

Creation Myths in Kalevala and in Hungarian Oral Tradition

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For over a thousand years, the Weltanschauung of Hungarian country people has been determined by Christian teaching. It is into this Christian framework that they could fit vague pagan beliefs as well as other elements of a biblical interpretation of the world (i.e. considerations extraneous to Christianity). Eventually, all of these elements melded together, resulting in biblical narratives - handed down orally from generation to generation - a strange reflection of church teachings. While these narratives involve changes to these teachings from the point of view of time and space, they are still related to each other through their level of consciousness.

What led to the discovery of this existing epic tradition was the collecting of narratives, myths and legends concerned with the genesis of the world. In the course of the last 10-15 years, listening to biblical stories related by our story tellers about the creation, the life of Joseph, the deeds of Jesus as a child or the Passion, we realized that these narrations could also be considered as part of folk narratives and a result of the same way of looking at the world. We entered our collecting upon the Holy Scriptures and arranged the compiled information in a so-called *Peasant Bible*¹ which consists of some 500 folk narratives, that had never existed as a whole in the repertoire of our story tellers but seemed trustworthy since a homogeneous worldview was reflected in them. The mythological texts are arranged in such a way as to make up another chronology if fitted in with the biblical one. The "sacred time" of the Scriptures becomes mythical time. In spite of a conscious arrangement, the texts are naturally related to each other. They also describe the world's coming into being in a way which despite its Christian roots, has nothing to do with the Christian view itself. Also, they contain features which the genesis do not.

In contrast to the Kalevala, the Peasant Bible is not the "product of a literary culture".² Its units are independent texts which, similarly to myths, are accounts of events having taken place at the earliest time in the world's history: there are stories about God, Jesus Christ, saints acting as heroes of culture and other biblical personalities whose deeds serve as an example to be followed in everyday life. Since these texts follow the sequence of the Holy Scriptures, there was no need to arrange them as in the case of Lönnrot's unconnected folk poems. The similarity between the two collections is that both of them lend themselves to a mythical interpretation, somewhat different from the conclusions that can be drawn from the two peoples' independent myths of the genesis. The mythical experience this epic collection offers, can be compared with the narratives based on Christian teaching.

In the *Peasant Bible*, the cosmos, the microcosmos and the final forms of human existence have been created by rather complicated activities. The physical, biological, social and symbolic reality is unchangeable because it was sanctified, by divine as well as diabolical beings. Although the texts of the *Peasant Bible* fit in with the chronology in the Scriptures, the creation of the constant world reflected in them is entirely different from that of the Holy Bible. In fact, it is organized according to a logic or method that can be called resistant mythological syllogism. According to this form of reasoning, in case A (formation of the world) belongs to every B (divine and diabolical being) belongs to every C (a being which is permanently or only temporarily in possession of divine or diabolic powers), A (formation of the world) belongs to every C. Thus in the formation of the world's constant elements God himself takes part, God and the Evil one, God with the angels, the Devil, Noah, Elijah (as cultural heroes), the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and St. Peter. It is this constantly growing world forming process where some of the elements often recur in cycles into which the individual actions of the re-interpreted biblical stories having absorbed the features of Hungarian peasant life, are built. Into this network of the constant elements vacillating between divine and satanic powers the biblical figures build their individual world which is, however, exposed to destruction at any time. Their actions can be lasting value only by having legal force through divine interference.

In the *Peasant Bible*, the world is formed in three cycles basically. The first is the antediluvian one; the second is the one immediately after the Flood; the third period is related to the well described actions of Our Lady, Jesus Christ and St. Peter. As we have already mentioned, there are stories about the formation or creation of the world connected with the names of Noah and Elijah as well (e.g. it is Noah who first plants a grape-wine and makes wine from it;³ it is Elijah who gives fire to mankind,⁴ and so on).

During the first phase of creating the world, before the very appearance of the earth and of man, God created hell, a pit for the fallen angels, while he remained on high, thus determining the boundaries of evil forever.⁵ It must be evident from this first episode that the formation of the world's constant features is not limited to creation alone, since this act having an overall effect is none other than the acceptance and sanctification of evil. This paradoxical deed makes it possible for God to fight against the evil principle which is kept secluded in Hell and he is unable to destroy it. According to one version of creating the earth, God and Satan do it together but oppose each other⁶: according to some other versions, God creates the earth alone.⁷ His action, the creation of the earth, similarly to that described in the Kalevala, is some kind of artistic endeavour: God decorates the heaven with the sun, the moon and the stars. In the very first phase creation means the primary creation of the material and biological world. God creates, and, sometimes, the devil creates as well. Nevertheless, the principal creator is God; the devil cannot create, since he is unable to instill life into man. The creatures begin to live their own lives with the principle of both good and evil in them. According to some narratives, Eve was evil from the very first, since God created her as such, e.g. from a dog's tail;

this is why women are similar to dogs: they resemble them by being wicked and so on.⁸ In this period, the rest of God's world forming activity already correlates with the objects and beings created, indirectly even with the devil himself.

In the formation of the secondary phenomena God is active or passive, respectively. One act of world formation that stands closest to creation is distributing the goods at large such as names,⁹ characteristic features¹⁰ and sexual organs.¹¹ Furthermore, making changes in what has already been created, e.g. the devil produces knobs and branches on trees originally free from imperfection.¹² This is another active form of world building. Part of the activity lies in the confirming power of the word of divine origin: God blesses or curses. On the one hand, the animals and human beings have been given unfavourable conditions because of their ill will towards God, e.g. the bee must die immediately after having delivered its sting;¹³ on the other hand, their position in society is not favourable: they are either poor¹⁴ or have to work hard for their living.¹⁵ Benediction results in the class of animals with favourable features and people who don't have to work.

A passive form of world building is the acceptance of the physical, biological and social state effected by human actions involving both good and evil. Therefore it is natural that a baby has to be carried in his mother's arms for a year,¹⁶ or, that making the beds and washing up is the women's task.¹⁷ The enforcement of the spontaneous changes the natural world undergoes is also a kind of passive formation.

The second phase of world building follows after the Flood. While in the first period God, or, sometimes the devil, creates the basic symbolic, physical, biological and social forms by separating evil, nominating male and female roles and confirms the practice of being married to one partner at a time, also differentiates between the rich and the poor and introduces agriculture, in the following cycle more differentiated forms are brought about. God, accompanied by a mate, creates nations with the Hungarians among them.¹⁸ He sets a limit to human life by creating diseases.¹⁹ The active forms of performance in this phase are as follows: by distributing the goods, at large God creates national characteristics,²⁰ e.g. languages.²¹ In response to individual and national attitudes towards him, he distributes years,²² feasts,²³ the Holy Land²⁴ and so on.

In this period, new manifestations of the active world formation appear. God teaches man to plough. There are new objects discovered: the devil assisted by man introduces tobacco (pipe), and spirits.²⁵ That God's malediction begins to take effect in this phase as well is shown by polyglottism²⁶ and the angel of death becoming deaf and dumb.²⁷ Also, the national costumes are sanctified in the course of the passive world formation.²⁸

The sophisticated network of permanent constituents furnished with institutions and confirming human mortality becomes even more elaborate in the third phase of creation, in the course of which several laws influencing the everyday life of plants, animals and human beings are enforced by the Virgin Mary, Jesus and St. Peter. In the world already furnished and inhabited, creation is but a response to acts being a series of modification rather than creation in itself. For example, the first turtle is

made from an envious woman²⁹: a piece of bread falling out of St. Peter's mouth, who is eating secretly, is turned into a mushroom by Jesus;³⁰ tears of the Virgin Mary become lilies-of-the-valley³¹ and so on.

Although St. Peter in trying to prove his divinity does his utmost to actually create, all his efforts turn into failures. He makes hunchbacks,³² a man with his head looking backwards,³³ flies³⁴ and many similar examples. By this time, with everything having been distributed, the constant elements of the world come into being by changing (modifying), blessing and cursing. The changing is related to the carrying of terrestrial things into heaven, and the cosmic activities of St. Peter and Jesus Christ being already there in the course of which heavenly phenomena are brought about according to earthy patterns.³⁵ In this cycle God loses his temper and reacts less tolerantly to evil actions. According to their attitude towards God, Jesus and Virgin Mary, blessings and cursings are given without end: the honeysuckle becomes badsmelling,³⁶ the spider receives a cross,³⁷ the knobby tree trunks are hard to cut down,³⁸ whoring comes to light within three days.³⁹ As a consequence to blessing, the gipsy is allowed to steal,⁴⁰ the fortunetellers are given wisdom and so on.⁴¹ These transformations qualify those deeds which were a reaction to the blessing or the curse, thus they become some of the constant elements having two contrary values. Pronouncing judgement also confirms the moral laws of the world and Jesus motivates good actions by morals, resembling proverbs: the lazy has to take twice as much pains as the diligent;⁴² idleness is the root of all evil;⁴³ one is caught in one's own trap and so on.⁴⁴

Both the approval of, and the act of making unalterable the consequences of human action refer to phenomena important to human life: the stories explain why men are stronger⁴⁵ and women suffer during child birth⁴⁶ and on what conditions married life is to be conducted,⁴⁷ why the smith and the herdsman have to work so hard and so on.⁴⁸

The threefold world formation to be found in the *Peasant Bible* gradually proceeds from the creation of the constant elements to the building up of the more elaborate laws of earthly life. Simultaneously, the importance of the non-constant elements is decreasing, human actions having been more profane in the beginning lose their significance in the network of the better constructed world. Finally, sanctity becomes predominant.

This idea of world formation is mythical-pagan and Christian at the same time revealing a system differing much in organization from the one manifested in the Holy Bible.

The creation of the Kalevala's world also consists of essentially three phases: 1. creation of the heaven and the earth; 2. creation of the plants and agriculture; 3. calling forth of confirming changes related to the birth of Marjatta's child. In the second phase the versions of the primary creation are performed, then the formation of some of the constant elements follows. The third, symbolic creation, similarly to the postdiluvian re-creation in the *Peasant Bible*, which predicts a new, better mankind to come, also means the fall of the proud, sinful, semigods.

The types of world building activities are sometimes similar to the Christian ones and sometimes differ from them: they can be active, meaning intentional creation, or a passive process of coming into being. The actual creation is not directly expressed; Ilmarinen forged the heaven,⁴⁹ Marjatta's child created the sun, the moon and the stars.⁵⁰ Similarly, in the texts of the *Peasant Bible* Jesus and God are often interchanged. The creation can be related to more divine beings, while the making of primary physical, biological, social and symbolic forms is always connected with the artistic activity of creation.

The resistant mythological syllogism by which the structure of the *Peasant Bible* is determined gains significance in the Kalevala as well. It is important in two respects. On the one hand, all the divine beings are able to change things and can create constant elements, even though they do not always make use of this ability. On the other hand, the divine or semidivine beings appear as participants in the creation, thus trying to prove their divinity.

In the first period of Kalevala's world formation the primary elements come into being through a passive, accidental process. This coming into being by chance is not followed by the separation of evil from good. In the course of later events, it is ambivalence and not dichotomy that prevails up to the time when Marjatta's son is born. The contingency as a constituent of the Kalevala's world can also be explained by the neutral powers. The first half-human/half-divine being, Väinämöinen is born at the same time as the world comes into being.⁵¹ Through the activity (distributing and planting the seeds already created) by him and a child called Sampo, the flora of the earth⁵² and agriculture (by the help of the eagle and the titmouse) was brought about,⁵³ the latter episode being similar to the act of ploughing in the *Peasant Bible* taught by God.⁵⁴ Some highly developed symbols such as kindness, eternal happiness, charm and so on are formed through the passive process of change.

These constituents being not really on the same level make up that primary stock out of which the secondary elements of the following phase are built. A double series of actions lead to the creation of iron, which can be considered as intentional creation: God creates virgins and their milk becomes soft iron, new steel.⁵⁵ Beer is made by adding a new element and can also be regarded as an actual world building activity.⁵⁶ Instruments and music become a reality to be enjoyed by everyone, through modification of the elements that were already created.⁵⁷ The only entirely wicked being is the daughter of the North who gives birth to those monsters from which she creates the diseases.⁵⁸ In this phase, the word's confirming power often states moral laws.

The Kalevala accepts as evidence but does not utter a word about the formation of several elements that can be regarded as constant. The sanctification of these missing elements with basically social reference can perhaps be discovered in a hidden acceptance which is formulated as a negative consequence by not keeping the rules.

Because the Kalevala is an epic the plot which consists basically of one thread can be fitted organically into the network of the world's constant elements. Many of

the world-forming activities only differ in quality from the chain of actions. The creation of the world's constant elements, however, takes place similarly to that of the *Peasant Bible*, concerning its logic and structure or the forms of activities.

Both the Kalevala and the *Peasant Bible* begin with the creation. While the former ends with the arrival of Marjatta's son whose destination is to create a new order, it is the group of the New Testament narratives in the latter which provides a continuation. These narratives are several episodes of the final world formation: the doors of the heaven that has become accessible by the salvation will open, the good are separated from the wicked after death and stay at the opposite poles of the next world and reflect the same principal of opposites which appeared in primeval times.

A better future promised in the last verse of the Kalevala also predicts the radical separation of good and evil, and thus even though in an incomplete form, reveals a world created in the same pagan-mythological-Christian way as the Hungarian *Peasant Bible* which is based on oral tradition.

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