

Pynchon, Grimm and Swinish Duality: A Note on the Pig Image in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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The pig appears again and again, in many contexts, throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. A number of studies have explored the way the pig image functions in the novel, but many of them are flawed by attempts to impose a single reading of the image. Not that one reading is correct and the others not: as with many aspects of Pynchon's writing, the truth is more complex. We were warned as early as *The Crying of Lot 49* to beware the pitfalls of either/or thinking. The prevailing view of the pig as a symbol of transgression, detailed most thoroughly in Allon White's Bakhtinian reading, considers perhaps the primary function of the pig in *GR*. This function, however, is only one component of a multifaceted image.

Another, often overlooked use of the pig is as a dualistic image of sacrifice and redemption, whose main source is almost certainly the first volume of Jacob Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology*. Steven Weisenburger argues in his *Companion to GR* that Pynchon made extensive use of Grimm's study, but he does not link any of the pig references to Grimm. Grimm's study, in fact, provides the key to one facet of the ubiquitous pig in *GR*. Grimm's initial discussion of Teutonic pig sacrifice is our starting point: "probably [sacrificial pigs] were selected immediately after birth, and marked, and then reared with the rest until the time of sacrificing" (1.50). Weisenburger identifies the pig as "a totemic sign of the preterite throughout *GR*" (273-74), but the pig is also Slothrop's personal totem, illustrating the way he too was marked for sacrifice.

Slothrop becomes the sacrificial pig shortly after his birth through his father's agreement with Lyle Bland and Laszlo Jamf. The sexual/behavioral conditioning of Infant Tyrone begins an arc that threatens to end with Pointsman's intended conclusion to the experiment—Slothrop's castration. But Slothrop is saved through the passive intervention of a brightly colored pig costume. Major Marvy (a metaphorical white pig) is castrated instead by Pointsman's agents.

There are many parallels between Pynchon's description of Marvy's fate and Grimm's discussion of ancient pig sacrifice. Grimm enumerates several critical points: only male animals are sacrificed; the color of the animal is important (white being the most favorable); the victim is

always boiled, never roasted (1.53–56). In *GR*, white Infant Tyrone (albeit code-named “Schwarzknabe” [286]) is chosen for an experiment whose very nature is tied to his maleness: “a hardon, that’s either there, or it isn’t. Binary, elegant” (84). Marvy, Slothrop’s later substitute, retains emphatic whiteness and maleness, and he is even figuratively boiled before being castrated: he takes a steam bath with a prostitute, then, in fleeing, hurriedly grabs the pig costume because all the uniforms are gone (605–07). The most interesting aspect of the Pynchon-Grimm confluence is Pynchon’s deviation from the ancient model: the original, marked victim escapes while a surrogate receives the ritual punishment.

Slothrop’s escape points to a dualism of the pig image: the pig represents both sacrifice and freedom, Preterite and Elect (chosen), victim and hero. Slothrop, whose ancestors were swineherds (555), adopts the identity of a pig. First, during a morning “of good old lust,” when a groaning Katje calls him a “‘pig,’” he oinks “cheerfully” (205–06). Later, he dresses in the costume of the Pig-Hero Plechazunga for a village celebration (567–69). Eventually, he befriends an actual pig, Frieda, whose name is a variant of Freya—Teutonic goddess of love and fertility, discussed throughout Grimm. Here the narrative is interrupted by one of *GR*’s many songs:

A pig is a jolly companion,
Boar, sow, barrow, or gilt—
A pig is a pal, who’ll boost your morale,
Though mountains may topple and tilt.
When they’ve blackballed, bamboozled, and burned you,
When they’ve turned on you, Tory and Whig,
Though you may be thrown over by Tabby or Rover,
You’ll never go wrong with a pig, a pig,
You’ll never go wrong with a pig! (575)

Indeed, this pig leads Slothrop to temporary safety, and to some information about the rocket, and the pig costume ultimately saves him. But while the pig costume saves Slothrop, it destroys Marvy, demonstrating that the pig serves a dual function.

After Slothrop disappears, “[s]cattered all over the Zone” (712), the pig image makes an odd reappearance. It resurfaces first in “The Sign of The Gross Suckling. . . . A loathsomely fat drooling infant . . . clutch[ing] a dripping hamhock (sorry pigs, nothing personal)” (707). Almost immediately, then, we see Roger Mexico and Seaman Bodine (presumably the Pig Bodine of Pynchon’s earlier fiction) narrowly escape ritual sacrifice in a barbecue pit. The alliterative disgusting-food-

naming game they resort to and the explosive bodily functions it triggers clear the path for their escape. This Rabelaisian episode unites the pig as image of sacrifice and escape with the pig image drawn from Grimm and with that forming part of the more complex transgressive thread of the novel. *GR*'s frequent use of the pig as an image of transgression (not least in Seaman/Pig Bodine) helps transform the Grimm-inspired images of sacrifice into simultaneous images of freedom.

While Pynchon never specifically refers to Grimm's discussion of pig sacrifice, he does refer to the ancient practice of horse sacrifice:

The heathen Germans who lived here sacrificed horses once, in their old ceremonies. Later the horse's role changed from holy offering to servant of power. By then a great change was working on the Heath, kneading, turning, stirring with fingers strong as wind.

Now that sacrifice has become a political act, an act of Caesar. (749)

According to Grimm, the horse was particularly sacred, and its sacrifice was quite solemn (1.49). Just as the nature of horse sacrifice changed, the nature of pig sacrifice changes, updated by Pynchon through Slothrop and the Pavlovian researchers. But the horror of twentieth-century rockets and psychological control may not be absolute. The pig is not always the victim; sometimes he is the hero.

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Works Cited

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