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MARTIN GRUNEWEG'S MAGIC WORLD
Remarks on the Early Modern Mentality

Martin Gruneweg (born in Gdańsk in 1562), a Lutheran converted later to Catholicism (in 1588 he entered the Dominican Order), is the author of *Memoirs*, preserved in the Polish Academy of Sciences Library in Gdańsk¹. Researchers have not given them much attention so far². And yet this source is extremely rich in information concerning not only Gdańsk, but also the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Muscovy and even Turkey and the Orient, since Gruneweg as an agent of a merchant — first Varsovian, then Armenian — made several often exotic journeys and was a man open to the world and endowed with an excellent sense of observation. He can also be regarded as an excellent guide to the everyday life as well as the mentality of the middle strata of Gdańsk society (his parents were hucksters) in the early modern era.

Gruneweg's *Memoirs*, where he extensively describes among other things his childhood, corroborate the fact that the inhabitants of Gdańsk, also those moderately wealthy, had a wide access to education; parents took care that their children, regardless of sex, received an especially practical education, matching

¹ Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) Library in Gdańsk. MS 1300 (old call number IE.f.77).

² Only marginally were they used by German researchers: T. Hirsch, J. Bolte, K. Hoburg, P. Simpson. Of Polish researchers who discussed the source more extensively we may cite R. Walczak, *Pamiętniki Marcina Grunewega (Martin Gruneweg's Memoirs)*, "Studia Źródłoznawcze", vol. V, 1960, pp. 57–77; they were also used by F. Markowski, *Gotycki klasztor dominikański we Lwowie w świetle gdańskiego rękopisu z XVI w. (The Gothic Dominican Monastery in Lwów in the Light of a 16th c. Gdańsk Manuscript)*, "Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki", 1969, vol. XIV, pp. 65–83.

their social status. Gruneweg's sister was given an education as well, and he does not present this as anything extraordinary, rather as a usual thing. Gruneweg himself, from the age of five, attended a parish school at Our Lady's Church³. When in 1572 his mother fell seriously ill, the ten-year-old Martin was placed in the care of a well-known preacher, theology professor at the Gdańsk Academic High School, Augustine Herzberger M.A.⁴ Living in his lodgings Gruneweg continued his education, taking lessons from bachelors and students of the Academic High School. Two years later (1574), in order to learn Polish, he was sent to Bydgoszcz for a year⁵. This education was later complemented by the practical learning of the trade in the commercial firms first of a Warsaw merchant Jerzy Kerstner, later an Armenian merchant Bogdan Aszwadur of Lwów⁶. On his travels, the young man from Gdańsk learned foreign languages, and got to know the world, people, various customs, which broadened his mental horizons.

This *curriculum vitae*, until his entering a monastery, should be regarded as typical of a young man born in Gdańsk at that time. This was a city of educated townspeople who engaged in large commerce and banking, and had contacts with all the world, which they observed with a sober, watchful eye. At the same time, however, these enlightened townspeople, also their well educated élites⁷, harboured a magic picture of the world, in accord with the "learned" beliefs of early modern science. Both Protestant and Catholic theologians assumed that human fate was directed not only by Providence, but also by the influence of stars and their mysterious conjunctions, studied by astrologers, astronomers, physicians and philosophers⁸. The world of people of that era was filled not only by men and women, but also by many supernatural beings. In every corner lurked the eternal enemy of humankind

³ R. Walczak, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cf. M. Bogucka, *Żyć w dawnym Gdańsku* (*Living in Old Gdańsk*), Warszawa 1977, p. 187 ff.; the same author, *O mentalności mieszkańców Gdańskiego u progu ery nowożytnej* (*On the Mentality of the Inhabitant of Gdańsk on the Threshold of the Early Modern Era*), in: *Mieszczaństwo gdańskie* (*Gdańsk Burghers*), ed. S. Salmonowicz, Gdańsk 1997, p. 221.

⁸ M. Bogucka, *Żyć*, p. 251.

— the Devil, but at moments of danger or temptation an Angel would turn up, usually disguised in the person of an old man who would offer help, good advice, and show the right way to be followed in life. Apart from Satan and Angels also demons, ghosts, werewolves, sea monsters populated the imagination of merchants and bankers otherwise full of common sense, Gdańsk was a maritime city, and sailors were especially superstitious: dozens of stories of miraculous happenings circulated among them⁹. Leaflets, printed in Gdańsk or brought here from other towns, profusely reported on amazing events: revelations and demoniacal possessions, appearances of phantoms, sudden deaths of sinners, and returns of the dead from the other world¹⁰. The worlds of the living and dead, the earthly world and the extra-mundane world were not distinctly separated, they intertwined and overlapped, creating a magic unity. In this situation the belief in magicians and witches flourished¹¹; an ordinary, average inhabitant of Gdańsk had a sense of permanent intercourse with mysterious, invisible beings, who made their appearance either as a result of magic endeavours, or as nightmares — hence belief in dreams and their interpretations, an especially frequent motif of Gruneweg's *Memoirs*.

Martin Gruneweg was born and brought up in a very loving family, in a home typical of 16th c. Gdańsk. Bereft of his father in his early childhood, he was linked by strong emotional ties with his mother and sister. His upbringing was not very strict, though his step-father was demanding. The adults had a lot of warmth and indulgence for the young boy. And yet his childhood was filled with fear.

He did not feel safe at home. Herzberger's lodgings seemed to be haunted by ghosts and revenants. One day the children had to be moved to the boarding school, so scared were they by the

⁹ M. Bogucka, *Gdańscy ludzie morza w XVI–XVIII w.* (*The Seamen of Gdańsk in the 16th–18th c.*), Gdańsk 1984, pp. 165 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. R. Habermas, *Wunderliches, Wunderbares. Zur Profanierung eines Deutungsmusters in der Frühen Neuzeit*, in: R. van Dülmen (ed.), *Armut, Liebe, Ehre. Studien zur historischen Kulturforschung*, Frankfurt/M 1988, p. 38 ff.

¹¹ M. Bogucka, *Żyć*, pp. 187 ff.; K. P. Szkurlatowski, *Gdańskie procesy czarownic w XVI–XVII w. na tle ówczesnych przemian religijnych* (*Witchcraft Trials in 16th–17th c. Gdańsk Against the Background of Religious Transformations of that Era*). (in:) *Protestantyzm i protestanci na Pomorzu* (*Protestantism and Protestants in Pomerania*), ed. J. Iluk and D. Mariańska, Gdańsk-Koszalin 1997, pp. 209–229.

nightly noises and disturbances¹². Some horrible things lurked in the familiar household effects — one day the stove in his mother's home changed into a green pane, hiding behind its surface a Hell full of tormented sinners¹³, a ring-pendant turned out to be a hiding place of the Evil One¹⁴. Especially dangerous was to look into the mirror after dark — the Evil One would appear causing death. Such was the fate of a frightened girl in the neighbourhood¹⁵. A careless angry word could immediately summon the Devil: when the cook, irritated by begging for food threw a piece of meat at the bothersome boy, telling him at the same time to go to Hell, the child became possessed by the Devil and quickly died¹⁶.

The conviction of the close presence of Satan and his permanent readiness to take possession of people is a characteristic trait of Gruneweg's vision of the world. Even such a usual, everyday undertaking as hiring a maid was connected with a big risk, since one could let in a witch. Gruneweg's mother hired a servant named Gretchen from a village near Gdańsk; it turned out that the girl, her mother and sister practiced witchcraft. Gretchen had to be promptly fired¹⁷. It was clear that nobody could be trusted. At a certain moment (1577) Gruneweg's mother became suspicious of the honorable teacher, Master Herzberger himself, lest he teach her boy the black arts. Desperately rummaging through her son's belongings in search of some proofs, she found a booklet given to her son by a friend, with dubious "recipes" — how to prepare invisible writing, how to burn a light under water, how to make dogs stop barking. His mother's dismay affected Martin, who started believing that he was enclosed in a circle of magic; he began to fear the dark, went to sleep only when the light was on and always with somebody near him¹⁸. This continued until he was seventeen.

¹² M. Gruneweg, *Pamiętniki (Memoirs)*, PAN Library in Gdańsk MS 1300, pp. 572–573.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 727–728.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 565–571.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 577–578.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 517–518.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 525–526, 543.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 700–701.

On his journey as a merchant's apprentice he also often came across strange events. When he spent a night in Chocim (1583), he was warned in his dream that the roof over his head would break-down¹⁹. During his further trip to Turkey he saw in a dream the wedding of his sister, just taking place in Gdańsk²⁰; after returning to Poland (December 1583), he eagerly listened in Łęczyca to terrible stories about the pranks of the Devil Boruta²¹ and about a female inn-keeper's problems with a sorcerer, who not only paid her a suspect coin, but also turned the woman into a midget²².

Most dreams and visions written down by Gruneweg relate, however, to his later entry into a monastery. These stories testify, according to Gruneweg, that in dreams, also at moments of special proximity to supernatural powers, the secrets of the future are unveiled to people. One of the earliest "visions" of that type was his strange experience as a five-year-old boy, led by his father to school. They entered a church on the way, where St. Catherine's picture showed its "inner side" to the boy — the painting turned out to be an entrance to some other, luminous space, out of which a boy of Martin's age emerged and offered him two pictures: of the Virgin Mary and St. Catherine, asking in return for one shilling²³. A little later at night the boy saw in his dream a monk who told him to recite an *Ave* every day. The little Lutheran thought at the beginning that this dream augured some misfortune, that it was probably the Devil in the shape of a monk who tempted him to praise the Virgin Mary instead of God, but when the next day nothing bad happened, he started to follow this advice and recited the *Ave*²⁴. Also his nanny, as well as a half-witted girl named Ursula, who walked the streets of the neighbourhood, foretold him he would be a monk²⁵. On September 3, 1575, at the age of thirteen, he saw in a dream a strange wedding procession (strange, because the women taking part in it were not dressed according to the Gdańsk fashion), which he

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 942.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1018–1019.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1107.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1109.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 501–502.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 785.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 295, 297.

followed running together with other children along a beautiful street lined with richly-painted houses. All of a sudden the door of some church opened and an unknown monk drew him in, not without his resistance. After some seconds the beautiful street went down with a bang²⁶. At first Martin could not find the key to this dream, he only thought that the monk meant misfortune, so he kept the dream in secret from his mother²⁷. In the next years the signs foretelling his entry into monastery recurred and were ever more pressing (e.g. the dream of alleged "fiancée" handing him a baby in diapers and the warning by a monk in Dominican attire that it was not baby but a cat with human face²⁸, or finding a brass cross on the ground under his feet on New Year's Day 1586)²⁹.

The climax of these visions and prophetic dreams came in the days of an illness that affected Gruneweg during the epidemic at Adrianople in the summer of 1586³⁰. He believed that he was then visited by an Angel and an Old Man, whom he thought to be St. Andrew the Apostle or St. Wenceslaus³¹. Later some visions consisted of picture representing the terrible chasms of Hell with tormented sinners or of miraculous visits to far-off places — Jerusalem with Christ's Sepulchre (which Gruneweg longed to see before his death)³² the capital of Christendom — Rome³³, Lwów with the monastery where in the future he was going to live as a monk³⁴, as well as other cities and kingdoms. Gruneweg affirms that during his miraculous journeys the fate of many rulers and states was revealed to him³⁵. Due to these visions, when he recovered, he converted to Catholicism, went on a pilgrimage to Częstochowa (as he promised it at the moment of health crisis)³⁶, and entered the Dominican Order in Lwów³⁷.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 293–294. The street means doubtless the terrestrial world with its temptations and dangers, the monk drawing the boy into church is a symbol of the choice of monastic life, difficult, but protecting one from the evils of the world.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ August 1585, *ibid.*, p. 1243.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1269.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1269.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1321–1322.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 1317, 1328 ff.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 1348 ff.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1348 ff., 1371 ff.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1372.

³⁶ Summer 1588, *ibid.*, pp. 1513–1514, 1531–1532.

³⁷ September 1588, *ibid.*, p. 1567 ff.

Gruneweg presents his visions and dreams with conviction as something real. He declares as the true fact that he disappeared from the infirmary tent for the time of his wanderings (later he was inquired by other inmates where he had been), and claims that the objects he used during his visions, such as a water jug, or plate, which he had marked with his initials, were found on the next day in the infirmary tent with these signs still visible. Moreover, in subsequent years he was sure to have met the people whom he believed to see for the first time in his revelations: the pious widow Sophia, his brother-friars from the monastery in Lwów, priests he talked to in Jerusalem. There can be no doubt that for Gruneweg the reality had a twofold structure, he experienced it already as a child in Gdańsk, discovering "the other space" hidden in St. Catherine's picture. Throughout his whole life this merchant from Gdańsk found it extremely easy to overstep the threshold of real existence, and felt at home with the world of dreams and visions where one can walk on the water or float in the air. This other world in his descriptions resembles very much the presentations by other visionaries of the era, with famous Christine Poniatowski at the head³⁸. Wanderings in the other world were usually guided by an Angel dressed in white, or by a respectable Old Man; sometimes besides the terrible sights of Hell the visionaries were able to see the beautiful landscapes of Paradise (Gruneweg, however, did not reach it). All the visions contained strong didactic accents — calling for atonement and reform of life. In spite of their supernatural character, the experiences described both by Gruneweg and other visionaries of that era display much devotion to hard facts and predilection for accuracy; they are rich in details which give them a concrete, almost tangible character. The exactness of the account embraces the appearance of the guides who lead the visionary person to the other world, the features of the Angel and the Old Man, the clothes they wore, the particulars of the places visited, the descriptions of even small objects used during the journey (e.g. an almost photographic description of the basket in which Gruneweg believed he was transported one night, or the picture of the interior of the shepherd's tent, where one night he found

³⁸ Rich collections of that type of publications are preserved in The Prince Augustus Library in Wolfenbüttel. Cf. call numb. 198.13 Hist.(29); 218.13 Quodl.(60); 240.61 Quodl.(10); 202.79 Qu(32); 202.79(23); 202.79(23).

himself together with his ghostly companions). This matter-of-fact attitude and exactness was certainly to add to the authenticity of the picture as well as enhance the feeling that the described world of visions was not a nightdream, but existed as concretely as the real world one moved in every day. The elements and realities of both worlds appearing in Gruneweg's *Memoirs* are, at any rate, frequently identical, built of the same material — a naive example of that may be the dish of dumplings prepared in "an Armenian way", brought one night by the Angel to the hungry Gruneweg³⁹.

The conviction of the twofold structure of reality, the co-existence of the two worlds, between which the boundary is very fluid, is connected in Gruneweg's *Memoirs* with a specific notion of time as an important element of the structure of both realities, welding them together with the magic of numbers and signs (including names), the magic shaping human life. Although the Church forbids the belief in happy and unfortunate days — says Gruneweg — as well as too ready credence in the prophecies of astrologers and mathematicians, yet the essence of time, its division into hours, days, months, conceals without any doubt many Divine secrets⁴⁰. The day on which the phoetus is shaped and infused with soul in its mother's womb is mysteriously linked with the days of the most important events in its future life⁴¹. It is from the prism of the possibility of such connections that Gruneweg analyses calendars, and above all — St. John's *Apocalypse*; he interprets the magic number 666 at the end of chapter 13 as the name of Martin Luther⁴². Such type of deliberations appeared often in many early-modern publications, especially those produced in the German territory, culturally close to Gdańsk. Gruneweg was certainly familiar with such publications.

Gruneweg's *Memoirs* present the author as a very unusual, though at the same time very typical person. The son of Gdańsk small shop-keeper, he received an education typical of this group of townspeople. At the beginning his career was typical too — a merchant's agent travelling across the vast territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and in the East. However,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1368 ff. See a recipe for these dumplings on pp. 1376–1377.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180 ff.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 489–490.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 1490–1491.

even as a child Gruneweg showed a sensitiveness and excitability greater than an average youngster, which probably made him feel more deeply the religious transformations taking place in Gdańsk at that time. His dreams and visions in his childhood were certainly inspired by the clashes between Catholicism and Protestantism, and the exchange of the old rites and customs by the new ones among the urban population. This resulted in the emergence of his hypersensitivity to everything that could show the omni-presence of the Devil, who in his imagination lurked in every dark corner and was hidden in every piece of furniture, waiting to catch the careless sinner. This was confirmed by the old medieval conviction of the power of magic in everyday life. Gruneweg's later conversion to Catholicism and entering a monastery (to the dismay of his family and friends) was doubtless also a result of his Polonization during his trips and contacts with Polish and Armenian merchants of Lwów; it is noteworthy that in his visions Gruneweg talks with the Angel and the Old Man in Polish! Thus Gruneweg seems to be a person formed in the borderland of two cultures: that of Gdańsk burghers, in a large part German, and the Polish culture in its Armenian-Lwów version. The magic perception of the world pervading Gruneweg's mentality was at any rate a feature of both these cultural spheres. Probably this made it easier for him to feel at home in Catholicism and among Dominican Friars.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)