

The Devil between Nature and Culture

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Though devotional literature has its roots in the Church, one of the most civilised spheres of culture, the devil of this genre can be said to represent nature. He is depicted as a fear-inducing being and as a tempter in uncivilised, naturalistic terms. In folklore, which is looked upon as a natural, uncivilised, sphere of culture, he represents both culture and nature. As a fear-inducing being, the devil bears characteristics indicative of culture, but as a tempter he lures people into living a natural, unrestrained life. Thus tradition bearers express that which is alien and dangerous by employing inverted values. Nature and culture are indeed opposites but in the cognitive system to which the present material gives expression, they also complement one another.

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It is sometimes claimed that folklore was created by “nature poets” and “nature prose-writers”. Consequently, at the time of Herder and Goethe it was thought that folk poetry was indeed true, genuine and unaffected writing. In this respect it contrasted with fiction, which ever since the time of Aristotle had been burdened with rules governing metre and structure (*Geschichte* 1981, 90f; cf. Wretö 1984, 52, 79, 83f). For Herder and Goethe and others of their persuasion, the term “nature” has positive connotations. The word also has a negative meaning, however, in the sense that naturalness is equated with lack of education, civilisation or cultivation. The word thus gives rise to two opposite sets of associations.

Nature can be understood in folklore as a dangerous area. In folk poetry it is inhabited by supernatural beings such as wood-spirits, water-sprites, etc. (cf., e.g., Stattin 1990, 23ff; Wikman 1961 and Rooth 1961). These creatures all possess characteristics that distinguish them from man: they have hollow backs, mermaid’s fins, green skin, or they are hairy. They have clearly animal-like features and thus belong to the realm of nature. Not all supernatural beings, however, have such a “natural” appearance. The household brownie and the fairy of a ship or of a mine are, for

example, frequently depicted as small adults. That they lack animal-like features can perhaps be explained by their close proximity to human dwellings or places where humans live.

Of all supernatural beings, it is the devil that will be addressed here. On the one hand, he is represented iconographically as a natural being with the qualities of satyrs such as cloven horns and feet (Grober-Glück 1985/86, 122ff). On the other hand, he appears in connection with the Church, which may be seen as being distant from popular culture and which constitutes one of the most civilised, ordered and rule-bound spheres of our culture. There is, therefore, every reason to ask whether the devil represents culture or nature. In the light of what has been said about the close links of folklore with nature, it is my hypothesis that the devil of folklore should be wild, unruly and uncivilised since he belongs to the folk, the natural, sphere. On the other hand, the devil figure found in the teaching of the Church should be ordered and civilised due to the disciplining and civilising function of the Church. Since nature and culture can be seen as opposites, it may be assumed that the two spheres should be unconnected with each other.

I shall try to prove my hypothesis by examining two aspects. First, it is my intention to



The devil in culture.
Faust (Svante Martin)
and Mephistopheles
(Algot Böstman) in
Faust at Svenska
teatern, Helsinki, 1990.
Photo: Peter Sandberg.

demonstrate how the devil and his dwelling-place are described in devotional literature, i.e. "culture", and in folklore, i.e. "nature". In this way I hope to determine whether the devil forms part of nature or culture. Devotional literature was represented by the homilies and hymnals used among the Swedish-speaking inhabitants of the Finnish countryside at the turn of the century (e.g., Luther 1860 a-c; ib. 1867; Arndt 1891; Björkqvist 1877; Nohrborg 1899; *Psalmboken* 1802; ib. 1928; *Sions Sångar* 1840; *Sionsharpan* 1893). The folklore material is made up of notes and reports collected from Vörå, Ostrobothnia, Finland, about the same time. (Cf. Wolf-Knuts 1991, 319–382. The original documents are kept in Helsinki in the Archives for Popular Culture of the Swedish Society for Literature in Finland (Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland Folkkultursarkiv) and in the archives of the Department for Folklore Studies at Åbo Akademi University, Åbo).

The appearance of the devil in devotional literature

In devotional literature, the devil is seen variously as an anthropomorphic, a zoomorphic and a mythological being. He is male, a king with a bride and it is said that he has a gaping mouth, from which people may be rescued. As

a zoomorphic figure he is associated with the wolf, the snake, the lion, the dog, the owl and the kite. He is also depicted as a red dragon. In mythological terms he is seen as an angel or spirit. Finally, he can make his presence felt in the form of a storm or by means of other loud noises. In other words, he can take on many different guises.

The appearance of the devil in folklore

In folklore the devil may also be seen as an anthropomorphic figure. He may appear in the form of a little old man, a gentleman, an elderly gentleman with a long-stemmed pipe in one hand, a priest, the headmaster of a school or as a cantor. As such he has a head, a skull, two eyes, red hair, a neck, strong lungs, tremendous physical strength, hands, fingers, a stomach, legs, etc. He is described in many accounts as being very ordinary in appearance. There are, however, exceptions, as in those cases where he is described as having a blue beard or a single eye in the middle of his forehead, for example. In temperament, too, he is very human: he may be glad or sad, frightened or content with what he has done, he is persevering and greedy.

In zoomorphic terms he is represented in folklore as a dog, and he is said to be able to

turn himself into a flock of black ravens or a pig. Similarly, he is associated with the snake and with various kinds of insects. It should be noted, however, that the majority of reports begin by describing the devil in human form; it is only at some later stage in the story that he turns himself into some kind of animal. This ability to alter his appearance gives rise to people's uncertainty, recorded in the Vörå reports, about whom they are dealing with. Hence the oft-asked question, "Are you a man or are you the devil?" There is no basis in folklore for the conception of the devil as a mythological, demonic being diametrically opposed to God.

The dwelling-place of the devil in devotional literature

Devotional literature tells of how the devil may exist in either a mythical or in a non-mythical environment. Thus he finds himself in hell though he would rather be in heaven. He can, however, also be found on earth, in the world, that is to say in the midst of worldly vice and temptation. Further, he can be found in the sea or in other water-rich areas, though it is also stated that the sins of mankind are forgiven by throwing them into the depths of the sea so that the devil *cannot* find them. He is also able to fly in the air, but he would prefer to be situated in the heart of man, which is compared to "an abominable pile of mud and a hellish pit full of thorns, nettles, thistles, dragons, ghosts, goblins, elves, owls, scorpions, spectres, etc." (Arndt 1891, 1020).

The dwelling-place of the devil in folklore

The devil's abode in folklore may also be mythical or non-mythical. He can be found in hell, which he enters through a cellar door, or he can be met at the end of the world. If he meets a human being in a non-mythical location, the meeting usually takes place in a human environment, e.g. in a farmer's house, at the end of the table, in the cellar, at a dance hall, in the hay-loft of a barn. Such a meeting between the

devil and a human being might take place in a meadow, on a road, in a sand-pit, a sauna, a smithy, a church, in a churchyard, or on the steps to a bell-tower. Furthermore, it is stated that he can be found in a shop, at the market, in court, at the gallows, on a ship, or at a desk in a classroom.

Is the devil a representative of nature or of culture?

In accordance with my hypothesis, the devil should, in his popular form, be natural, wild and uncivilised while the devil of devotional literature should be ordered and civilised.

We have seen above how the devil of folklore might appear in both the form of a person or of an animal. The human roles he might take on were all associated with a certain level of education: he might be a gentleman with a long-stemmed pipe, a priest, a cantor, or the headmaster of a school. More often than not he appeared in human form with a human temperament, i.e. with the ability to experience emotions. Inasmuch as he appears in the form of an animal, the role he adopts is a transformation from human form.

The devil of devotional literature might, of course, also take the form of a human being. Much more frequently, however, he is described as having animal-like features or, quite simply, just as an animal. In addition, he can be heard in a storm or through other loud noises, i.e. in natural phenomena associated with sounds beyond human control.

The devil portrayed in folklore lived for the most part close to peasants, i.e. on the farm or in other places associated with human labour. Even in cases where in folklore the action takes place in hell, it still takes on the characteristics of the peasant's environment.

The devil of devotional literature is described almost without exception as being situated in different parts of the cosmos (in heaven, in the air, on earth, under the earth, in the sea). When he takes up his abode in the heart of a human, it is given the unambiguous features of a primeval forest.

From this it may be concluded that the devil

The naturalistic devil.
Photo: Marianne
Sjöman.



of devotional literature, who might be expected to be a "cultural product" formed by the norms of the Church, which is the most highly civilised and cultivating institution of society, has, in fact, predominantly naturalistic characteristics. Viewed from the other side, it can be seen that the devil of folklore, who should be undisciplined, uneducated and "folk" in the most negative sense of the word can indeed display strong cultural features. In this way my hypothesis has been disproved and in tradition as a whole the devil can thus be seen as representing both nature and culture, albeit with reversed roles in relation to the context. Thus in the Vörå sources, the values associated with nature and culture are reversed when expressing the place of the devil in these spheres. From this it can be seen that the two spheres are not entirely separate from each other. By means of inversion, contact is maintained between the two so that devotional literature/culture has elements of the natural while folklore/nature contains elements from the realm of culture.

A fundamental thought pattern which can be discerned in devotional literature is the desire to lay down rules of conduct. There exists a clear need to polarize good and evil; that which is good is attained by obeying certain norms. In actual fact, devotional literature is full of exhortations as to how one should live together with prohibitions against various ways of liv-

ing. It is often the case that the exhortations and prohibitions contain restrictions; there are things that one is not allowed to do, that one must resist, that are permitted only in certain circumstances or with the greatest of self-control, etc. The function of these commands and prohibitions is to lead an individual from a life of sin, which is characterised in terms of disorder in different forms, to a Christian life, where order and method are achieved with the aid of limitations on the way one is to live. The attempt of devotional literature to distinguish between and polarize good and evil can be seen as an attempt to do away with that which is disordered and wild in man, an attempt to civilise, to educate. Those who do not submit, those who remain uncivilised, uneducated and wild are outsiders.

In devotional literature, man is tainted by original sin and appears as an evil, wild creature who belongs to nature, which is frightening and insecure. The intention here is that man should be guided away from that insecure phase of life into one characterised by order, habits and norms, i.e. to the culture represented by devotional literature. Following the educational principles that have prevailed almost up to the present day, it was not uncommon to frighten or threaten an individual into obedience (Miller 1985, 2372; see also Fertig 1984, 99–125). Not only wild and uncivilised persons but also those who were educated and

civilised, but who might nonetheless yearn for their natural past, were frightened into submission with the aid of the devil. He continues to have natural, demonic and wild features. It can thus be said that the methods employed in devotional literature to do away with that which is wild follow the saying "evil shall be cast out with evil".

That the natural, the uncivilised was used in order to frighten people into submission also outside the realm of devotional literature is well-known. Fictitious beings in folklore often take on a dangerous appearance or come and take those who stray beyond the limits of that which is permitted; the chimney-sweep is black because he is by nature unclean and dangerous, the sandman is by nature unshaven and dangerous. Another figure used to frighten children into obeying the accepted norms of hygiene was that of the rebellious boy with unkempt hair and uncut nails (cf., e.g., von Sydow 1941, 18; Fertig 1984, 107ff; Hoffmann 1906, 2).

It may therefore be said that the devil of devotional literature has natural, uncivilised and demonic features in order to frighten people into an orderly and civilised life in the heart of culture and the Church. The natural devil is thus used as a civilising instrument. Inversion becomes a mechanism by which people are civilised through fear.

Can it then be said that folklore has a more civilised and educated devil? Study of the appearance and abode of the devil in folklore lends support to this idea. It must, however, be observed that meetings between the devil and man are often characterised by uncertainty. There are frequent references to humans not realising who confronts them. Hence the question, "Are you a man or are you the devil?" The purpose of this is to banish by magic what might turn out to be the devil. Culture and nature are thus polarized by the actors in folk tradition. Culture is emphasized through reference to a person, an ordinary person with whom one identifies. Nature, on the other hand, is spotlighted through reference to the devil, i.e. a being with whom one does not identify. The idea on which this is founded is the popular notion which holds that that which is

alien is in some way dangerous. In the kind of record represented by the Vörå notes, there exists for people a kind of opposition between the dichotomy: person like us, not dangerous/culture, on the one hand, and the devil as different from us, dangerous/nature, on the other.

The devil can appear in folklore as a cultured, educated and civilised gentleman. As such he is alien to rural society and thus constitutes a potential danger. In addition, it is important to note a certain contempt for such "gentlemen" that can be found in folklore. This contempt is built not only on the inability of the gentleman to fully comprehend the way of life of the peasant class, but also on social antagonism. "Gentlemen" represent a highly ordered, civilising authority that attempts to impose restrictions on the lives of peasants with regard, for example, to work on Sundays, the making and drinking of alcohol, morals, etc. Among these gentlemen, the representative of the Church is also found. Thus one may claim that the devil, when he is made a "gentleman" becomes a representative of an alien – and therefore dangerous – social class. He becomes a fear-inducing being also in folklore, not as a natural being but rather as a cultural being through his advocacy of civilised culture, which simply does not belong to the natural surroundings of the peasants. Also with regard to folklore it can be stated that inversion is a mechanism of discipline through fear. Thus it can be said that while the devil appears as a fear-inducing figure in both folklore and culture, in the latter he plays the role of inducing fear through his links with nature.

An analysis of whether the devil belongs to the natural or the cultural domain, however, cannot be limited just to the devil's abode and his appearance. It is also necessary to extend the study to include observation of the devil's deeds. His most common activity is, of course, to tempt people to do things unacceptable in an orderly life; he lures people to break accepted norms, whether in the form of card playing, alcohol, money, sexual immorality, etc. In the final analysis his task is to get the person to stray from the accepted course, i.e. to achieve a restrained and well considered existence, and live as he wants, without regard for others.

Very often the devil is successful in his attempts. Man gives in to his natural, human egoism and to his materialistic desires. Consequently, it may be said that the devil is used as a tool for leading man back to his natural state.

The devil of devotional literature can therefore be said to represent nature. In folklore, however, he personifies both culture and nature. In order to play his fear-inducing role, the devil of devotional literature takes on uncivilised, natural features whereas in folklore he can for the same reason take on civilised, disciplined characteristics. When tempting man to return to his natural state, the devil retains, in devotional literature, his close associations with the natural, and in folklore he plays the role of a figure who attempts to persuade man to live a natural and unrestrained, and for that reason unacceptable, life. Thus, on the basis of this material one can, contrary to the hypothesis formulated above, claim that the tradition bearer, by employing inverted values, can express that which is alien and thus do that which is to be feared. Furthermore, while it is clear that nature and culture are opposites in the cognitive system to which the Vörå material gives expression, they also complement each other. A question which remains unanswered as yet, however, is how the "natural" devil in the "natural" sphere of culture, of which folklore is an expression, should be explained.

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