

# *The Concept of the Inverse World in Lithuanian Folklore*

Quite a few phenomena related to beliefs about the afterlife that are characteristic of both archaeology and folklore reveal that the other world is dominated by peculiar mythic spatio-temporal traits. In general, these mythological peculiarities can be defined by the conception of inverse symmetry, when the respective manifestations of the other world are a kind of a mirror-image of the human realm. However, this is not a mere specular reflection, when everything is literally represented upside-down, but rather a system of sophisticated mythic laws that affects the material and temporal dimensions of the other world.

The paper attempts to define the concept of inverse symmetry in Lithuanian folklore. In the first part, *The Evidence from Archaeology and Custom*, I explore the relationship with the otherworld that can be deduced from the burial practices of the ancient Balts and more recent Lithuanian funeral customs, and also consider related folk beliefs about death and reversal. In the second part, *The Evidence from Folk Narratives*, I discuss the interpretation of otherworld phenomena in Lithuanian tales of magic, religious tales, realistic tales (novellas), and folk belief legends dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and conclude by paying special attention to the temporal component in both folk narratives and customs.

Such a diversity of the discussed material is necessary because the issue of inverse reality in the afterlife is considered in nearly every folklore genre. A wider context

discloses not only the versatility of mythological images, but often underlines their contradictions as well.

## The Evidence from Archaeology and Custom

Changes in religion, predominant world view and daily customs are reflected in the manner of burial. Naturally, only a partial glimpse of the life of the living and their worldview remains in graves, but it is still the most thorough information which has come down to us, since we do not possess any other reliable sources (Griciuvienė 2000: 106). The archaeological artefacts found at the burial sites of the Baltic tribes of the Middle and Late Iron Ages, dating mainly from approximately the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, disclose that burial items were frequently damaged or destroyed. In the archaeological research literature, data concerning the burial sites of the Balts is presented quite often; it shows that such tradition of the destruction of burial objects was characteristic of a long historical period, though, seemingly, it was not prevalent (Beresnevičius 1990: 165). A thorough classification could only be performed by archaeologists; therefore we will enumerate only the most significant examples.

For instance, in the 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, shards of smashed pots, bent weapons and reaping hooks, and broken bracelets and necklaces were put into cremation graves of the Scalvians (Griciuvienė 2000: 126). In the settlement area of the Samogitians (Western Lithuanians) a unique tradition of placing a horse's head or sometimes its legs in the inhumation graves of males lasted from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Griciuvienė 2000: 122). The customs of putting corporal parts of domestic animals, e.g. a horse's head, a goat's or sheep's head or teeth, next to the cremated dead were also widespread among the Scalvians from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Griciuvienė 2000: 126). Furthermore, in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, a distinctive custom of putting miniature work implements (reaping hooks, spinning wheels, sash-twining tools, and miniature clay cups) in the inhumation graves of the Curonians is found (Griciuvienė 2000: 130).

What patterns of the conception of the afterlife could explain these long-lasting burial customs of the Balts? Some researchers refer to the animistic explanation, that the damaging of various burial items was intended to free the soul of an object and to allow it to pass to the other world together along with its dead owner (Storå 1971:

181). However, in the case of the entombments with the corporal parts of horses or sheep it is more likely that the symbolic principle of *pars pro toto*, when the part represents the whole, was predominant (Beresnevičius 1990: 164–5). The problem of ritual funerary miniatures requires still another clarification, namely that in the other world these models were supposed to be transformed into implements of normal size (Beresnevičius 1990: 168). Notwithstanding these diverse ideas about the afterlife, a fundamental mythic conviction can be traced about a certain expectative transfiguration of the burial objects that would assure their subsequent applicability in the otherworld.

Though with the spread of Christianity in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the burial traditions of the Balts changed irreversibly to inhumation, the custom of putting various burial items into the coffin has survived up till recent times in Lithuania. For example, it is quite widespread that a rosary, a picture of a patron saint, a handkerchief and a candle blessed on Candlemas<sup>1</sup> are put into the hands of the deceased (Vyšniauskaitė et al. 1995: 448). Items the departed was used to during his lifetime (i.e. a bottle of vodka for a drunkard, a pipe for a smoker) could be also put to the coffin (Dundulienė 2005: 302).

Looking for some typological similarities to the archaeological record in later burial customs, it is noteworthy that in Lithuanian funeral rituals of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries the belongings of the dead and other objects that had contact with the deceased were often destroyed or thrown away (Racėnaitė 2006a: 15–6). It was assumed that the bed, pallet, or bedclothes on which someone had died or the deceased was laid down on afterwards were in some way virulent and pestiferous, since they had a direct contact with a deadly substance, “the smell of death”. The mythological idea of “the smell of death” was also common among the Eastern Slavs (Tolstoj 1999: 267) and the Finno-Ugrians (Storå 1971: 174; Konkova 1999: 28). Therefore in Lithuania the bed or bench on which the deceased lay were taken out of the house (Čilvinaitė 1943: 164) or turned upside down (VUB RS 169 (379): 29), while the room was quickly cleaned (VUB RS 81 (616): 3–5); the straw from the pallet was burned, and the bed linens were thrown away. Among the neighbouring nations,

1.

In the Roman Catholic Church, Candlemas (also known as the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple) is celebrated on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February and refers to the practice of blessing the candles which are distributed to the faithful for use at home.

the Baltic Finns also had a practice of disposing of the deathbed straw by throwing it into the grave pit (Arukask 1998). The custom of overturning various items of furniture after the coffin had been carried out of the house or smashing the utensils used to wash the corpse was also widespread among the Slavic people (Zelenin 1991: 346; Tolstoj 1995: 215). In the Western part of Lithuania, the vessels that had been used for washing a dead body were also smashed or crushed under the wheels of the funerary carriage (Vyšniauskaitė 1961: 137).

Mythologically, reasoned fear towards the return of the revenant to the world of living or the belief that the personified death could remain at the house of the deceased after his/her death can be considered a probable ground for these customs and folk persuasions, and this later behaviour could also be explained in a rational manner, being motivated by the apprehension of becoming infected with deadly diseases. However, it is likely that these late funeral customs were also genetically related to the belief that the damaged objects would regain their proper form in the afterlife.

The performance of particular reverse actions was strictly forbidden at ritually insignificant times, since it was believed that it could provoke certain misfortunes or even death (Racėnaitė 2002: 226–33). In the majority of cases, actions dangerous to human life are based on the principle of similarity, reckoning that they are reminiscent of actions performed in the proximity of death. E.g., it was widely believed that it is unsafe to walk in disorderly footwear, that is, only with one shoe on or with loose bootlaces, because both of the parents (Balys 2004a[1981]: no. 25; Balys 2004b[1979]: no. 872; Basanavičius 2004: 357, no. 5) or one of them (Balys 2004a[1981]: no. 33) might die. Such warning could be substantiated by Lithuanian funeral tradition to bury the dead in different footwear from that of living people or without shoes at all (VUB RS 81 (64/167): 62; VUB RS 169 (90): 1, 4; VUB RS 372: 12, 18, 22). Referring to comparative material, in Georgia, for example, the dead person was also laid in the coffin without shoes or with the laces left untied (Mikkor 1997). In Russia, puttees (i.e. cloth strips used to cover the legs from ankle to knee) were wound round the shins to the left instead of to the right (Maslova 1984: 86).

In Lithuanian folk belief, there also existed a vivid inducement to avoid moving backwards casually, as the backwards steps symbolically counted the length of a coffin or the length of a grave pit for one's parents (Balys 2004a[1981]: no. 26; Basanavičius 2004: 233, no. 176; 357, no. 4). These folk prohibitions also referred to actions carried out during the funeral. E.g., in some regions of Latvia and

Russia, the mourners used to walk backwards from the cemetery after the funeral (Zelenin 1991: 350; Butkus 1999: 191). An explanation for such behaviour can be traced in one Lithuanian folk tale. The Devil's daughter, when asked how to reach her father's land, explains that it is enough to take three steps backwards and one will find himself/herself there (LTR 4128 /36/).

So, it seems that one's disorderly footwear or odd manner of walking resemble the appearance of the dead or actions that are characteristic of the otherworld. It could be stated that both the aforementioned ritual overturning of beds and other items of furniture and the performance of reverse actions are connected with considerably extensive semantic spheres of change, conversion, metamorphosis, transmutation and, broadly speaking, interconnections between this and the other world in general (Tolstoj 1995: 221).

## The Evidence from Folk Narratives

The mythical concept about the alterations in the other world is also represented in Lithuanian folk narratives. The notions of inversion in the other world are best reflected in those folk texts that depict human encounters with mythical creatures. Most often a person accidentally finds himself in the mythical realm or he is invited to make a visit to the afterworld. Then he observes incomprehensible phenomena on his way to or in the other world. The idea that fairy tales in both structural and semantic terms depict a journey into the otherworld and back has been already proposed by Vladimir Propp (1986: 47-51).

Such an encounter of human with mythical being can be distinguished by an evident inverse symmetry. E.g., in Lithuanian folk tales and belief legends, the objects given to a man by mythical creatures undergo a transformation when brought back to the human realm, for example, barren things (a handful of wooden slivers or coal brands) turn to coins or, on the contrary, valuable objects transform into rubbish (into a tree stump, a piece of dung, or into parts of decayed beast carrion or skeletons). Therefore the hero is prompted to ask for a

proper reward from the otherworldly being. In the tale of magic *The Wife-Succubus (The Devil's Daughter)* (AT 424\*, see Kerbelytė 1999: 196-9)<sup>2</sup> a wife teaches her husband how to behave in her home country, namely, the Devil's land. She instructs him not to take money, but to ask for a sack of coals; not to take a light-footed horse, but to ask for a worn-out animal or to take a bird instead; to reject a splendid carriage and take a wooden trough in its place. The man chooses a sack of coals but he can't resist taking the horse and carriage. When coming back home the coals turn into golden coins, but the carriage turns into an old trough while the horse suddenly becomes a bird and flies away (Kerbelytė 1999: 196-9).

Moreover, the man is told to do everything contrary to what his wife's relatives do: when shaking hands, he must offer his fingers only (LTR 368 /306/) or his hand will be dismembered; when the dinner is served, he must not eat (LMD III 129 /101/) and when a golden wineglass is brought, he must ask for an ordinary cup, since the golden one is actually the hoof of a dead horse (LTR 4128 /36/) and the wine accordingly is urine (Kerbelytė 1999: 198). In this context, comparative data from Georgian folklore is helpful. In one folk tale, this time the husband teaches his wife how to understand the language of his home country – the country of sorcerers. If the mother-in-law asks to smash a pot, the daughter-in-law should give it to her, and when the mother-in-law says to pour water out, she was asking her to bring her water instead (Holbek 1996: 320).

In other Lithuanian variants of the same tale the man is instructed not to laugh when everyone laughs or not to wonder whenever he sees extraordinary things: his wife's brothers with two, three or four heads (LTR 953 /34/), a fat woman with extremely thin legs, a very thin woman with a huge stomach or an extremely short man with a long nose (LTR 1693 /120/). At first, the hero abstains from comments, but afterwards he becomes amazed how a squab dancing man does not burst into pieces or how a spindly dancer does not break in half. Instantly, the first dancer blows up and the second one breaks apart (Kerbelytė 1999: 197).

The idea that valuable things outwardly seem to be of low quality is also typical of Lithuanian belief legends

## 2.

The tale types marked as AT refer to the Lithuanian tales as they are classified in *The Catalogue of Lithuanian Narrative Folklore* by Bronislava Kerbelytė since these types are not included in *The Types of International Folktale* by Hans-Jörg Uther.

about cursed treasures. Their outer appearance is associated with the world of the dead: they appear in a shape of dead animals or objects that were used in funeral rituals. For example, in a very popular Lithuanian folk legend, the corpse of a dog that was thrown into a poor man's house turned out to be a sack of money (Kerbelytė 2002: 286, 290).

In addition, the notion that otherworldly beings are fond of ordure and waste is popular in Lithuanian folk belief legends as well. For instance, one girl is visited by a strange looking gentleman who entertains her with luxurious dishes and rich wines. However, later on it turns out that the gentleman is the devil himself and they have eaten horse's dung and drank urine instead (Basanavičius 2001: 98-101). An interesting belief in protective magic is illustrated in a narrative about the personified epidemic disease Cholera. It is said that during a raging epidemic only one man survived, since he was clever enough to serve Cholera with a cup of urine (Sauka, Seselskytė and Vėlius 1967: no. 432).

The characteristics of mythical beings associated with cadaveric features are pictured in the tale of magic *The Household of the Witch* (ATU 334). On her way, a girl observes the repellent appearance of the witch homestead: the gate is closed with a human arm and the door with a human leg; human heads hang on the fence; inside the house a human stomach full of blood is put on a table and human hair is bundled all over the floor. The witch asks what the girl has seen and explains the true meaning of the strange phenomena observed: the gates are closed with a bolt; the door is secured with a hasp; the heads are actually her pots; the stomach is her bowl with sauce; and the hair is flax fibres for spinning (Kerbelytė 1999: 175-6).

Summing up, all of the aforementioned folk narratives prompt the listener to evaluate the objects of the other world according to their inner purpose instead of their external attributes. The picture of the mythical world is distinguished for the emphasis put on the ugliness of its objects and the oddity of its surroundings. The symbolic interpretation of the environment in the traditional folk worldview is virtually based on the juxtaposition of the usual and the strange, i.e. the division into kin and alien from the point of view of the humans. The outer world is believed to be dangerous and harmful to human society. Therefore the mythical beings that are located in the other world are endowed with demonic features which are not characteristic of human nature (Toporkov 1989: 95). Thus, repulsive and cadaverous features also quite often distinguish the picture of the other world in traditional narratives.

As we have seen, the other world is imagined in a quite material,

palpable and substantial way. In Lithuanian religious tales, e.g. *The Bridge to the Other World* (ATU 471)<sup>3</sup> and *The Punishments of Men* (ATU 840), even human sins and virtues are pictured by figurative means. On his way to the other world a hero observes mysterious scenes. For instance, two young ladies repeatedly throwing each other a golden apple on and on; incessantly fighting ravens or scuffling pigeons; scrawny sheep in a beautiful pasture and fat sheep in poor pasture, etc. The explanation is given to him that such condition of the personages is stipulated by their conduct – these are people who have got a corresponding reward or punishment after their death: the two ladies were in love with the same man; the fighting birds stand for brothers who couldn't divide a piece of land; the scrawny sheep are rich but greedy people that are now unable to satiate themselves by any means and the fat sheep are generous people, etc.

In the second religious tale *The Punishments of Men* (or *Human Sins*) (ATU 840) a young traveller stays overnight in a strange farmstead where he observes the unusual appearance of the local inhabitants and their tools: pigeons are flying around the sleeping newly-weds; a snake crawls near the hosts of the house, in the yard a man lies with an axe hacked in his head. The old fellow traveller explains that these are sleeping people: the newly-weds love each other, while the hosts are at odds and the houseboy always forgets to take the axe indoors. Such scenes reveal that the corresponding reward might be experienced even in this very lifetime. The comparison of the two narratives presented above discloses that the spheres of death and dreaming are interrelated, that is, the dream-time is regarded as a temporary death.

Moreover, this illustrates that, apparently, a human being is witless whenever he finds himself in the other world and faces death-related phenomena. The hero deludes himself then chooses the devil's gifts, and he misinterprets the visions seen in the afterworld as he characterises them according to their external signs instead of their underlying meaning. In this case, the strange visions seen by the hero cannot be explained strictly in the context of inverse symmetry, though undoubtedly they reflect a certain mode of the soul's transformations that are believed to be undergone in the post-mortal world. Nevertheless, such

### 3.

The tale *The Bridge to the Other World* (ATU 471) in *The Catalogue of Lithuanian Narrative Folklore* by Bronislava Kerbelyte is transferred to the chapter of religious tales due to its structural and semantic particularities.

visions, especially those seen in the other world, reflect a certain aspect of the otherworldly temporality, that is, they represent the time of eternal repetition. Thus, the personages characterized as sinners that repeat the same odd actions without interruption are as if stuck in time, and their activity has neither an intended termination nor a meaningful purpose (Beresnevičius 2006: 16).

It is said that one hour of post-mortal torments is equal to one hundred years of the most severe suffering on earth (Basanavičius 2004: 149, no. 14). This belief elucidates the idea that in the other world time is distinguished by an extreme concentration – three days spent in the afterworld stand for three hundred (LTR 1439 /32/) or even three thousand human years (LTR 449<sup>a</sup> /131/). A person coming back home from the other world finds himself/herself in completely changed surroundings and does not recognize anybody.

It could be stated that in folk narratives the overlapping of the real and the mythical realms is often linked to specific segments of time. Still, it is quite obvious in the folk narratives discussed that a man does not notice the moment in time when he passes from this world to the other one nor does he perceive the alterations of the otherworldly time. The manifestations of the other world are more frequent at night or sleeping time; however, a correlation with liminal periods of human life (birth, weddings and death) is of no less importance as well. The first two existential experiences (namely, childbirth and marriage) are distinguished by the proximity of the other world and its substantiality in the same way as the moment of death is.

The mythical notion that the segments of time are of unequal quality, precisely, that the time consists of prosperous and inauspicious moments, makes it clear why people born at different times have different fate. The future of a newborn baby can be foretold by observing the mysterious visions which appear at his cradle. In a realistic tale (novella) called *Laimė* [personified fortune] *Allotting Fate to People* (AT 947 B\*)<sup>4</sup> a midwife helps to deliver three children. By the first child she observes a house full of smoke; next to the second baby hang many ropes; and near the third one piles of books are stacked. On her way home, an old stranger explains to her that the first boy

4. In *The Types of International Folktales* by Hans-Jörg Uther this tale is categorised as the type *Bad Luck Cannot be Arrested* (ATU 947 A).

will die in a fire, the second one will hang himself and the third one will become a priest (LTR 792 /34/).

Similarly, in the Lithuanian realistic tale (novella) *The Predestined Wife* (ATU 930A) a young man searching for a fiancée meets an old man and observes his strange activity: the old man hangs small hooks onto a fence (LTR 409 /70/); binds blades of grass or flower stalks together (LTR 1825 /29/); sorts a pile of berries, picking them out in twos (LTR 4724 /96/); ties hair in a knot (LTR 811 /437/, 953 /35/), etc. The mysterious actions are explained to the young man: in this very way future spouses are allotted and the duration of marriage foretold. E.g., two hooks signify marriage and one hook means bachelorhood; withered flowers symbolize the oncoming death of the newly married couple and so on (Racėnaitė 2006b: 107).

In Lithuanian folk narratives, the span of the human life and the time of death can be also represented by an image of a burning candle. While paying visit to personified death, a man observes candles: some have just started to glow, others are half-burned and the rest are already out (LTR 3116 /3239/). Death tells the man that the long candles are the ones of the small babies, the middle ones stand for the middle-aged people and the burnt-out candles mark the dead.

In the mythological context, such objective manifestations of the other world elucidate the abstract idea of temporality, when the time course of human existence is symbolized by figurative means. In some cases, time seems to change direction for a while and flows from the future back to the past, that is, to the present moment (Beresnevičius 1990: 170). This phenomenon of the interference of the future into the present is associated with the mythological notion of predestination and is particularly vivid in beliefs about the omens of approaching death when the harbinger of death manifests itself before the oncoming death.

## Conclusions

The mythic alterations of space and time substantiate the notion that even the most common and natural features might turn out to be different and unrecognisable in the other world. The peculiarities of inverse symmetry in the afterworld are reflected both in burial and funeral customs and in folk narratives about the extraordinary spatio-temporal experiences undergone by a man.

Apparently, it was supposed that the things that had been broken during funeral rituals would undergo a certain modification in the

otherworld. The destruction of burial items was widespread among the ancient Baltic tribes. In late burial rituals of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries the belongings of the deceased were also often destroyed or thrown away, reasoning that they might be infected with deadly substances. On the other hand, the performance of reverse activity was forbidden in trivial contexts as it was reminiscent of the actions done in the proximity of death and therefore could provoke a new death. In the majority of cases, actions dangerous to human life at both ritually significant and ordinary times were based on the principles of contact and similarity.

The mythological idea of reversal in the other world is also illustrated in Lithuanian folk narratives. The afterworld in folk texts is imagined in quite a tangible manner, emphasizing the repulsiveness and oddity of the mythical surroundings. Therefore the barren or cadaveric objects given in the other world turn to valuable items when brought to the world of the living, and vice versa. Consequently, the listener is prompted to evaluate the objects of the afterlife according to their inner traits instead of their outward features.

The overlapping of the real and the mythical worlds is linked to specific moments of time, i.e. night, sleeping time or the liminal periods of human life. The otherworldly temporality can be represented by figurative means and is distinguished by exceptional concentration and eternal repetition.

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