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John Fitzell
Rutgers University

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Horse's Skull And Soul-Mouse: Folklore In A "Fairy-Tale" by Wilhelm Busch

John Fitzell

- Ich weiss ein Märchen hübsch und tief.
Ein Hirtenknabe lag und schlief.
Da sprang heraus aus seinem Mund
Ein Mäuslein auf den Heidegrund.
5 Das weisse Mäuslein lief sogleich
Nach einem Pferdeschädel bleich,
Der da so manchen lieben Tag
In Sonnenschein und Regen lag.
10 Husch! ist das kleine Mäuslein drin,
Läuft hin und her und her und hin.
Besieht sich all die leeren Fächer,
Schaut listig durch die Augenlöcher
Und raschelt so die Kreuz und Quer
Im alten Pferdekopf umher.—
- 15 Auf einmal kommt 'ne alte Kuh,
Stellt sich dahin und macht Hamuh!
Das Mäuslein, welches sehr erschreckt,
Dass da auf einmal wer so blökt,
Springt, hutschi, übern Heidegrund
20 Und wieder in des Knaben Mund.—
- Der Knab erwacht und seufzte: Oh,
Wie war ich doch im Traum so froh!
Ich ging in einen Wald hinaus,
Da kam ich vor ein hohes Haus,
- 25 Das war ein Schloss aus Marmelstein.
Ich ging in dieses Schloss hinein.
Im Schloss sah ich ein Mädchen stehn,
Das war Prinzessin Wunderschön.
Sie lächelt freundlich und bekannt,

- 30 Sie reicht mir ihre weisse Hand,
Sie spricht: "Schau her, ich habe Geld,
Und mir gehört die halbe Welt;
Ich liebe dich nur ganz allein,
Du sollst mein Herr und König sein."
- 35 Und wie ich fall in ihren Schoss,
Ratuh! kommt ein Trompetenstoss.
Und weg ist Liebchen, Schloss und alles
Infolge des Trompetenschalles.¹

"I Know a Tale that's Nice and Deep"

(from *Kritik des Herzens—Heart Critic*, 1874)

- I know a tale that's nice and deep.
A herdboy lay quite fast asleep.
Then from his mouth a mouse sprang out
Upon the heath that spread about.
- 5 The little white mouse ran straight away
To where a bleached old horse-skull lay,
That many a live-long day had lain
In burning sunshine and in rain.
Whiz!—the mouse is inside that,
- 10 Runs back and forth this way and that,
Through empty chambers slyly spies,
And out through vacant cavern eyes.
And back and forth she's quickly rustling,
All through the ancient horse-head bustling.
- 15 Then suddenly comes an old cow too,
Stops right there and goes, "hamoo!"
The little mouse, who takes a fright,
That someone bellows with all her might,
Jumps onto the heath, hootchee, and then,
- 20 Into the herdboy's mouth again.
- The boy awakens, sighing, "Oh,
The dream I had was happy though!
I went far out into the wood
And came to where a great house stood,
- 25 That was a palace of marble stone.
I went inside and all alone
I saw a girl standing there,
She was Princess Wondrous-Fair.
She smiles as if she knows me and

- 30 She reaches me her fine white hand,
She says: Look here, I've money, see?
And half the world belongs to me.
I love you only, only you,
You'll be my lord and king now too.
- 35 I fall into her arms at last,
Ratoo! there comes a trumpet blast.
And gone is sweetheart, palace and all
Because of that loud trumpet call."

Elements of folklore in literature—motif and/or symbol—tend to be archetypal by nature. This is eminently true of Busch's weird skull and mysterious mouse. A perceptive reader senses a symbolic level even in the humorous poem. Goethe's remarks on motif, symbol, and folk-tale can serve here as an introduction to our examination of what appears to be a mere light verse tale. What we call motifs, says Goethe,² are actually phenomena of the human spirit, which have always recurred and which shall recur, and which the poet merely demonstrates as historical—we take historical to mean: having taken place. (We shall return to this thought in conclusion.) What Goethe says of true symbolism repeats in other words, from another perspective, what he says of motifs. Of course, these are not definitions, they are interpretations. True symbolism transforms the phenomena (*Erscheinungen*) into an idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea in the image remains infinitely effective, and, even though formulated in any or every language, still would remain quite inexpressible.

The folk- or fairy-tale portrays for us impossible events under possible or impossible terms. Poetry indicates the secrets of nature and seeks to resolve them through imagery. These insights by Busch's favorite author provide the frame of thought for consideration of skull, mouse, and poem.

Wilhelm Busch is a folk poet in his own right. Büchmann's *Geflügelte Worte* will bear this out,—but Germanists have shown little interest in him considering his unique position in German literature and his endless popularity. The first slim volume of his poetry, *Kritik des Herzens*, appeared just one hundred years ago, and our Märchen, one of a kind in this collection, is the next to last poem in it.

As did Lessing, Herder, above all Goethe, and then Nietzsche, Wilhelm Busch believed in reincarnation. This is plain in countless of his poems, aphorisms, and letters; as he puts it: "Jede Geburt ist Wiedergeburt." This belief may clarify partially the function of skull and mouse in our poem and may explain one possible aspect of what transpires in the two parts into which the poem divides. His consummate remarks on reincarnation are found in two letters written toward the end of his life to his grandniece Frau Meyer-Thomsen:³

Und wo bleibt mein liebes, süßes Ich—Es gibt ein Innenreich und ein Aussenreich. Entweder verschwindet das Innenreich ins Blaue, Namenlose, oder es zieht bloss um, unter anderem Namen, und bleibt hübsch warm bei den anderen. In beiden Fällen geht das Aussenreich, bestehend aus Atomen, aus kleinen geknechteten Seelen, mitsamt dem Bilderkasten im Oberstübel aus dem Leim. Hast Du nie was von Lethe gehört?—Und doch könnte ein Gefühl, eine Ahnung, ein Istmirdochso, aus der fernsten Vergangenheit bleiben.

In the evening hours, the same letter goes on, the dreamy, interrupted song of the blackbird sounds like the partial recollection of some long forgotten strain.

In the second letter, this scheme of things seems interestingly and naturally concordant with the poet's traditional Christian belief: "Dass es noch eine andere Wiedergeburt gibt, nämlich die 'im Reich der Gnade,' wag ich bloss zu erwähnen." Whether the herdboy's dream in our poem depicts fairy-tale fulfillment in a dim past or a timeless archetypal desire, replete with an anima-princess emerging from the unconscious, is very difficult to decide. It may suffice to say that the dream world is a timeless macrocosm out of which—with Goethe—the phenomena of the spirit are constantly repeated. It is obvious, too, that the poem moves from the world or the dimension of the heath with skull and mouse to that of the forest, marble castle, and princess. Each part of the poem depicts one of these two worlds. The mouse enters the skull on the heath, leading the herdboy into the forest of the self, the unconscious, or the heart of nature, and then into the marble palace. The return of the mouse into the herdboy's mouth brings back a conscious recollection of his dream. The splendid palace where the princess dwells symbolizes here—as it does in most Märchen—the perfected or fulfilled self.

In an earlier letter to Frau Maria Anderson, we feel the mysterious folktale mood that informs so many of Busch's paintings as well as poems.⁴ The bridges, erratic boulders, and the heath of his homeland are quickened by the droll and grave spooktales heard in youth. We are reminded of "Lethe" and of the blackbird's evening recollection of a strain sung in an earlier life, both of which the poet "explains" in those two letters to Frau Meyer-Thomsen cited above. Only the slightest hint of recognition—the "Istmirdochso" of the letter to Frau Meyer-Thomsen may be felt in reference to the princess: "Sie lächelt freundlich und bekannt."

The setting is the heath of the author's Low-Saxon countryside. Although it is nowhere described, and evoked only by the word "Heidegrund" in lines 4 and 19, it does assume a unique life and atmosphere in the poem. Those elements imparting a necessarily eery quality to the heath are animated by a few essential strokes—as in the poet's later drawings. Although drollery is mixed into this uncanny world, the eery mood colors even the fairy-tale dream of the second half of the poem. Apart from the sleeping herdboy, only two creatures, mouse and cow, in the first half of the poem actually move, yet it is the skull of the horse which generates weird vitality in the poem, as presently may be understood. Indeed, there is contrast be-

tween the two dimensions or spheres of consciousness—we might say of reality—implicit in the darting about of the "Mauslein" and in the timeless reach of heath surrounding its strange trademark, the sun and rain bleached skull.

This skull is the mysterious pagan catalyst for all the events which take place in the poem. It is the motionless portal of entry into the macrocosm of its very own empty chambers! It is, of course, the marble palace of the dream. The cow seems to be an intermediary between the antics of the mouse and the stationary skull. Movement of the cow is confined to the taking of a ponderous stance above the skull and to expressing itself in the usual manner. Her role is crucial, though, in marking transition from the first to the second dimension of the poem, from heath to forest.

Clearly, the poet could not intend all his readers to do specific research into Germanic paganism or folk superstition in order to grasp the intrinsic meaning of his motifs. It is possible, though, that he hoped some knowledge of pagan tradition might be second nature for his readers as it was for himself. In any case, the "droll and grave" implications of the images, the formulation of a two-dimensional reality are all unmistakably suspected, felt, and experienced by a reader, whether they are "understood" in a consciously analytical manner or not. Poetically, they have their effect and serve their purpose. The somewhat nebulous quality of these suspicions or feelings hovers between "Erinnerung und Ahnung" and comprises in part a high degree of the charm in these verses. At the same time we ought to accept the fact that understanding of such traditional motifs adds to the perspective and aura of the poem—as well as to its value as a cultural document.

To Jakob Grimm⁵ it correctly seemed that the cult of the horse was equally proper to Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic peoples and in much the same manner. We are reminded of that frightening horse, the Púca (cf. Puck from puic, Gaelic for veiled, morose), which rises from the bogs in western Ireland to change into any form, at will—whether fairy, god, or demon. For us, the motif of horse and horse's skull must be traced to Sleipnir, Wodan's eight-legged stallion, who carried the god to the realm of the dead. From its intimate connection with the father of gods and men, the steed seems to have acquired its sacred nature. As rider, Wodan conducted souls of the dead to the world of shadows (Wodan = Mercurius, Wednesday = Mercredi), and in consequence many aspects of the god were translated to his emblematic steed. The stallion has an unclear relationship to the dead and also to the hosts of souls between "here and there"—hurtling along on the wind with Wodan, they made up his "wildes" or "wütendes Heer" (Wuotan—wüten).⁶

The skull, proper, conveys something eerier, deeper yet. Father of gods and men, inventor of runes, lord of spirits, Wodan possessed downright demonic faculties, too, and was feared as much as loved by his worshippers. Wanen sent the head of the giant, Mimir (cf. memory, memento, E. M. Arndt's "Mimerung unter deutschen Eichen") to Wodan, who preserved it with herbs and caused it to utter prophecy at his bidding. Clearly identification was made at length with the heads of visionary, sacrificed animals—or with those heads, real or wooden, burned in the fires of

Johannisnacht or set upon Maypoles in spring. The most grisly link in this dim association of god, prophecy, and skull is that tradition according to which a wooden human head was placed in the chest cavity of a sacrificed horse. We may recall, too, those heads of Roman steeds nailed to trees in the Teutoburger Wald or that of Falada in "Die Gänsemagd" of the Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Finally, we are reminded of the practice still current in East Frisia, Westphalia, and in Busch's Lower Saxony, where genuine skulls or carved wooden heads peer into the distance, warding off evil. Most important for us, however, the horse's skull is that vessel in which the soul may pass into the timeless realm of gods and nature, into the macrocosm of eternity. All the traditional motifs blend with this last in the skull symbol before us in Busch's "Märchen."⁷

Despite a certain frustrating lack of specific detail concerning the above tradition, its very dimness heightens the air of mysterious "Ahnung." On the other hand, we can be somewhat more precise about tradition and motif of the mouse—though not much more so about its origins. Like snake and butterfly in Busch's story, *Der Schmetterling*, or in his poem "Der Traum," the mouse is a "Seelentier," a beast which literally is the soul in its excursions from the body, usually while the individual sleeps and dreams. Often there may be more than one sojourn of the soul while the body sleeps. A strange phase of memory, of either past existence or past experience, is involved here, as in Goethe's *Faust* (I, v. 4179) where the red mouse springing from the young witch's mouth reminds Faust of the abandoned Gretchen.

Two traditional accounts parallel Busch's poem closely. The first is the anecdotal saga of Frankish King Guntram, told by Paulus Diakonus (familiar from Grimm's *Deutsche Sagen*).⁸ Here a "Tierlein" creeps from the mouth of the sleeping king, crosses a stream by the sword laid athwart it, and vanishes into a mound. Upon its return into the king's mouth, Guntram awakens to recount a dream identical to the experience of the mouse—according to which he discovers a treasure in the recesses of the mound.

The second account, a folktale from Luxemburg, comes so fascinatingly close to Busch that we include it here complete:⁹

Zwei Bauernjungen waren mit ihren Pferden nachts auf der Weide. Sie hüllten sich in ihre Decken ein und der Eine von ihnen fiel in tiefen Schlaf. Da sah der Andere aus dem Mund des Schlafenden ein kleines schwarzes Tier hervorkommen und in den Rachen eines Pferdekopfes kriechen, der neben ihm im Grase lag. Nachher kam das Tierchen zurück und schlüpfte wieder in den Mund des Schlafenden! Da wachte der auf und sagte zu seinem Kameraden: "O was für einen schönen Traum habe ich gehabt! Ich bin in einem Haus gewesen, das war schöner als alles, was ich bis jetzt gesehen habe." Da sagte der Andere: "O, da bist du ja in einem schönen Palast gewesen. Dein Geist war in dem Pferdekopf da. Ich habe ihn selber gesehen, wie er als schwarzes Tier da ein und aus schlüpfte."

This account is undatable and exceedingly widespread with only minor variations.

Busch collected folktales himself and it is intriguing to speculate upon the guises in which he knew this one. The very first verse of his poem asserts his familiarity with similar tales: "Ich weiss ein Märchen hübsch und tief." Like the folk tradition of the horse's skull, we may well look to the "Spukgeschichten" and hearsay of his youth rather than to any subsequent reading.

In his poem, Busch employs the doggerel or "Knittelvers" of earlier fable and story poem tradition (Hans Sachs, Gellert), but he does maintain a nearly regular iambic pattern. As exceptions to this, only five verses (9, 19, 22, 25, and 28) stress the first syllable and show other rhythmic irregularities. Verses 9 ("Husch!") and 19 ("Springt, hutschi") formulate respectively the two decisive movements of the mouse into the skull and then back over the heath into the herdboy's mouth again. The three rhythmic deviations in the second part point to joy in the dream ("Wie war ich doch im Traum so froh"), identification of the castle ("Das war ein Schloss"), and recognition of the "Prinzessin Wunderschön."

The economy and apparent simplicity of language are characteristic; its power to evoke unforgettable images is dynamic. As we noted earlier, the "Heidegrund" is named but twice (verses 4 and 19), yet it is quickened, even characterized by those four beings—herdboy, mouse, skull, and cow—who act out the little tale. Through them the setting is transformed into a "Märchenwelt" both droll and grave. "Hübsch und tief" define this mixture. Asleep, the herdboy arouses an expectant attitude, a momentary tension on the reader's part. Something must appear, one feels, out of that macrocosmic dreamworld. Then out jumps our "Seelentier." The whiteness of the soul-breast stresses its special role (not unlike the white stag of Bürger's "Der wilde Jäger" or Uhland's "Der weisse Hirsch"). Its movements suggest those flickering events in the dream world beneath the surface of sleep—the few seconds of the mouse's excursion and return being out of all proportion to the experiences in the timeless realm of the dream.

The antics of the mouse contrast even in the very rhymes, "sogleich" and "bleich," with this remarkable skull! Bleached many a day by sun and rain, the skull colors the ageless heath with its mystery. Busch confines its attributes to "bleich" and "alt," but its empty chambers and eye-sockets invoke the image of an ancient vessel containing the world of the dream. The eye-sockets through which our little mouse slyly peers express the clairvoyant faculties of the fairy-tale Falada and stallion heads of the pagan past.

The mouse comes to life through its motions—through verbs or verbal implications. Its excursion extends from the first jump onto the "Heidegrund" and the instinctive, immediate dart to the old skull to its jump back again into the boy's mouth. The events of the dream in a second reality are framed by the verses, "Husch! ist das kleine Mäuslein drin" and "Springt, hutschi" (v. 19). The most vivid, complete dreams are supposed to transpire in but seconds of actual sleep. Otherwise, running back and forth, viewing the empty compartments of the skull, peering through the

visionary sockets—all these actions formulate in a naively appealing manner an intrinsic trait of Busch's humor, his depiction of animals.

Although perhaps the cow appears as the least interesting of the several figures in the poem, she performs an essential function. Busch says only that she assumes her stance and moos; we, nevertheless, feel her lumbering bovine weight. Her sudden appearance and utterance are intermediary to the flickering motion of the soul-mouse and the forboding of the skull. There is a kind of irony implicit, too, equating the "Hamuh" here with the trumpet-blast (v. 36) in the dream. The cow scares the mouse from the skull back to where it belongs, as it were, while the "Trompetenstoss" dissipates the marvelous castle of "Prinzessin Wunderschön." The poet seems to suggest an unpleasant discrepancy here between the reality of the herdboy's everyday world and the "Märchenwelt" of his dream.

This same sense of contrast is evident between the herdboy's narrative manner and the actual substance of the dream. A certain banal simplicity and repetitiousness of diction are in keeping with character and poetic situation. We have "Schloss" in three consecutive verses (25, 26, 27). We hear such patterns as "Sie lächelt," "Sie reicht," "Sie spricht," in sequence. "Prinzessin Wunderschön" has the "weisse Hand," "Geld," as well as "die halbe Welt," which we have every right to expect. The humor reaches its apex as the herdboy's dream of happiness reaches the very moment of apparent fulfillment. Disappearance of the dream world and disappointment are sudden and utterly effected by the terrible trumpet-blast of the cow.

As mentioned above, the two landscapes of the poem are themselves curiously important in their representation of the two dimensions of reality. The heath is the forest of the dream—each providing the scene, respectively, for the darting of the little mouse or the entry of a sometime prince into a marble palace in a dark wood.

Our exemplary legends show the mouse to be a soul-beast identified here with the herdboy, and Busch's own attitude toward recurrent lives and eternal return indicates that the poem depicts inherent longing and apparently relates fulfillment in some past life to the immediate present. Our mysterious pagan horse's skull exerts a catalytic force all its own. Surely "once upon a time" it was the very castle, itself, just as the barren heath on which it rests was the forest setting of that same palace. The dimension of the dream is in a timeless macrocosm, where past and present are, indeed, one. All this is in keeping with the "realistic" language but dream-like metaphorical phantasy of the fairy-tale plot.

Of course the trumpet-call/cow-moo of disappointment is forthcoming. One senses readily why the "pessimist for the present and optimist for the future" found the idea of reincarnation so intriguing. The Busch connoisseur hears unmistakably personal tones in poems like this. Disappointment in love—biographically unclarified to this day—finds many varied forms of expression in various kinds of works of this poet, but this is not of paramount importance to our appreciation of these verses.

Poet and herdboy both know that gulf crossed only in dream or imagination—the

gulf between the miraculous sphere of dream-phantasy, of hopes promising fulfillment, and the immediate dimension of the present. The dichotomy of microcosm and macrocosm is quite plain in the contrasts of characters and landscapes in both portions of the poem.

Often satirical, sometimes bitter, frequently sad or droll, but always vital, Busch's poetry is enriched by certainty that all "microcosmic" beings, creatures or things, are infused and contained by that greater universal dimension in which no hope or wish was ever finally lost.

Concluding, we may recall Goethe's interpretation of motifs, here folk motifs, symbolic ones in the truest sense, which are those very repetitive phenomena of the human spirit demonstrated by the poet as historical. Demonstrate (*nachweisen*) suggests *how the motif or symbol is formulated*. Here the mysteriously contrasting spheres, the archetypal experiences of hope and disappointment are concordantly resolved by a sovereign humor as inherent to this poetic language as the depths of human experience from which these folk images derive.

Rutgers University

NOTES

1. *Kritik des Herzens* (München: Friedrich Bassermann Verlag, 1955) p. 86. Subsequent references are to this edition by page number in the text. The translation is my own. This paper was read in nearly the same form on October 18, 1974, at the University of Missouri-Columbia symposium: Thematic Patterns in German and Russian Folklore and Traditional Literature.
2. Goethe, "Maximen und Reflexionen" in *Werke* (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1958), XII, 470, 471, 493, 495, 498.
3. The two letters, dated 27. August 1897 and 3. Mai 1900, respectively, are included in Wilhelm Busch, *Ernstes und Heiteres* (Nachlass), ed. Otto Nöldeke (Berlin: Verlagsanstalt Hermann Klemm, 1938), pp. 232 and 234.
4. Wilhelm Busch, *Platonische Briefe an eine Frau*, Insel Bücherei, 358 (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1958), p. 43.
5. Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, ed. Eluard Hugo Meyer, 3 volumes (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965), II, 550, and III, 109ff, 248, 279ff, 283, 298. Cf. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2 volumes (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1956), II, 344, 345, 368, 383, 401, 464.
6. Cf. de Vries, op. cit. Grimm, III, 109ff and 550ff.
7. Grimm, III, 247ff. "Die Seele läuft als Maus, Katze, Wiesel, Schlange, Schmetterling aus dem Mund des Schlafenden." Also p. 312, "Ein Thier kriecht in den Mund des Schlafenden. Ein weisses Mäuschen schlupft dem Toten in den Mund." Also cited by Grimm, II, 222, Robert Plot, *Natural History of Staffordshire* (Oxford: 1686), and Luther's *Tischreden*, "Es wird ein loch in einen baum gebohrt, die seele (eine maus) darein gesetzt und ein pflock dafür geschlagen, dan sie darinne bleibe." It is curious that Luther says "soul" instead of "mouse." For him they are synonymous in this context.
8. Cf. de Vries, I, 159.
9. Cf. N. Gredt, *Luxemburger Sagen und Legenden* (Publication de la Section Historique de l'Institut Royal du Grand Duche de Luxembourg). XXXVII, 1885. (Thanks to my student Walter Schönefeld.)

