Postmodern Mythology: Ecology, Cultural Survival, and Sorbian Folklore in the Works of Jurij Brezan

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Postmodern Mythology: Ecology, Cultural Survival, and Sorbian Folklore in the Works of Jurij Brezan

Abstract
Although Jurij Brezan is probably the most prolific, best-known, and most acclaimed Sorbian writer of the 20th century, he remains relatively obscure. Brezan is first and foremost a Sorbian writer, although he also writes in German. The most prominent theme in his work is Sorbian identity: the identity of a minority people indigenous to Germany, whose language and culture have been suppressed by their German-speaking neighbors for more than a thousand years. Brezan draws on themes from Sorbian folklore in much of his writing, and writes in a surrealistic style reminiscent of myth. Grounding his works in the history and folklore of his people, Brezan mounts a critique of the forces of environmental degradation and globalization that threaten indigenous cultural survival.

Degree Type
Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department
World Languages

Keywords
Mythology, Slavic, Brezan, Jurij Criticism and interpretation
POSTMODERN MYTHOLOGY: ECOLOGY, CULTURAL SURVIVAL, AND SORBIA FOLKLORE IN THE WORKS OF JURIJ BREZAN

By

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

With Honors in German Literature

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan on this date

Apr. 23, 2004
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I. Introduction: the Importance of the Sorbian Writer Jurij Brezan

Although Jurij Brezan is probably the most prolific, best-known, and most acclaimed Sorbian writer of the 20th century, he remains relatively obscure. Brezan is first and foremost a Sorbian writer, although he also writes in German. The most prominent theme in his work is Sorbian identity: the identity of a minority people indigenous to Germany, whose language and culture have been suppressed by their German-speaking neighbors for more than a thousand years. Brezan draws on themes from Sorbian folklore in much of his writing, and writes in a surrealistic style reminiscent of myth. Grounding his works in the history and folklore of his people, Brezan mounts a critique of the forces of environmental degradation and globalization that threaten indigenous cultural survival.

My thesis will examine the way in which Brezan uses Sorbian folklore, and particularly the Krabat legend, to create a postmodern mythology that examines the themes of environmental destruction and Sorbian cultural survival. In works such as Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt and Die Schwarze Mühle, Jurij Brezan creates a new mythology addressing the erosion of the Sorbian people’s ethnic identity and the environmental problems of their homeland. Brezan’s works convey both a compelling “sense of place” and a message about the value of nature and small local cultures.

Often considered the most important Sorbian literary figure of the twentieth century, Jurij Brezan is an extremely prolific writer: he has written over 20 works, including novels for adults, an autobiography, short stories, and children’s books. Until

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1 The Sorbs have lived in Lusatia, the southeasternmost corner of the former East Germany, since around 500 C.E. In around 1000 C.E., they were conquered by Germanic tribes.
recently, when health concerns forced him to limit his literary output, Brezan wrote all of his works bilingually: he first composed them in his native Sorbian, then translated them into German.² (Brezan now writes exclusively in German.) His career spans the 1950s through the early twenty-first century.

II. The Krabat Legend in Brezan’s Work

Three of Brezan’s major works feature Krabat, a figure from Sorbian legend, as their major character. In Sorbian folklore, Krabat is a good wizard who uses his magical powers to benefit the Sorbian people. According to legend, Krabat drove storms from the fields, drained swamps and made the soil fertile, and freed his serfs at the end of his life.³ While elements of the Krabat legend are doubtless very old, dating from pre-modern times, Krabat is to some extent based on a historical personage, the Croatian military officer Jan Schadowitz. Schadowitz, who lived from about 1624 to 1704, received an estate in the Sorbian village of Wulke Zdzary (Groß-Särchen) as payment for his services fighting for Saxony against the Turks. The name Krabat is probably derived from the Sorbian word chorwat, meaning “Croat”.⁴

Brezan, who was first attracted to the Krabat story as a child, translated the legend into German in 1954.⁵ In 1968 he published his best-known work, Die Schwarze Mühle, a retelling of the Krabat legend written for young adults. In Die Schwarze Mühle, Krabat is a supernatural being who falls from the sky as a meteor and then takes the form of a

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⁵ Wolf: 43.
young boy. Krabat is enslaved by the Black Miller, an evil wizard who keeps the Seven Books of Knowledge locked in a chest in a secret room in his Black Mill. Krabat’s quest is to gain the knowledge stored in the Miller’s books. He recruits Markus, another of the Miller’s young serfs, to aid him in this quest. When Markus’ mother adopts him as her son, Krabat becomes a full human being (“the Son of a Mother”) and takes up the cause of the common people who live under the Black Miller’s domination. Krabat steals the Book of Power from the Miller and hides it under the roots of a tree near Markus’ house. After the magical knowledge contained in the Book proves to be Markus’ undoing, Krabat burns the Book and instructs the Mother to disperse the embers among the peasants. The peasants, enlightened by the embers of Knowledge, join Krabat’s fight against the Miller, who is defeated in an apocalyptic final battle.

At the core of Die Schwarze Mühle is the idea that knowledge is power: the phrase “Wer weiß, der kann,” is repeated frequently throughout the book. It was this idea that initially attracted Brezan to the Krabat legend. In an interview with Eberhard Röhner, Brezan stated, “Mich interessierte also nicht eine Sage an sich, als Sage sozusagen, sondern ihr faszinierender, gegenwärtig wirkender Kern.”

While composing Die Schwarze Mühle, Brezan was also writing his second book about Krabat, Krabat, oder die Verwandlung der Welt, which is considered by many critics to be his most important work. Krabat, oder die Verwandlung der Welt, a novel for adults, was written between 1964 and 1975 and finally published in 1976. In this

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6 This bears an interesting similarity to the “Superman” legend. While I was unable to discover any connection between the two legends, this possibility merits further research.
8 Wolf: 43.
work, Krabat and his companion Jakub Kuschk pursue Krabat’s opponent, the German count Wolf Reissenberg, through historical and mythological time. (Due to time constraints, I will not be exploring this work in my thesis.)

Brezan had no intent to write a third book about Krabat until 1991, when societal changes brought about by the German Reunification pressed him to revise and update his artistic vision.\textsuperscript{10} After the Reunification, Brezan wrote \textit{Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt}, which was published in 1995. \textit{Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt} is often considered a sequel to \textit{Krabat, oder die Verwandlung der Welt}, although it can be read independently of the earlier work. (For purposes of brevity, I will henceforth refer to \textit{Krabat, oder die Verwandlung der Welt} and \textit{Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt} as \textit{Krabat I} and \textit{Krabat II}, respectively.)

\textit{Krabat II} features two intersecting plots, one of which takes place in “real time,” in Lusatia shortly after the German Reunification, while the other takes place in “mythological time.” The first plot concerns Signe Serbin, a young doctor and heiress of Sorbian and Swedish heritage. Driven by a sense of social and economic justice, Signe attempts to use her inheritance (the fortune that her late father accumulated in the armaments industry) to better the world. She establishes a non-mechanized organic farm and a children’s village for war orphans in a small village in Lusatia.\textsuperscript{11}

The second plot follows Krabat and his companion Jakub Kuschk as they move through a dreamlike world. This dreamworld is filled with allegories depicting world events and social issues that affected the Sorbs (and other indigenous peoples) at the end

\textsuperscript{10} Scholze: 425.
\textsuperscript{11} Lusatia, the Sorbian homeland, is located in the southeasternmost corner of the former East Germany, in the Federal States of Brandenburg and Saxony. Its main cultural centers are Bautzen (in the highlands of Upper Lusatia) and Cottbus (in the flatlands of Lower Lusatia).
of the twentieth century. Krabat’s adversary is again Wolf Reissenberg, who represents the G7 nations: Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Italy, France, and Canada.

*Krabat II*’s two plots first seem autonomous, but they cross and influence each other later in the novel. Unlike *Die Schwarze Mühle*, *Krabat II* contains no “final battle” scene in which the adversary is decisively defeated. Instead, *Krabat II* ends after an argument between Krabat and Reissenberg in which there is no clear winner. In the last scene of the novel, a figure (probably Krabat) carries buckets of water back to the source of a dry stream.

III. Brezan’s *Krabat* Novels as Modern Folklore or Myth

In addition to utilizing figures and motifs from the Krabat legend, all three of Brezan’s *Krabat* novels are told in a “dreamlike” or “mythological” style. Time and space do not operate in a linear fashion. Great jumps across decades or even centuries of time take place in *Die Schwarze Mühle*, although only within the confines of pre-modern Europe. The space-time continuum is even more plastic in *Krabat II*. Sudden movement between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries occurs in the first chapter. Later, Jakub Kuschk follows a girl through a tiny portal in a surreal bookstore and emerges near a cottage by the sea.

Archetypes such as the Hero (Krabat), the Wolf, the Mother, and the Forest are prominent in *Die Schwarze Mühle*, as is the use of Magic, which operates as a stand-in

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12 Signe’s young son Martin, who is too young to distinguish between the rational and the supernatural worlds, drives much of the interaction between the two plots.
for science in the pre-modern world that Brezan has created. (In a 1975 interview with Eberhard Röhner, Brezan stated, “Zaubern ist ja angewandtes Wissen für den, der weiß.”) Human beings are transformed into animals and birds, but, in a dream-like fashion, are able to recognize one another despite this physical transformation. These dream-like devices are also common in folk tales. Die Schwarze Mühle was written as a folk tale for young people, containing a modern message about the value of knowledge.

In Krabat II, Krabat and his companion Jakub Kuschk interact with other figures from Sorbian folklore, including the River Woman, the Midday Woman, and the Water Man. Krabat and Kuschk travel through richly symbolic landscapes in which, for example, a crumbling “false cathedral” represents the demise of the Eastern Bloc, and seven skyscrapers represent the G7 nations. As Dietrich Scholze commented, referring to Krabat I:

...Fabelstränge wurden ständig unterbrochen, phantastische und historisch-reale Ebenen wechselten einander ab, Sagen, Märchen, und Parabeln, Versatzstücke aus antiken, biblischen, und sorbisch-volkstümlichen Mythen wurden in die reflektierende Autoerzählung inflationär einmontiert.

This comment is equally applicable to Krabat II, and the result is a novel that reads more like myth than like a traditional narrative. As in myth, many figures are not individualized characters so much as archetypes representing entire classes, nations, or

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14 Röhner: 62.
16 Lange: 92.
17 The Midday Woman (“die Mittagsfrau”) first appears in Krabat II on p. 40. She is a “grim reaper” type figure, bearing a sickle, who demands to be told a story lest she end her captives’ lives. For further explanation of the River Woman and the Water Man, see footnotes 34 and 51, respectively.
18 Scholze: 424.
ways of life. Also as in myth, the action consists of surreal, often seemingly absurd events that are actually allegories for events taking place in the real world.

IV. Postmodernism in *Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt*

Building on the Krabat legend and on Sorbian, classical, and Biblical mythic traditions, Brezan has created a new mythology. Through this mythology, Brezan grapples with the contemporary issues of ecology and Sorbian cultural survival. In this section, I will explain how Postmodernism has influenced the mythology that Brezan created.

In his paper “Postmoderne Tendenzen in der sorbischen Literatur?”, Dietrich Scholze identifies “Postmodern tendencies” in *Krabat I* and *Krabat II*. Scholze cites Brezan’s use of a labyrinthine plot and montage techniques as typically Postmodern. I agree with Scholze’s assertion that Brezan’s Krabat novels, and especially *Krabat II*, have been heavily influenced by Postmodernism. However, my thesis goes beyond Scholze’s. While Scholze seeks primarily to establish that Brezan should indeed be considered a writer within the Postmodern tradition, I intend to examine in detail the specific ends to which Brezan uses Postmodernism.

A labyrinthine plot and montage techniques are also used in *Die Schwarze Mühle*. However, the worldview put forth in this earlier work is not Postmodern, or even Modern. According to Mary Klages, Postmodernism, like its predecessor Modernism,
rejects black-or-white, clear-cut moral positions. Die Schwarze Mühle, in contrast, embraces the dualistic worldview espoused by the Communist government of the German Democratic Republic. Krabat and the Sorbian peasants are on one side of the moral divide; the Black Miller (the Capitalist oppressor) is on the other. After the Armageddon-type battle scene that ends the novel, only Krabat and the peasants are left standing.

Scholze states that in Krabat II, Brezan “gibt die totalitäre Entweder-Oder-Konstellation auf,” rejecting the dualism that characterized his earlier works. Rather than seeking the total destruction of the First World and its way of life, he hopes for reconciliation between the First and Third Worlds.

Krabat II displays further evidence of Postmodern thought. According to Klages, Postmodernism favors “mini-narratives” explaining local events and practices, rather than “grand narratives” that make claims to universal truth. Krabat II depicts the collapse of Communism, one of the predominant “grand narratives” of the 20th century. In an allegory, “der falsche Kathedral” of Communism literally crumbles and falls to pieces. The competing Capitalist “grand narrative” is continually called into question through allegories highlighting the materialism and economic inequality characteristic of Capitalist societies.

While references to events outside of Lusatia occur frequently in Krabat II, Brezan resists constructing a single “grand narrative” to explain them all. He instead focuses his social criticism on the destruction of one small community and its culture.

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22 Scholze: 429.
23 Klages: internet resource.
The Krabat legend is a “mini-narrative” used to explain the situation of the Sorbs. Other indigenous peoples depicted in Krabat II (the Sami, the Roma, and the American Indians) use their own mythologies to make sense of the world. Brezan treats the Krabat legend as a true and useful narrative for the Sorbs, but does not apply it to peoples of other times and places. Thus, the Krabat myth within Krabat II could be characterized as a kind of “Postmodern mythology,” in which each people is free to construct its own “mini-narrative.”

V. Ecology in Die Schwarze Mühle and Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt

A. Introduction

Jurij Brezan views the health of the world’s ecological systems as directly related to the health of its mythology. In Krabat II, Brezan makes this connection explicit:

“Die Feuer [forests burning]… töteten die Vögel in der Luft, Muscheln und Fische im Meer, Sandkäfer und Grillen im Sand der Wüste, Aladins Wunderlampe zerbarst, Sindbad der Seefahrer verlor die Sterne und zerschellte an einem Riff…”

26 Folk tales, like living organisms, can be killed by drastic changes to the environments in which they evolved. Like other components of human cultural systems, folklore is sensitive to environmental change. Through the course of his long life, Jurij Brezan has

24 Brezan, Krabat II: 61.
25 In the “real-time” plot, the Sami are represented by Signe’s friend Nusalag, the Roma by Wida (a Bosnian Gypsy), and American Indians by Robert W. Tearmont, a descendent of Wolf Reissenberg (on his father’s side) whose mother was a Native American.
26 Brezan, Krabat II: 15.
witnessed the devastating effects of lignite mining on the Sorbian homeland, Lusatia. During the twentieth century, strip-mining operations resulted in the total destruction of at least 45 Sorbian villages. The inhabitants of these villages were forcibly relocated to German-speaking towns, where they assimilated into the dominant culture.

In light of his life experiences, it is not surprising that Brezan’s works dwell on human culture as a casualty of environmental destruction. As he sees it, industrialization did not improve the quality of life in the villages of Lusatia. Rather, it uprooted Sorbian peasants from their homes, as fertile soil was cleared away to extract the lignite underneath. Environmental themes are prominent in *Die Schwarze Mühle* and *Krabat II*. In both works, Brezan uses the Krabat legend to explore ecological destruction.

**B. Industrialization and *Die Schwarze Mühle***

Written in Communist East Germany, *Die Schwarze Mühle*’s plot has to do with the industrial (Capitalist) economy and its exploitation of workers. The Capitalist figure in this novel is the Black Miller, who wields absolute power over the means of production (the Black Mill) and over the peasant inhabitants of the surrounding area. The Black Mill represents industry. *Die Schwarze Mühle* is set in pre-modern Europe, in which the closest thing to a factory was a simple water mill. Unlike ordinary water mills, the Black Mill does not grind grain into flour. Rather, it mills the workers’ sweat into gold.

Although real water mills do not produce toxic chemical byproducts, industrial pollution is represented in *Die Schwarze Mühle*. The Black Miller wears three magic

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27 For Brezan’s comments on lignite mining in Lusatia, see Wolf: 44-5.
28 Wolf: 52.
Rings that he uses as weapons against Krabat. His second Ring consists of “geglühtem und gehammertem Gift, dem nichts, was lebt—sei es Fleisch und Blut oder Gedanke und Wunsch--, widerstehen kann.” The Miller casts this Ring into the brook that powers the Black Mill, poisoning the water: “Der Schwarze Bach frisbt alles, was lebt.”

Communist ideology would dictate that the workers should expel the Miller and take possession of the Black Mill, reaping the gold produced from their own sweat. However, this is not what takes place. After Krabat kills the Miller, the peasants begin to plow the land surrounding the Mill, but ignore the Mill itself. Disinterested in industry, they revert to a peaceable, agricultural way of life. In Brezan’s view, industry—the Black Mill—is incompatible with disarmament, a healthy environment, and the well being of the Sorbian people. The peasants in Die Schwarze Mühle set an example for the reader by foregoing the gold that the Black Mill would earn them, opting instead for a low-technology way of life that will not pollute their brooks.

C. Ecology in the “Mythological Time” Plot of Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt

The profound disconnection between First World society and the organic world is a dominant theme in the “mythological time” plot of Krabat II. Everywhere that Krabat and his companion Jakub Kuschk travel, the authentic and natural have been replaced by the synthetic. Most sinister is the realization that the inhabitants of this world do not

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29 Brezan, Die Schwarze Mühle: 15.
30 Brezan, Die Schwarze Mühle: 43.
31 Brezan, Die Schwarze Mühle: 44.
32 Brezan, Die Schwarze Mühle: 90.
object to their artificial surroundings. Instead, they appear to believe that man-made products are always better and more beautiful than nature.

Krabat and Kuschk visit the village of Salow, which symbolizes Lusatia. The cherry trees in Salow’s orchards no longer bear fruit. False flowers adorn the trees. The recorded sound of humming bees is piped in through speakers hidden in the branches. Later in summer, when cherries would normally ripen, the villagers hang plastic cherries on the trees. They now prefer plastic cherries to the real thing, explaining that “Die sind schöner, und Würmer sind auch keine drin.” The reader is left wondering what the villagers will eat, now that their orchards bear inedible plastic fruit.

This scene can be read as a commentary on modern agricultural practices. There has been much outcry in Europe against genetically modified crops and the use of pesticides. Many feel that food produced with such extensive human intervention is unnatural, and no more fit for human consumption than the plastic cherries that hang in the orchards of Salow. Plastic cherries, like genetically modified cherries, are “schöner,” and like fruit grown with pesticides, plastic fruit does not get wormy. The idea of eating plastic fruit awakens revulsion in the reader. Brezan feels that this sense of revulsion should be extended to fruit produced in an “unnatural” manner.

Another scene depicts the outright destruction of the natural world. The River Woman (another figure from Sorbian folklore) and some companions attempt to protect a primeval forest from appropriation by a businessman. He intends to clear-cut the real forest, which provides a habitat for endangered species including grizzly bears, in order

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33 Brezan, *Krabat II*: 102
34 The River Woman ("die Frau vom Großen Fluß") first appears on page 10 of *Krabat II*. A goat, a wolf, and some cabbage are under her stewardship. The River Woman’s role is to row continually across the Great River, keeping the wolf on one side of the river, the cabbage on the other, and the goat with her in her
to print promotional brochures depicting a plastic forest that will be constructed on the same site. "Wir drucken eine Million Hefte, in denen das Tal dargestellt wird, Buntfotos auf bestem Papier." The businessman assures the River Woman and her followers that his plastic forest will surpass the original forest in its beauty, but the group is not convinced. One follower, disgusted by the idea of a plastic forest, cries out "Und Plastikbären, Plastiklachse, schließlich das Wasser und am Ende Plastikmenschen!" (my emphasis).

This man’s cry captures Brezan’s fear: complete replacement of the natural by the artificial, until human beings lose all sense of connection with the organic world. The businessman figure represents people who have already lost this connection. Unable to see any value in the real forest, he plans to destroy it in order to use it for his personal economic gain. Like the "Plastikmenschen" that the River Woman’s follower warns against, he is motivated entirely by greed and fails to grasp that he, too, is a living organism dependent on the same ecosystem that supports the salmon and bears.

At the end of Krabat II, Krabat’s adversary Wolf Reissenberg, who represents the First World, has constructed an Ark containing specimens of each species of plant and animal life on earth. In the event that the world is destroyed, the Ark, which is a spaceship, will allow life to continue elsewhere in the universe. Krabat views the Ark as an egotistical attempt by Reissenberg to create a new world in his own image after he has destroyed this one. As the two argue, Reissenberg puts forth that without him, humanity would still be in the Stone Age. Krabat counters that were it not for Reissenberg’s

small boat. Thus, she prevents the wolf from eating the goat and the goat from eating the cabbage— in a small way, she keeps the local ecology in balance.

35 Brezan, Krabat II: 148.
36 Brezan, Krabat II: 149.
destructive behavior, the Ark would not be necessary. Krabat states that Reissenberg must be willing to change his ways if the world is to be saved.37

Reissenberg asks Krabat, “Warum tust du nicht, was du von mir forderst?”

Krabat hätte antworten können: Weil ich nur zwei Augen haben, die sehen, und zwei leere Hände; alle Macht aber, aller Reichtum, alles Wissen liegt in deinen Händen, deine Augen jedoch, nicht blinder als die meinen, sind lichtlos in deinem Gesetz Immer-Mehr-und-Nie-Genug gefangen. Niemand kann dich daraus befreien, wenn nicht du selbst.38

Here, Krabat represents the Third World. The Third World suffers because of the First World’s arrogance—the ecosystems of the Third World are laid waste as corporations from the First World exploit their natural resources. However, only the First World has the power to correct its mistakes.

As a member of Central Europe’s sole remaining indigenous minority, Brezan takes the side of the indigenous peoples of the Third World. He argues that the First World must be willing to alter its way of life so that life may be preserved on Earth. Colonization of other worlds in order to assure the continuation of life should not be necessary.

37 Brezan, Krabat II: 208-9.
38 Brezan, Krabat II: 210.
D. Voluntary Simplicity in the “Real Time” Plot of *Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt*

Elsewhere in *Krabat II*, Brezan presents an example of what the First World can do to save itself. The “real time” plot centers on Signe Serbin, a young Swedish heiress who has returned to her mother’s hometown in Lusatia. Signe’s lifestyle exemplifies voluntary simplicity. While continuing to work as a doctor at a local hospital, Signe cultivates her grandfather’s land in order to feed herself and others. Her farmstead is organic and completely non-mechanized: horses are used to plow the fields. In addition, Signe and the other members of her household do without an automobile, relying on bicycles for transportation.

Signe’s organic farmstead provides an example of Postmodern thought in *Krabat II*. According to Mary Klages, Postmodernism holds that small-scale local initiatives are more likely to make a difference in the world than are sweeping, large-scale movements.\(^3\)  Signe Serbin’s ecological farm is an example of such an initiative. By modifying her lifestyle and tilling her own small patch of land, Signe means to impact her local community, and through her community, the world.

When her lifestyle is challenged by other community members, Signe gives the following rationale for her non-mechanized organic farm: “Ich glaube, daß die Zukunft keine hundert Jahre mehr dauert, wenn die reichen Länder ihren Standard nicht freiwillig um hundert Jahre zurückschrauben.”\(^4\) To help ensure that the world has a future, Signe is willing to accept a reduction in her own standard of living. Brezan feels that the rest of

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\(^3\) Klages: internet resource.
\(^4\) Brezan, *Krabat II*: 66.
the First World must be willing to do the same. Our modern way of life, he holds, is simply not reasonable.

The theme of reason ("Vernunft") recurs throughout Krabat II. By "Vernunft," Brezan means an ecologically sustainable way of life. Signe's farm is held up as an example of "Vernunft;" reliance on computers (and by extension, on other modern technologies) is an example of "Unvernunft." A way of life is "reasonable" when it allows the continuation of the natural world of which human beings are a part. An "unreasonable" way of life exhibits blatant disregard for the ecology, and thus ultimately threatens its own survival. In Brezan's view, the First World's lifestyle is not sustainable, and is therefore suicidal. He considers it as irrational as any other suicidal behavior.

E. Summary of Analysis

In both Die Schwarze Mühle and Krabat II, Jurij Brezan depicts the effects of industrialization and modern technology on the natural world. Through myth and allegory, he argues for a return to a simpler, more sustainable way of life. The "real time" plot of Krabat II provides a practical example of what First World people can do in order to encourage "die Bewahrung der Welt." The impact of Postmodernism on Brezan's philosophy can be seen in his creation of "mini-narratives" addressing specific environmental problems, and in his emphasis on small-scale initiatives to turn the tide of environmental destruction. Remembering the effects of industrialization on Lusatia and

41 See: Brezan, Krabat II: 84; and Krabat II: 89.
the Sorbian culture, he seeks to remind us that our non-sustainable way of life threatens our cultural survival, and ultimately, the survival of the world.

VI. Sorbian Cultural Survival in *Krabat, oder die Bewahrung der Welt*

A. Introduction

Jurij Brezan has been referred to as a *Heimatdichter*, a writer who concerns himself chiefly with his native region. Brezan’s Sorbian identity permeates all of his works, and his deep sense of attachment to his homeland is apparent.

In an interview with the critic Eberhard Röhner, Brezan stated, “Hier [in his home village of Worklecy/Räckelwitz] kenne ich das verwitterte Steinkreuz und seine Geschichte, hier hörte ich die Märchen und die Lieder meines Volkes und hier begriff ich sie, wie ich hier die Geschichte von Krabat begriff, der das Wissen aus dem Zauberbuch befreien wollte.” Brezan became familiar with the Krabat legend, later a recurring motif in his works, while growing up his homeland, Lusatia. In *Krabat II*, Brezan uses the quintessentially Sorbian Krabat story to express his concerns about the future survival of his culture.

Just as Brezan ties the health of the world’s ecology to the health of its mythology, he links the demise of the Sorbian culture to the demise of its folklore. Early in the “mythological time” plot of *Krabat II*, Krabat and Jakub Kuschk find that many figures from Sorbian mythology are dead or have abandoned their traditional roles: “Der

42 Wolf: 42.
43 Röhner: 60.
Wasserman ist tot, die Mittagsfrau hockt im Wohnwagen vor dem Fernseher, und [Krabats] Wanderstab kennt keine Wunder mehr, auch nicht die falschen.\textsuperscript{44} Even Krabat is affected; his walking stick, which was once also a magic staff, can no longer perform magic.

At the beginning of \textit{Krabat II}, the outlook for the Sorbs seems grim. Their folklore has lost its power. In Brezan’s worldview, in which folklore is an indicator of the health of social and ecological systems, this signifies that the rest of the Sorbian culture is also imperiled. Through the course of the novel, Brezan uses allegory to address two major contributors to Sorbian cultural endangerment: assimilation into the larger German society and revitalization efforts that ignore Lusatia’s depopulation crisis. Finally, he ends \textit{Krabat II} with a vision of modest hope.

B. \textit{Assimilation: the Loss of a People’s “Heart in the World”}

\textit{Krabat II} begins with an allegory of the arrival of the Sorbs in Lusatia around the year 500 C.E. and the coming of the Germans approximately 500 years later: “Gegen elf Uhr am Montag nach der Erschaffung der Welt nahm Krabat das Hügelchen, fünf Kornhalme hoch über dem Bach Satkula, in Besitz. Vier oder fünf Stunden später erschien Wolf Reissenberg dort und erklärte das Hügelchen zu seinem Eigentum.”\textsuperscript{45}

Throughout \textit{Krabat II}, the stream Satkula is used to symbolize the Sorbian culture and its language. Krabat represents the Sorbs, and Wolf Reissenberg embodies the G7

\textsuperscript{44} Brezan, \textit{Krabat II}: 52.
\textsuperscript{45} Brezan, \textit{Krabat II}: 5.
nations, particularly Germany. Late twentieth century Lusatia is represented by the village Salow, located on the same little hill above the Satkula that Krabat claimed for his own.

Brezan recounts that Salow was once called *Wutroba*, the Sorbian word for "heart." In Brezan's view, a Homeland is as essential to a culture as a heart is to the body. The Homeland is where cultural continuity is assured, where the elements of a culture—including language and folklore—are transmitted from generation to generation. The name *Wutroba* reflects the importance of the home village to Sorbian cultural continuity: “Damals glaubten die Leute noch, daß der Mensch einen Punkt in der Welt braucht, der wie ein Herz wäre für alle Jahre des Lebens, und zerrisse die Ader, triebe der Mensch in seinem Leibe einem fremden Grabe zu und litte Atemnot in seiner Seele, bis sie am Ende hinausführte, grau und zerschlissen.”

At one time, the Sorbs believed that without this *wutroba*, their Homeland and culture, they would lose their souls. This appears to be what happened in Salow. The village is inhabited by hollow people who lack a sense of continuity with the past or a purpose for the future. A desire to assimilate into German society led them to change the name of their village, symbolically forsaking the heart of their culture: “Später schämten sich die Leute ihres unmündigen Glaubens und taufsten das Dorf um.”

In addition to renaming their village, the people of Salow have diverted the Satkula from its natural bed. When Krabat and Jakub Kuschk question them about this,

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46 The G7 nations (the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, and Japan) are represented as seven skyscrapers dominated by graven images of Reissenberg.
47 Brezan, *Krabat II*: 97.
48 Brezan, *Krabat II*: 97.
they repeat, "Wir wollen den alten Bach nicht länger haben." In Brezan’s view, an indigenous culture is like a river that has flowed from its ‘source’ continuously since ancient times. The diversion of the Satkula represents the rejection of Sorbian cultural continuity, motivated by a desire for acceptance by the larger society. The villagers worried that non-Sorbs might mistranslate the name Satkula, which means “water from behind,” as “Arschwasser.” To avoid this potential for confusion and embarrassment, they decided to eliminate the stream all together. This parallels the choice to reject the Sorbian language in order to assimilate into German society.

C. “Building a New Water Man”: the Misemphasis of Current Efforts to Revitalize the Sorbian Culture

Through the Salow allegory, Brezan critiques current efforts to revive the Sorbian culture. The Sorbs, he argues, expend too much energy trying to revive old folk customs (“building a new Water Man”) while ignoring the depopulation crisis that robs Lusatia of the next generation of Sorbs.

In Sorbian folklore, the Water Man is a humanoid figure who makes his home in the many waterways of Lusatia. Unfortunately, in Krabat II the Water Man is dead. The people of Salow lament this loss, and attempt to cobble together a “new Water Man” from the remnants of old customs:

49 Brezan, Krabat II: 98.
50 Brezan, Krabat II: 107.
51 Slone: 136. Stone offers the following description of the Water Man (“der Wassermann”): “[The Water Man] figures in numerous legends originating in those parts of Lusatia where ponds and rivers are a conspicuous feature of the landscape, i.e. principally in Lower Lusatia and the northern part of Upper Lusatia. He is a small, grey, hideous creature with long green hair and occasionally claws, who lives in the
The dead Water Man represents the death of much of the Sorbian culture. These abandoned folkways were once part of the living culture just as the Water Man was a part of the ecosystem of the Satkula. Both were driven to extinction by modernization. The people of Salow attempt to revive these old customs by assembling half-remembered bits and pieces to create a “new Water Man”: a revived Sorbian culture. Brezan disapproves of these efforts, because too often their purpose is to bring tourist revenues into Lusatia: “Fremde würden kommen, [den Wasserman] zu bestaunen...”53 While the Sorbs are willing to put on quaint costumes for the benefit of the tourists, they do not seriously intend to reintegrate the folkways of their ancestors into their everyday lives.

Brezan’s most damning critique of the current movement for Sorbian cultural revival is that while it emphasizes reviving premodern customs, it ignores the real threat to Sorbian cultural survival: the depopulation crisis. Many young Sorbs leave Lusatia for wealthier regions of Germany. In addition, the death rate among Sorbs has exceeded the birth rate. According to Brezan (in Wolf, 2001), “For the first time in recorded Sorbian history and since we have had documented church records, we have more coffins than cradles.”54

depths of rivers and ponds. His magic powers enable him to disguise himself as a human being, though the wetness of his clothes often gives him away...”

52 Brezan, Krabat II: 142.
53 Brezan, Krabat II: 143.
54 Wolf: 46.
In *Krabat II*, Brezan addresses the depopulation crisis through the allegory of Salow. In Salow, “Die jungen Eltern wanderten mit ihren Kindern aus, und die Mädchen und Burschen, die vielleicht Kinder haben würden, wanderten auch aus.” An old woman is now the honorary president of the village’s Young Women’s and Young Men’s Societies, since there are no longer any young people in the village. Brezan condemns the fact that the Sorbs use the remaining scraps of their culture to lure tourists, while ignoring the threat of depopulation. In full, the sentence on discussing tourism in Lusatia reads: “Fremde würden kommen, [den Wassermann] zu bestaunen, und ins Ufergebüsch könnte man einen Recorder hängen, sicherlich fänden sich noch Bänder vom Kinderchor, den es nun nicht mehr gab,” (my emphasis).

No matter how many tourists come to gawk at villagers in folk costume or purchase colorfully painted Easter eggs, if there are no children to whom the Sorbian culture can be transmitted, it will die. In *Krabat II*, Brezan laments the fact that while the Sorbs attempt to reassemble their culture from broken bits of their past, they are neglecting to transmit the culture to their children, the real hope for its survival.

**D. Hope for the Future**

Despite his critique of assimilation and tourist-oriented cultural revival efforts, Brezan ends *Krabat II* with hope for the Sorbs. Despite the villagers’ efforts to banish the Satkula from Salow, natural processes are gradually wearing away the dam, and the stream is trickling back into its old bed. “In den Damm vor Salow sind Mäuse

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56 Brezan, *Krabat II*: 110.
eingezogen, tropfenweise sickert die Satkula in ihr altes Bett...”

Through this metaphor, Brezan depicts the slow seeping of the Sorbian language and culture back into Lusatia.

Unlike some Heimatdichter, Jurij Brezan does not limit his writing to pastoral descriptions of his Homeland or quaint reflections on its traditional way of life. He has seen Lusatia ravaged by the excesses of industrialization, and witnessed the slow death of his culture from assimilation and population attrition. He does not idealize Lusatia or the Sorbs; he criticizes what he perceives as their failures. However, he is not ready to give up hope for his people’s future. In time, he believes, the “dam” that the Sorbs have built to keep their traditional language and customs out of their lives will be worn down. Maybe then, a real Sorbian cultural renaissance will be possible.

VII. Conclusion

Sorbian folklore plays an important role in both Die Schwarze Mühle and Krabat II. In both works, Brezan reinterprets the traditional Krabat legend to send a contemporary message to his readers. In Brezan’s early work Die Schwarze Mühle, Brezan reminded his young readers of the power of knowledge, while illustrating the social and environmental evils of Capitalist industrial society. Written during the Communist period, the worldview espoused in this book is a dualistic one: the forces of good and evil, the Sorbs and their German oppressors, and Communism and Capitalism are presented as irreconcilably opposed. Brezan’s later, more mature work, Krabat II,

57 Brezan, Krabat II: 143.
58 Brezan, Krabat II: 174.
rejects this dualism. Instead, Krabat II embraces a Postmodern philosophy in which each culture is free to construct its own “mini-narrative” to explain the world.

In Krabat II, Brezan creates a new mythology revealing the dangers that the late twentieth century culture of globalization and consumerism posed to both Sorbian culture and the environment. Much of the narrative is meant to shock the reader into awareness of dire threats to the ecology and to indigenous peoples. The reality that Brezan portrays is bleak. He believes that without drastic changes in the attitudes and behavior of First World peoples, the environment will collapse. Similarly, the Sorbs will die out unless they confront the reality of population attrition.

Brezan presents a stark choice to his readers: accept far-reaching changes to your way of life, or prepare for extinction both as a culture and as a species. However, he is not entirely pessimistic. The last chapter of Krabat II is an allegory of a struggle to change history’s course. In the last scene of the novel, the River Woman sits on the bank of a dry riverbed and watches a man (probably Krabat) carry buckets of water upstream to the river’s source. The novel’s last two paragraphs read:

Die Frau... sah dem Mann nach, der—damit das Natürliche wieder natürlich wäre—das Wasser zu den Quellen schlepp. Sie sah nicht, wie er wieder und wieder erschöpft stehen blieb und mit den Augen die Ufer absuchte: Vielleicht erreichte die Vernunft Wolf Reissenberg doch, und er käme zu helfen. Nichts ist unmöglich.\(^59\)

In this final allegory, Krabat struggles to replenish the source of the Satkula, Brezan’s symbol for the Sorbian culture. His labor exhausts him, but he knows that it must be done, “so that what was once natural can be natural again”: in other words, to

\(^{59}\) Brezan, Krabat II: 230.
reconnect the modern Sorbian culture to its historical roots. This will allow more Sorbian children to come into the world, and to grow up in a Lusatia where they develop familiarity with and respect for their heritage.

When the Satkula metaphor refers specifically to the situation of the Sorbs, Krabat's effort to "turn the tide" can be applied more broadly, to the larger struggle to save the world's environment. Brezan expresses the hope that the wealthy G7 nations (symbolized by Wolf Reissenberg), responsible for so much ecological destruction, will reach "reason" and abandon their suicidal, non-sustainable course. Some day they might join Krabat in his quest to return to a more natural way of life. After all, nothing is impossible.

According to Scholze, Brezan's use of the phrase "Nichts ist unmöglich" to end his novel is an example of Postmodern irony. "Nichts ist unmöglich" is a well-known advertising slogan in Germany, on the level of the American advertising slogan "Like a rock," used to sell Chevrolet trucks. Scholze states:

\[ Daß der sorbische Schriftsteller die Hoffnung, die er mit der Fortsetzung des Krabat-Romans trotz allem signalisiert hat, in einer unverbindlichen Floskel gipfeln läßt, muß wohl als Ausdruck seiner Rat- und Orientierungslosigkeit verstanden werden: Die Kritik an den Umständen ist nicht mehr heroisch, sondern ironisch. Und doch liefert der Roman ein Indiz dafür, daß die postmoderne Strategie bei Anerkennung der pluralen Option zur Wahrung menschlicher Grundwerte beizutragen vermöge. \]

In Scholze's view, ending the novel with an advertising slogan is anti-climactic, and takes away the "heroic" aspect of Brezan’s social criticism. Closing with this advertising catch-line undermines the seriousness of Brezan’s critique.

\[ ^{60} \text{Scholze: 430.} \]
This is one possible interpretation of the last chapter of _Krabat II_. However, I offer another possibility: that this allegory, like virtually every scene in the novel, needs to be read on more than one level. One level, then, is the level that Scholze has detected: Brezan recognizes that his critique will not be useful unless people heed it, and therefore chooses to close with a slogan gleaned from the commercial culture that he detests—an ironic gesture meant to keep his allegory from developing the self-righteous universality characteristic of Modernist “grand narrative.”

On another level, the phrase “Nichts ist unmöglich” can be taken at face value. Change, while difficult, is not impossible. The future is not without hope. In my view, the second possible interpretation is the more important one. Social criticism combined with hope is at the heart of Brezan’s Postmodernist retelling of the Krabat legend.
Works Cited


