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The socialist devil.

Swedish young socialist fiction at the beginning of the 20th century

In the beginning of the 20th century, the devil found himself being fiercely attacked in the Swedish public debate. One evening in February 1909, a big meeting was held in Stockholm, with both liberals and social democrats present.¹ The purpose was to protest against the cruel visions of hell that permeated the sermons of the state church as well as the religious education at schools. The participants emphatically demanded that the devil should be expelled from all schoolbooks and religious manuals. The demands started the so-called devil controversy in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (*The Daily News*), where clergymen of the state church, nonconformist ministers, politicians and scientists were asked about their attitude towards the notion of devil and hell. The report was followed by yet another meeting where representatives of the state church were given the chance to defend their position. However, this meeting too ended in demands that the government should see to that the state church disposed of both devil and hell. With that, the criticism against what was thought of as the church's "diabolism", culminated. Among the most prominent critics were leading social democrats such as the party leader Hjalmar Branting and Axel Danielsson, who accused the church of trying to oppress people by threatening them with horrifying images of Satan and the torments that awaited the freethinkers in the underworld.²

Ever since liberal radicals and writers such as the Swedish author Viktor Rydberg had dissociated themselves from the idea of hell in the mid 1800s, the devil had become central when criticizing the clergy or the conservative state church. Besides that, the Swedish social democracy had also been influenced by the even more radical authors of the 1880s, who repudiated traditional Christian faith altogether. It was common to rhetorically contrast religion with medicine, and thereby imply that the clergy represented an outdated discipline in opposition to a modern, scientific conception of the world.³

¹ "Djävulen och prästerna", *Dagens Nyheter* 14/2 1909.

² Bengt Ankarloo, *Helvetet: döden och de eviga straffet i Västerlandets kristna tradition* (Lund 2003) p. 271–275.

³ Inga Sanner, *Att älska sin nästa såsom sig själv: om moraliska utopier under 1800-talet* (Stockholm 1995) p. 85–86, 136.

In spite of the vehement attacks on the destructive belief in the devil, the early working-class movement's relationship with the devil was more complex than one might think. Even though the social democrats' attitudes towards the church remained frosty, they still depended on Christianity in some respects. During the movement's formative years at the end of the 19th century, the socialists had to use images and symbols that were meaningful and comprehensive even for those who had no (or very little) experience of political debate. Since everyone in Sweden had to learn some of the central Christian passages at school, confirmation, divine service and parish catechetical meetings, the language of religion became a valid part of the language of the working-class movement as well. While still criticizing the church, the socialists therefore relied upon motifs and idioms originating from the Christian sphere. In fact, a rhetoric inspired by Christian representation was frequently used quite deliberately when criticizing the state church teachings. Quotations and allusions to passages in the Bible often proved helpful in illuminating, for example, the hypocrisy of the clergy.⁴

The growing conflict between the state church and the free churches in Sweden, contributed to renewing the actuality and drama of the religiously influenced language – a language in which the devil played an important role. Consequently, at the turn of the century, the devil was not only a terrifying monster employed by the conservative church, but was also one of the most powerful symbols available. As such, he could be used in many different contexts. These circumstances were particularly well taken advantage of by the young socialists, a radical fraction of the social democrats. Long after references to both the oppressing religion and the devil had become scarcer in the social democratic papers, Satan was frequently referred to in the young socialist paper *Brand (Fire)*.⁵

Even if many of the texts in *Brand* used the figure of Satan in a conventional way, i.e. to illustrate the world's evil, the character developed more freely in texts that favoured a more benevolent attitude towards him. Initially, the young socialists shared this attitude with the social democrats, who also used to imagine the devil as a more ambiguous character than the despicable superstition they rejected in the debate of 1909. In this paper, I will discuss the character of the devil more in detail, using the young socialist fiction as a starting point in my analysis. By examining how the devil was interpreted and reinterpreted in young socialist

⁴ Kurt Johannesson, "Arbetarrörelsen – en ny kyrka?", *Arbetshistoria* 66–67 (1993).

⁵ Herbert Tingsten, *Den svenska socialdemokratins idéutveckling* 2 (Stockholm 1967) s. 258–276.

fiction, I hope to elucidate how this fictional devil found his place also within the radical politics of the time.

Truth and light

In the poem “En dröm” (“A Dream”), a clergyman was interrupted during service by the devil himself, who flung the church gates open and let his voice ring out over the parishioners. Those who had managed to stay awake during the sermon, turned anxiously in the pews, as the stately figure accused the clergyman of spreading lies about him in order to intimidate people and thus keeping them from ever knowing the truth. “I am not the devil with cloven hooves you painted upon the wall”, said Satan, “I am the truth and the light.” The devil who made his entrance in the poem, could no longer stand the churches’ false imagery. Nor did he in any way resemble the hoofed creature – on the contrary, the poem’s devil was described as an impressive figure of light, an emblem of knowledge and truth.⁶ Apparently inspired by the Bible, he described himself as the truth and the light, but the light he alluded to was probably not the one found in the Bible, but the one spread by the Enlightenment.

To let a figure resembling the devil pose as symbol for knowledge in contrast to old and dark, oppressing teachings, was not uncommon in the socialist press at the end of the 19th century, though the devil was only one of the mythical characters lending his features to this symbol. The character most frequently embodying the Enlightenment’s striving for knowledge in the 19th century literature was the Greek mythologies’ Prometheus. The fire he had stolen for mankind was identified as the light of reason, which gave mortals the ability to become independent thinkers and not blindly serve the gods of the Olympus.⁷

As in European literature, Prometheus was a recurring theme in Swedish poetry. Especially the author Victor Rydberg used the motif of Prometheus in a way that proved very influential in early Swedish labour movement literature.⁸ In the poem “Prometheus och Ahasverus” from 1877, Prometheus was a friend of mankind and opponent to the tyrannical gods. As the brave freedom-fighter, he did not despair after being punished by the gods, but swore to return and one day bring about the fall of the despotic Zeus. It is not hard to imagine why this

⁶ ”En dröm”, *Nya Brands Månadshäfte* 7–8 (1913).

⁷ Brigitte Mral, *Frühe Schwedische Arbeiterdichtung: poetische Beiträge in sozialdemokratischen Zeitungen 1882 – 1900* (Uppsala 1985) p. 133.

⁸ Mral (1985) p. 133–137; Magnus Nilsson, ”Prometheusmotivet hos Victor Rydberg och i den tidiga arbetarlitteraturen”, *Sammlaren*. Vol. 128 (2007); Stig-Lennart Godin, *Klassmedvetande i tidig svensk arbetarlitteratur* (Lund 1994) p. 112–117.

Prometheus appealed to the sympathizers of the labour movement. Just as Prometheus had given fire to man, the social democrats wanted to liberate the people by giving them the light of knowledge and education.⁹ Therefore, Prometheus became a popular and long-lasting topic in the poetry of the working-class movement, where he could represent technological and scientific advances as well as the idealistic strive for knowledge.¹⁰

When Prometheus first appeared in the working-class fiction, it was nonetheless under the name of Lucifer and consequently in close connection with the devil. The social democratic newspaper *Arbetet* (*The Work*), published in 1887 a poem named “Ljusbäraren” (“The Light-bearer”), where Prometheus was portrayed as a revolutionary martyr, uncompromising in his endeavor to fight the injustices of this world.¹¹ The Light-bearer was identified both as Prometheus and the devil. Not only did the title reference the name “Lucifer”, but the poem’s Prometheus himself said that he would remain the same, irrespective of whether he chose to manifest as Prometheus or Satan.¹² Even if the socialist publishers declared that the name Lucifer only referred to its linguistic meaning, it inevitably was associated with the socialist criticism of Christianity.¹³ Yet another mythical figure was associated with the role of the light-bearer. The Nordic god Loke had also been cast in a similar role in August Strindberg’s poem “Lokes smädelser” (“Loke’s blasphemies”) and together, the three became parts of a symbolic character that was rebellious but also stood together with the people in the struggle for the light of knowledge.¹⁴

That young socialists as well were eager to use this tradition when creating their fictional devil, became evident in the very first issue of *Brand*, whose front page displayed a poem in which Prometheus was called upon to speak to the people from the underworld.¹⁵ In the poem “Djävulen” (The Devil), it was established that the devil indeed had taken many different shapes throughout history, one of which was Loke – the shape most suitable for fighting the authorities in Scandinavia.¹⁶ The devil who flung the church gates open in the young socialist poem, depended not only on the images presented by the church, but also largely on the

⁹ Mral (1985) p. 133–137.

¹⁰ Godin (1994) p. 113.

¹¹ Mral (1985) p. 133–137. Axel Uhlén, *Arbetardiktningens pionjärperiod 1885 – 1909* (Stockholm 1978) p. 29–30.

¹² Nilsson (2007) s. 110.

¹³ Per Faxneld, ”Problematiskt med Satan som god förebild”, *Svenska Dagbladet* 22/6 2006.

¹⁴ Nilsson (2007) p. 110; Mral (1985) p. 135.

¹⁵ ”Brand!”, *Brand* 1 (1898).

¹⁶ ”Djävulen”, *Brands månadshäfte* 6–7 (1909).

connection to the hopeful figures of the Light-bearer and Prometheus. The honoring of Lucifer did not only serve as a negation of the Christian rhetoric, but could also be described in more positive terms as a celebration of free thought and man's ability to be independent.

Rebellion and contempt

Even though Prometheus could work as an efficient symbol of science and reason, his power was limited by the fact that the figure was rather exclusive and principally associated with philosophical arguments and higher education. Satan, on the other hand, had nearly endless possibilities. Everyone had their own opinion about the devil; to some, he was the evil of the world personified, to others, he was a disgusting hoofed creature or a ridiculous superstition. His power within the fiction was strengthened by his ties to the church, which gave him both fame and a provocative potential. Why let Prometheus fight the long-forgotten gods of the Olympus, when you could show how Satan interrupted representatives of a god still worshiped by the religious as well as the worldly rulers of today?

As the debate of 1909 illustrates, the young socialists did not only choose an utterly controversial religious figure but one who was filled with political implications, when they chose Satan as a character in their fiction. Nonetheless, to merely force the state church to give up teaching about the devil, was not enough for the radical authors of *Brand*. This, they meant, would only be a false victory. Unlike the social democrats, the young socialists never abandoned their marked anti-religious attitude, and thus meant demanded the church should be stopped from spreading its misleading view of the world altogether.¹⁷

It is true that the young socialists were not alone in their efforts to discredit the church, but the social democrat's criticism of the church seems not to have excluded a quite appreciative view on the political and social potential of Christianity. Seen in a secular context, particularly Jesus could be described as a precursor in the struggle for justice. Like so many after him, he was brutally murdered by the ruling classes for spreading his revolutionary thoughts. Rather than criticizing this version of Jesus, the social democrats preferred to include him in their own agitation. As a result, social democratic texts often engaged Jesus on their side in the political debate, making him a revolutionary as well as an advocate for

¹⁷ Evald Palmlund, *Väderhatt och väderflöjel: Erik Lindorm och tidningarna 1905 – 1924* (Lund 1981) s. 41. Tingsten (1967) s. 265.

peace.¹⁸ Even though the young socialists could express some sympathy for Jesus, they never really claimed him in the way that they claimed Satan – the much less mild and amenable of the two.

While the social democratic texts often played with the ambiguous name of Lucifer, stressing the qualities associated with Prometheus, the more radical young socialists seem to have preferred the name Satan. They did not simply accept the broader movement's use of the positive Lucifer/Prometheus, but used this image in creating their own Satan.¹⁹ According to the poems in *Brand*, Satan distinguished himself from other, similar characters, because he was the one most hated by the authorities. While he had been an esteemed hero in ancient Greece and worshipped in Old Norse society, Europe under Christian rule had spared no effort in fighting both the devil and the principal of reason.²⁰ To defend Satan was therefore to join forces with the most hated, the most persecuted and misunderstood mythical figure in history. In that, Satan was unquestionably superior to Prometheus. That was probably why the poem let Satan and not Prometheus – or even Lucifer – be the one to flung the church gates open and try to shed the light of truth over the parish.

The young socialists often stressed the fact that Satan was a figure who told the truth, and added that this made him a dangerous threat to the ruling classes. Since the devil had brought knowledge to mankind by convincing Adam and Eve to taste the forbidden fruit, he could be portrayed both as a true friend of reason and an enemy of God. His fight to bring knowledge to the world was often described as a direct confrontation with God. The poem “Hymn till Satan” (“Hymn to Satan”), praised the devil's shrewdness when he persuaded Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge before “the jealous god” came to inspect the Garden of Eden. It was this act of Satans that allowed the light of truth to drive away the world's evil darkness.²¹ The short story “Gud och djävul” (“God and devil”) assigned the devil a similar function, as it told the tale of how the establishment lead by king God the first, tried to prevent people from listening to the free thought by naming it Satan or the devil. They tried to convince the people that he was an incarnation of evil and that anyone who followed him would be condemned to burn in hell. To further deter people, they described him as an ugly and repugnant monster,

¹⁸ Johannesson (1993);Tomas Fransson, ”’Ett nytt namn på en gammal sak’; synen på kristendomen i tidig svensk socialism”, *Historisk tidskrift* 4 (2009).

¹⁹ See the discussion about the social democrats' interpretation of Rydberg's Promentheus. Nilsson (2007).

²⁰ ”Djävulen”, *Brands månadshäfte* 6–7 (1909).

²¹ ”Hymn till Satan”, *Brand* 7 (1907).

but despite all their efforts, Satan's ideas of science and knowledge spread all over the world.²²

Even though Satan acted in accordance with his role as the light-bearer in the short story, his primary motive seems not to have been his love of knowledge, but a lust for rebellion and hate of oppression. Spreading knowledge was only one aspect of this. The short story portrayed him as the rebel who first saw through the rulers' lies and the injustice of the system and because of that rebelled against God, the ultimate authority.²³ Intertwined with the indignant but nevertheless clear-headed and controlled Satan, appeared a devil who embraced the role of the first and greatest radical. The young socialists were more than willing to accept a figure who so easily could illustrate "the rebellious and revolutionary ideas". His rebellion against God could easily be described as a rebellion against all kinds of authorities.

Menace and anarchism

The perception of Satan as the first rebel was widely popular amongst left-wing radicals at the turn of the century. Early on, he could be found in publications such as the theorist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's, who called him the sworn enemy of churches and kings.²⁴ Mikhail Bakunin, one of the most prominent figures of the anarchist movement, did the same in his influential pamphlet "God and the state", published in 1882. Like Proudhon, Bakunin used the character of Satan to show the necessary anarchist rising against oppression, but chose to be as condemning of Christian religion as he was of church and clergy.²⁵

Bakunin described Satan as the eternal revolutionary and the first freethinker. Whereas this interpretation of Satan evidently was present in the anarchist tradition, it was, perhaps because of that very reason, not as common in social democratic publications. As early as in 1871, the differences of opinion between Marx and Bakunin had caused the First International to dissolve. Before the split between Marxists and anarchists, the two schools were seen as belonging to the same movement; now they were thought of as essentially different. In accordance with that, the Swedish social democrats too, renounced anarchism in 1891.²⁶

²² "Gud och djävul. Ett draksådds-kapitel", *Brands månadshäfte* 7 (1908).

²³ "Gud och djävul. Ett draksådds-kapitel", *Brands månadshäfte* 7 (1908).

²⁴ Faxneld (2006).

²⁵ Michael Bakunin, *Gud och staten* (Stockholm 1995) p. 20–21.

²⁶ Henrik Lång, *Drömmen om det ouppnåeliga. Anarkistiska tankelinjer hos Hinke Bergegren, Gustaf Henriksson-Holmberg och Einar Håkansson* (Umeå 2007) p. 80.

After several violent attacks perpetrated by European and American anarchists at the end of the 19th century, anarchism had come to be almost synonymous with terrorism and was therefore a term that could be effectively used as a weapon against political opponents. This was the case with the young socialists, who were accused of being anarchists and consequently alien to the socialist working-class movement. Eventually, the socialist youth league was expelled from the social democratic party in 1908.²⁷

Even though the young socialists hesitated to label themselves anarchists, they were not hostile to anarchist influences. On the contrary: several articles about anarchism and anarchists were published in the young socialist papers. Unlike the social democrats, the young socialists did not find it necessary to distance themselves from anarchist circles. Therefore, the fictive, shockingly rebellious Satan was accessible to them in a way that he was not to the social democrats. Their fictional texts often alluded to Satan's association with the dangerous anarchists, making their own organization seem more powerful and influential. Just like Satan, they wanted to lead a rebellion against the oppressing God. That a rebellion like that may not be possible by peaceful means only, was often hinted at.²⁸

Apparently, the young socialists did not shy away from the risk of linking their knowledgeable but somewhat intimidating Satan with the threat of anarchism. *Brand* published more than a few fictional texts in the shape of high-flown tributes to the devil. In "Hymn till Satan", the admiration for the defender of reason was mixed with a fascination for the possible threat posed by the powerful figure of Satan; much of his stature was said to rest upon his "intimidating frightfulness". This version of Satan was not only different from the one found in the Bible or the church, but also from the brightly shining Lucifer. It enhanced the menacing tone introduced by the use of the name Satan.²⁹

As a dramatic spirit of rebellion, Satan was highly compatible with the notion of the young socialists as a fairly loud-mouthed opposition to both the bourgeois establishment and the social-democrats. The socialist youth league celebrated the principal of revolt as a result of the ability of independent thinking and reluctance to accept any kind of authority. When the young socialists identified themselves with such an impressive and grand figure as Satan, they

²⁷ Henrik Lång, *Drömmen om det ouppnåeliga. Anarkistiska tankelinjer hos Hinke Bergegren, Gustaf Henriksson-Holmberg och Einar Håkansson* (Umeå 2007) p. 80.

²⁸ "Antitheos", *Brands månadshäfte* 3 (1908).

²⁹ "Hymn till Satan", *Brand* 7 (1907).

did not only intensify the group's revolutionary image, but also associated their position as political outsiders with a symbol that lent the group some of its romantic glow.

Romance and darkness

At the time when Bakunin published his pamphlet, there already existed a tradition in which the devil could be given a dramatic form, primarily in works of fiction. The inspiration to use Satan as an anarchist role model probably came from English romantic authors. They reinterpreted the Satan-character in John Milton's biblical epos "Paradise Lost" from 1667, where an unrepentant Satan openly proclaimed his revolt against his former position as God's servant. It was the romantics who initially compared the fall of Satan to that of Prometheus, thus giving the devil a more noble charisma than before. In the works of poets like Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Satan became the real hero of the epos. His splendor and persistence when humiliated by a vengeful God, gave him a moral stature far superior to God's.³⁰ This admiring of Satan's rebellion, made it easy for radicals and anarchists to adopt him as a symbol. Milton's Satan was admired for claiming that he would rather reign in hell than be a slave in heaven. One of the strongest influences on the young socialist Satan is probably to be found in this context.

The romantic Satan in young socialist fiction had an agenda that reached far beyond criticizing religion or spreading knowledge. His was a universal uprising, a personal attitude towards life, where beauty and creativity were central elements. When taking this romantic outlook into account, it is not surprising that the human being created by Satan in the young socialist short story "Satans dröm" ("Satan's dream"), was both freer and more beautiful than God's slaves. In contrast to God, Satan did not wish for his relationship with man to be hierarchical. "You are a god, as am I! You are my brother!" said Satan to his creation. Thereafter, Satan and his new, free man joined in an ecstatic dance that created an unbreakable bond between them. As their lips met, they took each other's hands and the world danced with joy.³¹ The will to rebel, which had its origin in the heartfelt indignation, blended with intense and intimate emotions. The romantic Satan was evidently a figure who easily could be portrayed as a highly emotional creature.

³⁰ Faxneld (2006); Robert Muchembled, *Djävulens historia* (Stockholm 2000) p. 235.

³¹ "Satans dröm", *Brands månadshäfte* 6 (1908).

That the young socialists chose Satan as an allied was in accordance with their special liking for emotional expressions. They often sought to highlight the emotional aspects of political standpoints, for example the sentimentally motivated refusal to do military service. In this respect, the romantic version of Satan fitted the young socialist group perfectly.³² The Satan found in *Brand* indeed managed to live up to the romantic ideals: his palace in hell was built of “strong, wild, violent passions”. In addition, he resembled the romantic hero also by being exceptionally beautiful. One of the poems in *Brand* painted a picture of a lonely Satan gazing out over his hell, his “dark and proud” features illuminated by the fire.³³

Unlike many of the protagonists in novels of the romantic era, Satan did not come across as a character confined only to his own emotional life.³⁴ When used in a radical, political context, Satan could no longer be allowed just to attack the injustice he had experienced in heaven. In *Brand*, the devil’s scrutinizing of the conditions on earth and his sympathy for the miserable people, were of vital importance. He also dreamt about changing the world – hence the creation of a new man. With such ambitions, his fall would unfortunately be the more painful. Despite his courage and his belief in the power of rebellion, the romantic Satan sometimes lost himself in thoughts of despair and hopelessness. Passion and joy were not the only emotions mediated by the symbolic figure of Satan. As often as untiringly rebellious, he would be portrayed as sad and brooding, fighting his own, inner darkness.³⁵ When the creation of a beautiful, new man turned out to be nothing but a dream, the sensitive Satan cried and trembled with disappointment, cursing the shackles that denied both him and humanity their freedom.³⁶

Like no other character, Satan seems to have been able to dramatize the romantic protagonist’s feelings of melancholy in the face of bleak reality.³⁷ The desperate devil crying over his lost dream was in many respects very different from the Lucifer who, confident of victory, never hesitated to attack those in power. Whereas Lucifer and Prometheus seemed destined to one day overcome ignorance and oppression, the romantic Satan acquired an air of

³² Emma Hilborn, *De förrådada kämparna. Gemenskap och identitetsskapande inom den ungsocialistiska rörelsen i Skåne 1903 – 1917* (Landskrona 2008).

³³ ”Gehennamajestätet”, *Brands månadshäfte* 7 (1908).

³⁴ Anne-Charlott Trepp, ”The emotional side of men in late eighteenth-century Germany”, *Central European History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 1994, p. 134.

³⁵ ”Gehennamajestätet”, *Brands månadshäfte* 7 (1908).

³⁶ ”Satans dröm”, *Brands månadshäfte* 6 (1908).

³⁷ En vanlig tematik inom romantiken, bland annat benämnd ”Weltschmerz”. Lilian R. Furst, ”The romantic hero, or is he an anti-hero?”, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, nr 1 vol. 9 1976, p. 57.

hopelessness. Even though identifying with this figure provided a certain feeling of superiority in an unsympathetic world, it nevertheless involved admitting that one had lost the battle.³⁸ The only thing saving the romantic devil from being entirely dominated by a sense of doom, was probably his connection to the other, more optimistic images of the devil, which made it possible to maintain the feeling that a renewed rebellion would come after all.

The devil and the politics

An analysis of the devil's popularity within the working-class movement at the turn of the century, not only shows that the Christian figure was an integrated part of political language at the time, but also illustrates the extensive reinterpretation made by the socialists when they adapted a pre-existing symbol to their political views. By further developing a character already familiar both to the workers and the establishment, the young socialists created their own devil, adding elements from political and literary traditions. With the help of this fictional Satan, they made sense of their own situation at the same time as they introduced new themes to the political debate. By stressing certain features and meanings, they were able to present a Satan who supported their own visions. Even if the texts sometimes referred to the images spread by the church, the devil in *Brand* was essentially different. The protagonist in these fictions was not the incarnation of evil from the Dark Ages; he was without a doubt a socialist devil.

³⁸ Håkan Lindgren, "Varför vi lärde oss att älska djävulen", *Dagens Nyheter* 25/4 2010.