violence constitutes a microcosm of the Nazi violence that dominates the dog years narrated in the story, and Eddi Amsel's power to draw the physically stronger boy into what Reddick calls a «subservient attachment» demonstrates a moral and intellectual superiority that sets Eddi apart from the other characters in the novel.(1)

This power and superiority, however, remain unaccounted for in Reddick's study, despite the fact that a series of increasingly uncanny events accumulates around the figure of Eddi Amsel in «Morning Shifts» and «Love Letters,» culminating in a miraculous transformation. In fact, the elements of the marvelous that crop up in Grass's works have led critics to talk about Grass's «modern mythology,» a speculation that proves especially tempting in light of the recurrent symbols of transcendent reality that appear in his novels. Edward Diller, in *A Mythic Journey: Günter Grass's Tin Drum*, maintains that in the

saga of Oskar, «a pattern of epic mythic evidence established and confirmed itself undeniably in the triadic structure of the novel, in its supernatural events. . . .»(2) An article on *Dog Years*, appearing in a recent number of *Lituanus* describes the elements of Balto-Germanic folk-lore that lend local color to the novel. In particular, the author points out the ways in which Grass employs his knowledge of the cult of the Prussian triad of gods, Perkunos, Pikollos and Potrimpos, to construct a symbol system for «Morning Shifts,» the novel's first part.(3)

Grass, however, employs Baltic mythology and the language of mythopoesis not only in the «Morning Shifts» but throughout the novel. In addition, he parodies the mythos of anti-Semitism, undercutting not only Nazism, but its foundation in Volkist race-ideology. By identifying the Jewish character, Eddi Amsel, with the gods of ancient Prussia while simultaneously demonstrating his conformity with some of the standard traits claimed by Volkist anti-Semitic propaganda to be uniquely and objectionably Jewish, Grass ironically inverts the traditional identification of land, Volk and life forces which, according to George L. Mosse in *The Crisis of German Ideology*, formed the life and world view of most Germans from the early nineteenth century onward. The Jew, seen as «rootless» and alien by German anti-Semites, becomes identified in Grass's novel with the values that Volkist ideologues held to be characteristic of the settled, rooted and «genuine» German. Simultaneously, Grass demonstrates in Amsel many of the characteristics advanced by the anti-Semites as evidence of the Jew's inhuman and threatening character. The result--the eventual triumph of this arch-Germanic, arch-Jewish *eiron* in the midst of a hostile group of fascistic *alazons*--is not only a brilliant surprise, but a resolution entirely consistent with Grass's desire to treat the German language, and hence German thought, in an entirely new way.(4)

Grass's style blends fantasy and documentary realism. The pervasive atmosphere of anti-Semitism, which had been on the rise in Germany since the mid-nineteenth century, is objectified not only in the words and actions of particular characters in *Dog Years*, such as Walter Matern and Tulla Pokriefke, but in Grass's incorporation of Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex and Character*) into the plot of the novel. Weininger, an apostate Jew, published his work in 1903 as an endorsement of conservative Volkist thinking about the role of women in German society.

Appearing at a time of increased demand for women's rights, it presented the argument that only the masculine was endowed with true creativity; the feminine was reserved for lesser and strictly biological roles. To buttress his argument, Weininger asserted that the masculine-feminine role relationship was similar to that of Aryan and Jew. Whereas the Aryan was spiritual and creative, the Jew, Weininger maintained, was materialistic and incapable of original creativity. Grass, however, uses Weininger's book to do more than provide period atmosphere. As Wesley Blomster writes, «Weininger's role within the novel is a dynamic one; his function begins when his book is first mentioned and continues on into the novel. In a certain sense he becomes a character who acts and reacts in a relationship with other major figures in the work.» With ironic gravity, Grass proceeds to build upon this base the structure of Eddi Amsel's German-Jewish identity.(5)

Eddi's father, Albrecht Amsel, acquires Weininger's book shortly after its publication. Anxious to repudiate his own Jewishness and so assimilate with the German-Gentile culture of the Vistula estuary, the elder Amsel follows the description of what Weininger presents as identifying characteristics of Jewishness with pathetic intensity, altering his own behavior whenever possible in order to attain the particular antithesis of a supposedly «Jewish» trait. «And so Albrecht Amsel opened the book and read ... The Jew has no soul. The Jew does not sing. The Jew does not engage in sports. The Jew must surmount the Jewishness within him... And Albrecht Amsel surmounted by singing in the church choir, by not only founding the Bohnsack Athletic Club reg. 1905, but also ... by introducing *schlagball*, a relatively new sport, in the territory to the right and left of all three mouths of the Vistula.»(6)

After the death of Albrecht Amsel, who falls for the Fatherland at Verdun, his son inherits the «standard work» of Weininger and keeps it by him throughout a long and turbulent career. It winds up on the desk of Herr Brauchsel, one of the avatars of Eddi, as we subsequently discover. Eddi appeals to Weininger in a monologue-debate in which he alternately defends and questions the tenets of *Sex and Character*. Mirroring the division within his own half-Jewish, half-Gentile identity, he harangues a roomful of scarecrow figures in his Langfuhr villa and imagines their answers, sallies and retorts as they line up on one side or

another of the «Jewish question.» During the course of this monologue, all of the standard anti-Semitic accusations are voiced. Jews are soulless, materialistic, aliens in the German homeland, dishonest, unethical, lustful, physical not spiritual, empirical, humorless, without identity, irreverent («'...to them nothing, absolutely nothing is inviolable or sacred...'» [DY, p. 193]) cynical, liberal, uncreative and unidealistic. All of these accusations are common-places of anti-Semitism from Fichte to Goebbels. It is against such charges that Eddi and his father before him attempt to defend themselves.

Like his father, Amsel the younger is at pains to «surmount the Jewishness within him» by reading Weininger and then acting as little like a Jew as possible. He sings beautifully; «because he is an obese child, he has a lovely velvety boy soprano voice...» (DY, p. 137) which first gushes forth to the reader's hearing at a singalong led by a troop of Hitler Youth on the Brösen pier in the Danzig of the early 'thirties. Like his father, he takes up athletics; inept at *Schlagball*, he finds his niche in the gentler sport of *Faustball*, playing centerfielder. And it is here that the irony begins to show, for Eddi is the director, the «switch-board,» the «play-maker» of the team. «What Horst Plötz and Siegi Lewand picked up in the rear and conveyed to the center of the field, he deftly, with supple forearm, dispatched to the line... Amsel knew how to receive treacherously dealt balls and turn them into neat passes....» (DY, p. 178) He is the team middleman; even in sports his Jewishness asserts itself, refuses to be surmounted. Similarly, though musical, his talent is oddly effeminate, a soprano voice «which even after graduation refused to come down from the upper story.» (DY, p. 177) Either Eddi is sexless or he is as effeminate as Weininger predicts the Jew will invariably be.

Grass, in fashioning Eddi's character, conforms to the stereotype developed by decades of academic anti-Semitism. In doing so he challenges and tests his readers' responses, for failure to sympathize with Eddi's Jewish humanity implies anti-Semitism in one's self. Also by solemnly reproducing the specious catalogue of «Jewish» traits in Eddi's personality, Grass spotlights the anti-Semitic mythos with the glaring particularity that is required by the ironic inversion of Volkist values that informs the novel. Eddi's Jewishness is described in terms of Weininger's thesis. He is, for instance, «rootless»: his father died before he

was born, and he left the island of his birth to move to Danzig and later to Berlin and finally to Hamburg, abandoning the land for the city. He is a middleman, whether as *Faustball* player or as manager of the German Ballet. He is irreverent, displaying «typical» Jewish cynicism in the face of Aryan idealism. For Walter the last straw is when his friend makes nine figures of S.A. men, giving them the faces of Goethe, Weininger and of Amsel himself, as well as clockwork mechanisms that enable them to goose-step and salute. Complains Walter later, «nothing was sacred to him...to him everything was funny.» (*DY*, pp. 246-247)

It is precisely this ambivalence, this sense of ironic detachment that Eddi communicates, that makes him at once both stereotypically «Jewish» and vastly more complex, multiple and psychologically interesting than the inarticulate and pugnacious Matern. And throughout *Dog Years* the picture Grass builds up of Eddi's personality provokes the reader to wonder whether the Jewish personality, as perceived by Weininger *et al.*, is as terribly threatening as they suppose, or whether the anti-Semitic stereotypes correctly interpret the data of personality and behavior. Consider the following: unlike the Aryan Walter, whom Grass describes as «rawboned and masterful» (*DY*, p. 130) young Eddi is «a fatty,» soft, plump, with a high, girlish voice and a constant need to «imitate somebody, himself if need be.» (*DY*, p. 86) This urge to imitate is, of course, the foundation of his art, the making of scarecrows. These life-like figures, which were «never anonymous, but signified Johann Lickfett the fisherman, Pastor Blech, time and time again Kriwe the ferryman,» (*DY*, p. 40) and at other times Walter Matern, the Prussian gods, characters of folk-lore and myth--are all products of «Eduard Amsel's keen sense of reality in all its innumerable forms....» (*DY*, p. 39) Now depending on the degree to which one's perceptions are filtered through anti-Semitic thought forms, the success of the scarecrows at frightening birds may be taken as a tribute to Eddi's eye for observation and his ability to construct convincing effigies of human and supernatural characters. On the other hand, Eddi's powers of imitation may be taken as corroboration of his Jewishness, evidence that he is essentially uncreative, capable only of slapping together ersatz persons with odds and ends fished from the flotsam-bearing Vistula--other people's lost clothing, pieces of other people's fences and barns, human refuse on the stream of history. The reader must construe as he will;

Amsel is either an artist or a barren imitator, depending on one's preconceptions. The story of Eddi becomes a Rorschach test for prejudice or for the lack of it.

We are thus presented with a Jewish character who embodies a large number of the traits execrated by a century and a half of German Jew-baiters. But, rather than being the repulsive and loathsome object predicted by the stereotype, Eddi is easily the most personable and engaging character in the novel. He is endlessly creative, not only mimetically but also satirically. He is friendly, harming no one, siding with the persecuted Jenny Brunies, ironically witty, fair and practical in his dealings even with his erstwhile persecutor, Walter. He contrasts favorably with the novel's *alazons*; decisive where Walter Matern is ineffectual, a doer where Harry Liebenau is only an observer, and of course infinitely more generous and humane than the closed and triangular-faced Tulla Pokriefke. The most fully human character in the novel is, in fact, the despised Jew. As the remainder of this essay will argue, he is also the most fully German, for he alone of all the characters in the novel exhibits a transcendent power stemming from the embodiment of cosmic forces in the land of his nativity. He is spiritually, as well as physically, a German.

According to Hitler, the proverbial saying was true, Whoever knows the Jew, knows the Devil. He assured readers of *Mein Kampf* that «no one need be surprised if among our people the personification of the Devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jews.»(7) In light of the old «Jew as Devil» idea, it is worth our while to take note of the constant allusions Grass throws out in *Dog Years* to the legends, myths, and gods of the pagan and medieval Baltic peoples. Two such mythological allusions are of special interest. First, there is a multitude of cryptic references to the deities of the old Prussian triad--Perkunos, Pikollos and Potrimpos. Secondly, the frequent references to the twelve headless knights and nuns, whose haunting of Queen Louise's mill results in its destruction by fire, seem to organize German history under the aegis of Perkunos, the god of fire, and Pikollos, the god of the underworld, or of the dead.

The most detailed information Grass gives us about the Prussian triad is to be found in the «Eighteenth Morning Shift,» where Perkunos is described as the fire god, Pikollos as the god of the dead, and Potrimpos, «the forever laughing youth with the

ear of wheat between his teeth,» as the god of fertility and the protector of grain, paralleling in his function that of the maker of scarecrows, Eddi Amsel, whose very presence is enough to alarm grain-eating fowl. Grass's account of the pagan Prussian deities closely parallels that of Jaan Puhvel, co-editor with G. J. Larson and C. S. Littleton of *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*. Puhvel relates that the images of the gods were installed in an evergreen oak tree, and before each image was maintained its appropriate symbol: a fire forever burning before Perkunos, a milk-fed snake covered with grain sheaves before Potrimpos, and the skulls of a man, a horse, and a cow before Pikollos. The original high priest of the cult was a Swede named Criwe.(8)

Grass identifies Eddi Amsel with all three of these Baltic deities by means of their cult symbols. Not only does Eddi build images of each, he participates in rites connected with each of them. Led by Kriwe the ferryman--Grass's character is obviously an echo of the priest of the ancient Baltic cult--Walter and Eddi one morning observe eels slithering out of a brook through tall grass to drink milk from the udders of willing cows--a reminder of the mild-fed, grain-covered snake of Potrimpos. Later, on a winter afternoon, Eddi is the only witness to the visit of the twelve headless knights and nuns to the Matern postmill, who kindle a fire there while Eddi watches, glows, and melts snowflakes on his heated skin; and we remember that fire is the cult-symbol of Perkunos. Finally, after Eddi and Walter move to Danzig to attend high school, they explore the sewers under the old city and find the skeleton of a Napoleonic soldier lying under a church. When Eddi attempts to pick up the skull to use it for a scare-crow's head--and we remember that the skull is the sign of Pikollos--Walter becomes infuriated, striking his friend. He adds, «This is the kingdom of the dead,» (*DY*, p. 87) and leads Eddi back to the light and air above.

Symbolic identification is augmented by identity of function. Like the boy Potrimpos, the boy Amsel, with his scarecrows, protects the farmers' grain fields. Like Pikollos, Eddi is at home under the ground, whether in the sewers of Danzig or in the potash mine of Brauchsel and Company. Like Perkunos, he is not only closely associated with fire--Herr Brauchsel is a chain-smoker--but with angry judgment; as Herr Haseloff, the ballet director, he is irascible and easily excited. At ease in each of his roles, Eddi not only progresses through his life from one role to the next, but

frequently evidences the characteristics of more than one Prussian deity; for example, Herr Brauchsel, the god of the underworld, begins the novel with a map of the Vistula estuary drawn in cigarette ash, given relief by burnt match sticks--products of fire, which belongs to Perkunos. Thus, it is apparent that, regardless of the prevailing avatar, he contains within himself the seeds of multiple identities, and the transformations he undergoes are manifestations of various possibilities.

It is evident, by virtue of his association with gods both of fertility and of destruction, that Eddi is a chthonic figure. There is a doubleness about such figures, as has already been noted in Grass criticism. Kurt Lothar Tank, writing on *The Tin Drum*, remarks that Oskar, intent on preserving his freedom, identifies himself with evil in order to do so.(9) The Prussian triad, consisting of a god of fire, a god of grain, and a god of death, contains within itself that tension between birth and death inherent in the chthonic conception. This same sinister ambiguity is exemplified in the Lithuanian herd god Velnias, who not only takes care of the domestic flocks, but also habitually assumes the form of a handsome youth, a wolf, a black dog, or a strange bird in order to deceive men and women and lure them to their deaths.(11)

Eddi partakes of the dual nature of the Baltic earth-gods. On the positive side, he exercises power over the birds of the air and over the lives and fortunes of Walter Matern and Jenny Brunies. He is instrumental in the creation of the appropriate conditions for the recovery of the postwar German economy, by way of miller Matern's flour sack and meal worms. And, in creating and marketing his mechanical scarecrows, who in the potash mine re-enact not only German history but also basic human emotion and ratiocination, and who protect the grain fields of the world from Kansas to the Ukraine, he manifests on a cosmic scale the duality of his chthonic essence--master of living nature and lord of the potash-lined underworld.

Eddi also manifests a sinister side that is replete with reverberations of the old «Jew as Devil» theme. His Great Cuckoo-Bird figure alarms man and beast alike, and the superstitious islanders intuitively connect it with the death of Grandmother Matern. His figure combining tree and human being--his willow-tree grandmother, modelled in part on Grandmother Matern--completes the mental collapse of Lorchen. Close to the novel's end, Eddi is clearly diabolical in the inferno his

cigarette butt ignites in Jenny's Berlin bar, and finally, as operator of the technological hell of the scarecrow-producing potash mine, he is unchallengeably the lord of the underworld. The view of humanity generated by the scarecrows in the mine is so terrifying that Walter Matern exclaims, «Heavens above, this is hell. It is hell itself!» (*DY*, p. 557) Eddi's mysterious ability to induce the black German shepherd Harras, one of the line of shepherd dogs that carries the theme of the Nazi mentality through the novel, to respond instantly to the name «Pluto» is another case in point. From the beginning, when Brauchsel is sketching a map of the Vistula with ashes and burnt matches, to the end, when Goldmouth burns down Jenny's bar with a cigarette butt, Amsel is associated with fire. And his identity as ruler of a technological hell, combined with these other associations, gives him distinctly diabolical overtones, which are triply appropriate in light of the fact that medieval Christian chroniclers of Baltic paganism designated its three chief gods as demonic. Grass, we find, is true to the ambivalent nature of the *chthonios*, and does not attempt to romanticize Eddi by implying that he is utterly flawless, a lamb repeatedly in danger of being carried off to slaughter like the lamb in the clutch of the stuffed eagle in the window of the shop on Milchkanngasse. (*DY*, p. 88) Grass does extend the darker tendencies toward death and violence from German culture as a whole into spiritually Germanic Eddi Amsel, whose career enacts the best while hinting at the worst qualities of the Volk of which Grass insists he is a part.

Eddi, with his close ties to the land and its cosmic forces, has mysterious powers that ironically suggest the Nietzschean «superman,» who lives beyond good and evil and compels reality with the force of his will. When, as a boy, he constructs his figures on the Nickelswalde dikes, he ties nothing together--the old rags he flings at bean-pole frames stay in place «miraculously.» (*DY*, p. 43) He is compellingly charismatic as well; Walter Matern becomes his flunky and protector as soon as he sees the figure Eddi made of him. Similarly, when Eddi draws Hedwig Lau a picture showing her how he wants her to change her hairdo, she does so, inexplicably in the absence of words or of any outwardly prepossessing attractiveness on the part of the boy whose silent order she willingly obeys. In later life, the ease with which Eddi navigates the treacherous seas of both Nazi and Occupation bureaucracy, manipulating the black market, and setting up

milller Matern in his new postmill, seems uncanny. He is one of those with inexhaustible connections and the wherewithal to execute his projects, whether opening a new restaurant, manufacturing and marketing spectacles that have the power of revealing to their children the crimes committed by German fathers during the war, or opening a scarecrow-building factory in the depths of a potash mine.

What, then, are we to make of Grass's portrayal of Eddi Amsel? On two distinct levels, the sociological and the mythological, Grass seems to endorse, by his portrayal of Eddi, the indictments levelled against European Jewry by Volkist anti-Semites that Jews are typically materialistic, and that they are representatives of spiritual evil. On the sociological level, the description of Eddi functions much like a Rorschach test for prejudice or its opposite. The standard anti-Semitic indictments are carried faithfully into the text, but when applied to a particular person with a name and a face his «Jewish» traits not only merge into the context of his whole personality, but are frequently charming in contrast with the ineffectual violence of Matern, the senseless malice of Tulla, and the infatuated yearning of young Harry Liebenau, whose fixation upon Tulla symbolizes the disastrous tendency of German romantic idealism to become captivated by the demonic. The irony with which Grass develops Eddi Amsel's life and circumstances in pre- and post-war Germany works in fact by means of parody of Volkist concepts of German character and Jewish characterlessness. By appearing to substantiate anti-Semitic doctrines in Eddi's case, Grass uncovers their absurdity by in fact examining that individual case very carefully. What this examination discloses is that Eddi is in closer and more intimate communion with his land and its cosmic creative forces than are any of the book's major gentile characters; only Kriwe the ferryman and the clairaudient miller Matern display powers comparable to Eddi's. Amsel's childhood experiences on the Vistula dikes come vividly to mind as we consider the romantic pantheism of Volkist ideologues, who maintained that nature was filled with life forces that corresponded to human emotions, and that these forces manifested themselves in landscape, which, according to Mosse, «became a vital part of the definition of the Volk through which it retained continuous contact with the life spirit of the transcendent cosmos.»(11) We think of Eddi's vision of the milk-drinking

eels, or of the twelve headless knights and nuns who visited the Matern postmill with incendiary consequences.

Grass's treatment of Volkist racial myth parallels his demoralizing of a romantic symbol of inspiration in his essay *Die Ballerina* (Berlin, 1963). There, he attends carefully to what the «muse» does in the dressing room and after work. Ann Mason writes of this obsession with apparently absurd and trivial particulars, «He uses one of Romanticism's chief myths for the purpose of deflating it; the artist's alienation from the bourgeois, normal world is made ludicrous by a parodic imagination, which is delighted by the homely details and incongruities of inglorious normality.»(12) So, in *Dog Years*, Grass, employs several of Nazism's chief myths for the purpose of deflating them; the Jew's alleged alienation from normal humanity is made ludicrous by Grass's parodistic imagination, which is delighted by particular human details and their refusal to conform to an ideological «type» in expected ways.

NOTES

1. John Reddick, *The 'Danzig Trilogy' of Günter Grass: A Study of The Tin Drum, Cat and Mouse and Dog Years* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 173, 269, 217.

2. Edward Diller, *A Mythic Journey: Günter Grass's Tin Drum* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), p. vii.

3. Rimvydas Šliažas, «Elements of Old Prussian Mythology in Gunter Grass' *Dog Years*.» *Lituanus* 19:i, 39-48.

4. Ann L. Mason, *The Skeptical Muse: A Study of Günter Grass' Conception of the Artist* (Bernand Frankfurt: Herbert Lang Verlag, 1974), pp. 9-16. The terms *iron* and *alazon* are explained by Northrop Frye in the *anatomy of Criticism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press). The *alazon*, a Greek word meaning imposter, is variously described by Frye as «someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is,» or as one of the «blocking humors who are in charge of society» (pp. 39, 227). The *alazon* is the antagonist, the «heavy» that is circumvented and shown up by the *iron*, one who deprecates himself (p. 40), taking «an attitude of flexible pragmatism,» assuming that «society will, if given any chance, behave more or less like Caliban's Setebos in Browning's poem, and he conducts himself accordingly.» (p. 226)

5. George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), p. 215. See also Wesley V. Blomster, «The Documentation of a Novel: Otto Weininger and *Hundejahre* by Günter Grass,» *Monatshefte*, 61 (1969), 122-138.
6. Günter Grass, *Dog Years*. (Greenwich, Connecticut Fawcett. English translation copyright 1965 by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich and Martin Secker & Warburg Limited), p. 37. Subsequent references to this edition will be represented in the text by the following abbreviation: DY.
7. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), p. 21.
8. Jaan Puhvel, «Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon,» in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, ed. G. J. Larson, C. S. Littleton and Jaan Puhvel (Los Angeles and Berkley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 79-80.
9. Kurt Lothar Tank, *Günter Grass*, trans. John Conway (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969), p. 6.
10. Marija Gimbutas, «The Lithuanian God Velnias,» *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, pp. 90-92.
11. Mosse, *Crisis in German Ideology*, p. 15.
12. Mason, *The Skeptical Muse*, p. 18.