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ANATOLY LIBERMAN:  
Etymological Devilry: Swedish *raggere/raggen*,  
English *ragamuffin*, Lithuanian *rāgana/rāgius*,  
and Italian *ragazzo*

Half a century ago, the beat generation, or beatniks, dominated the American scene. Highbrows found great depths in Allen Ginsberg's »Howl« and Jack Keruac's »On the Road«, while lowbrow hippies were rocking the boat of the consumer society that had given them the means to wander about, get high, and make (free) love. At that time, the honoree of the present volume and I did not know each other (we met in 1965) and roamed the streets of Leningrad in search of something to consume. In 2006, Keruac seems to be more remote and decidedly less interesting to both of us than Óláfr Tryggvason and even Egill Skallagrímsson. Yet this contribution to my old friend's »Festschrift« has some relation to hippies, albeit in their Swedish guise. I read Alf Spånberg's book »Raggare« from 1962 a few years after it was published, and it occurred to me that the *raggare* got their name because they were unkempt and ragged. My guess, it will be seen, was not so bad, but since the mid-sixties I have learned something about the origin of several words beginning with *rag-*, and it is to their history that I am now turning.

The most natural point of departure will be Sw.<sup>1</sup> *raggen* »devil«, which is indistinguishable, as far as derivation goes, from Sw. *ragg-en* »goathair«. The devil may have been called this with reference to *raggig* »shaggy«. In medieval mysteries he was often portrayed as having a ragged appearance (on Satan's shagginess see also what is said at the end of the etymological note preceding the entry *devil* in »The Oxford English Dictionary«). Inasmuch as Engl. *rag* is a borrowing from Scandinavian (cf. OI *rōgg* ~ *rōggr* »tuft of fur«), my naïve interpretation of *raggare* may get some support. In the 14th century, Engl. *Ragman* turns up (Langland's spelling *rageman* presupposes a pronunciation in three syllables); this name can be detected in the modern words *Ragman's roll* (a historical term) and *rigma-role*. At the same time, the devil Ragamoffyn surfaced in literature; his

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1 The following abbreviations have been used in the text: Dan. – Danish, dial. – dialectal, Du. – Dutch, Engl. – English, Fr. – French, G – German, Gk. – Classical Greek, Gmc – Germanic, It. – Italian, Latv. – Latvian, Lith. – Lithuanian, Norw. – Norwegian, OE – Old English, OI – Old Icelandic, Russ. – Russian, Sw. – Swedish.

name continues into the present as *ragamuffin*. *Ragamuffin* should probably be etymologized as ›devil-a-devil‹, for its second element is traceable to Anglo-French *maufé* ›ugly; the Evil One‹ (*Satan le maufé*). The vowel *-a-* is a common feature of English extended forms (›Streckformen‹), as, for instance, in *cock-a-doodle-doo*.<sup>2</sup> According to »The Oxford English Dictionary«, Sw. *raggen*, along with names like *ragamoffyn*, has the root *rag-* ›rag‹.

Sw. *raggen*, a word unrecorded in the other Scandinavian languages, is an unlikely etymon of any English proper or common name. Since the origin of OI *rōgg* is also obscure, it cannot provide any reliable information on the history of *raggen*, *Ragman*, or *ragamuffin*. Spitzer suggested that the English name of the Devil is a borrowing of Fr. *Ragemon* (*le bon*) and *Rogomant* (*bon* is a euphemism for ›bad, evil, wicked‹).<sup>3</sup> His hypothesis is tenable, but it leaves the ultimate origin of *Ragemon* ~ *Rogomant* unexplained.

In the history of Germanic languages, words having the root *rag-* and *arg-* tend to be confused. *Arg* is usually said to be primary. In Hellquist's view, Sw. *raggen* was derived from *arg-*.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, his etymology differed from the one favored by »The Oxford English Dictionary‹: his Devil was evil, wicked, rather than ragged. Likewise, according to Falk/Torp, OI *ragr* is related to *arg-*, as *ars* ›posterior‹ is related to its doublet *rass* (sub *arg* and *ars*). Weisweiler's investigation showed that the original meaning of Gmc *arg* was ›lustful‹ (when applied to women) and ›perverse‹ (when applied to passive homosexuals).<sup>5</sup> The next stages were ›emasculated; impotent, unmanly‹, ›cowardly‹ (that is, behaving not as a man should), ›loathsome‹, and finally, under the influence of Christianity, ›impious‹. But Weisweiler denied any connection between *arg-* and the words traditionally listed as its cognates: Sanskrit *ṛgháyati* ›shakes, trembles, raves‹ and Gk. *ὀρχέομαι* ›(I) dance‹.<sup>6</sup> Neither Frisk nor Chantraine (at *ὀρχέομαι*) mentions Gmc *\*arg-*. Frisk doubts that even Sanskrit *ṛgháyati* is related to *ὀρχέομαι* and offers a tentative etymology of the

2 See the details in LIBERMAN: 2004.

3 SPITZER: 1947, 91.

4 See *arg* in his dictionary and NOREEN: 1970, sec. 315.

5 WEISWEILER: 1923, 27–46.

6 Those cognates can be found in WALDE: 1927–1932, 1147, and POKORNY: 1959, 339.

Greek verb (which Chantraine rejects). Nor does Gmc *\*arg-* appear in Boisacq's dictionary. Mayerhofer merely ›compares‹ ῥγάγῃ with *\*arg-*.<sup>7</sup>

According to Watkins, dancing, shaking, and trembling initially had the ritualistic or obscene meaning ›mount‹, that is, ›copulate‹.<sup>8</sup> Following, apparently, Falk/Torp's lead (who expressed their opinion on this point cautiously), he connected the Indo-European root *\*ergh-* with Gk. ῥχίς ›testicle‹. Some phonetic difficulties weaken his reconstruction (the velars do not match), and a testicle as a tool for copulation is not what one could have expected (hence probably Falk/Torp's uncertainty). Considering how obscure even such present day words as *fag* ›male homosexual‹ and *dyke* ›lesbian‹ are and how unpredictable the semantic development of *gay*, *queer*, and their counterparts in other languages turned out to be, we can hardly expect to guess the origin of an Indo-European adjective for ›passive male homosexual‹, the more so because we do not know whether the word *\*ergh-* with its Germanic reflexes *arg* ~ *argr* was a gross insult (like *dyke*), mildly offensive (like *pansy* ›effeminate or homosexual man‹), or devoid of derogatory overtones (like *gay*, which now belongs to the neutral style). Seebold had doubts about Watkins's etymology,<sup>9</sup> but later supported it with minor reservations.<sup>10</sup> »Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Althochdeutschen«<sup>11</sup> (sub *arg*) makes no mention of it. Our knowledge of Germanic attitudes toward homosexuality is too patchy for any solid conclusions.<sup>12</sup> Hypotheses concerning the unrecorded history of *arg*, for the most part, do not carry conviction. Loewenthal, a master of fanciful root etymologies, sometimes came up with ingenious and even supportable combinations (as happened in his discussion of *ivy* ~ *Efeu*). He thought that *arg-* was related to Gk. ἄρχός ›anus‹, from *\*arghós*.<sup>13</sup> His idea has been pooh-poohed and ridiculed rather than refuted. No one seems to have paid attention to Gerstein's conjecture that *arg-* and *rag-* are related to *warg-* ›outlaw‹.<sup>14</sup> The question is unresolved and invites endless speculation.

7 MAYERHOFER: 1956–1980, I:119.

8 WATKINS: 1975.

9 KLUGE: 1989 and 1995, *arg*.

10 KLUGE: 2000.

11 LLOYD and SPRINGER: 1988.

12 Cf. SCHWINK: 1993, 237 on *arg*.

13 LOEWENTHAL: 1930, 157.

14 GERSTEIN: 1974, 152–154.

My point is that, whatever the origin of Gmc *\*arg-* and regardless of the attested metathesized form *rag-* (< *arg-*), words also existed with the root *\*rag-* ›fury, frenzy‹. Du. dial. *raggen* means ›run around in a state of wild excitement‹ (*lopen en raggen* has the same meaning). It alternates, as is common in words with roots ending in *-g*, with *rakken*. Weijnen discusses these verbs but refrains from giving a definitive etymology.<sup>15</sup> The Scandinavian cognates of Du. *raggen* ~ *rakken* are numerous; some of them have nasalized variants. Consider Norw. dial. *rakka* ›wander about‹, synonymous with *ranka* and *raga* (which also have the figurative meaning ›hesitate‹) and with Sw. dial. *rakkla*. In the entry *rangle* ›roam, wander, etc.‹, Falk/Torp list numerous seemingly related verbs. They include *rakka*, *ranka*, and *raga*, mentioned above, as well as Sw. dial. and Dan. dial. *rangla* ›shoot up‹ (said about a lanky youth), Sw. dial. *raga* ›sway‹, and (with ablaut) *rinka* ~ *runka* ›shake; totter, dodder‹. The reference to Norw. *rage* ›rise, tower, jut out‹, from German,<sup>16</sup> remained undeveloped, for the meanings ›roam, wander‹ and ›shoot up, rise‹ have little to do with one another. But we can probably agree with Falk/Torp that G (*er-*, *auf-*)*regen* ›excite‹ is a causative of *ragen*; only the etymon of *regen* must be *ragen* ›run around in a state of excitement‹ rather than *ragen* ›rise, tower, jut out‹. ›Roam, wander‹ may be a weakened variant of ›run in excitement‹. Perhaps Rag(e)man was thought of as a ›furious one‹, like Wodan ~ Wuotan ~ Óðinn. Be that as it may, not all occurrences of *rag-* ›evil‹ should be looked upon as metathesized variants of *arg-*.

As is known, attempts to discover the origin of *rain* (OE, OI *regn*, etc.) have not gone beyond a tentative connection between the Germanic word and the root of the Latin verb *ir-rig-āre* ›water, refresh‹. However, *rain* need not have meant ›water‹, ›moisture, vapor‹, or ›wet‹. People distinguish between many kinds of water falling from the sky: cf. Engl. *shower* and *drizzle*, along with numerous compounds like Engl. *down-pour*, G *Platzregen*, *Sprühregen*, *Nieselregen*, *Staubregen*, Norw. *duskregn* ~ Sw. *regndusk* (this *dusk* is presumably related to Russ. *dožd'* ›rain‹ and its Slavic congeners – that is, if we discard the alternative etymology of *dožd'* from *\*dus-djus* ›cloudy sky, bad weather‹). The German idiom *es regnet Bindfäden* ›it's coming down in sheets or torrents, or buckets; it's raining cats and dogs or pitchforks‹ (*Bindfaden* ›string‹) suggests that rain

<sup>15</sup> WEIJNEN: 1939–1940.

<sup>16</sup> FALK and TORP: 1910–1911, rage III.

is sometimes associated with straight lines between the sky and the earth. Likewise the Swedish idiom *regnet står som spön i backen* (also said about a heavy downpour) means literally ›the rain stands as a (the) rod in the bank‹.

Can \**reg-* in \**regnaz* ›rain‹ be in ablaut relation with *ragen* ›rise‹ or *ragen* ›move furiously‹ (or with both of them if the two are, after all, related and especially if *ragen* ›rise‹ could at one time designate movement in any direction, like G *steigen*)? Perhaps initially \**regnaz* meant ›shower; heavy rain, downpour‹. But to return to our devils.

Outside the Germanic speaking world, we note Lith. *rāgana* ~ *ragúota* and Latv. *ragana*; both mean ›witch‹. Most language historians detect the Baltic root *reg-* ›see‹ in it. The implication is that the *ragana* is a seer, a prophetess, a knowing one, like Russ. *ved'ma* ›witch‹. However, Otkupščikov defends a competing etymology, according to which *rāg-* ~ *rag-* is related to Lith. *rāgas* ›horn‹.<sup>17</sup> Although he mentions Marija Gimbutas's idea that Lith. *rāgius* denotes ›seer‹, the relevant passage in her article has to be reproduced in full. In her work on the Lithuanian god Vėlnias (the older forms are *Vėlenas* and *Vėlinas*), she says: »Another name used for Vėlinas is Ragius ›seer‹, from the verb *regėti* ›to see‹, stressing the clairvoyance of Vėlinas. Its female counterpart is Ragana ›seeress‹, in present Lithuanian ›witch‹. Clairvoyance is among the most eminent characteristics of Vėlinas, richly preserved in legends.«<sup>18</sup> Her gloss, repeated in a matter of fact way by Puhvel,<sup>19</sup> makes the impression, especially in an English language article, all of whose readership cannot be expected to know Lithuanian, that the word *rāgius* ›seer‹ exists in the language. But it does not; ›seer‹ is a product of unprovable etymological analysis. Obviously, if *rāgana* is not a seer, then *rāgius* is not one either. Otkupščikov, who adduced many examples of a belief in horned witches, understands *rāgius* as ›one having horns, horned‹. In Walde, *rāgana* is tentatively listed at \**ergh-* ›shake, tremble, excite‹ with *ῥgháyati*, *ῥρχέομαι*, etc.<sup>20</sup> Otkupščikov may have missed this etymology.

A divine name is hard to interpret even when no doubts exist about its origin. Óðinn is certainly ›furious‹, but the nature of his fury is unclear. A

17 OTKUPŠČIKOV: 1977.

18 GIMBUTAS: 1974, 89; the diacritics as in the text of the publication.

19 »Vėlinas was one-eyed, prophetic (epithetically Ragius ›Seer‹)...« PUHVEL: 1974, 84.

20 WALDE: 1927–1932, I:147.

god of the dead, a god of war, a shaman, the mythic inventor of the runic script, and the patron of the skalds – each of those functions may require ecstasy and frenzy. Vélnias is indeed one-eyed, like Óðinn and a few other gods, and in legend he and his votaries are clairvoyant, but he is predominantly an evil trickster (again not unlike Óðinn), and we cannot be sure which of his characteristics inspired the soubriquet *rāgius*. Pagan gods are apt to have multiple names.

*Vélnias* appears to be akin to *Veles*, the name of the Slavic ›cattle god‹. Animals' frenzy, whether caused by the sexual urge or by irritation, finds its reflection in many words. One of them is Engl. *busy* ~ Du. *bezig*, originally ›driven to distraction by flies‹ (said about cattle; *busy* is thus related to *buzz*). A cattle god would naturally be accountable for all facets of cows' behavior, including deviations from the norm. Horns would become such a deity even better, but nothing is known about Vélnias's connection with herds, and I would rather not separate *rāgius* from other *rag*- names for demons. The reference of *rāgus/rāgina* to *reg*- ›see‹ should be abandoned, whereas the resemblance between those words and *rāgus* ›horn‹ is, in all likelihood, fortuitous.

In dealing with *rāgius*, the possibility of a borrowing or of a migratory word has to be taken seriously. Words of this type travel fast. For example, Engl. *bogy* ~ *bogieman* (to cite the most common variants) ›evil spirit, hobgoblin‹ sound almost like their Russian synonym *buka* (there also is *bjaka* ›a thing one is not allowed to touch‹). They may be baby words. Their root is *boo-* ~ *bo-* (as in *peek-a-boo*, *bo-peep*, and so forth), but even if so, the similarity goes astoundingly far: Engl. *bug-*, in *bugaboo* and *bugbear*, is a synonym of *bogy*, and the verb *bug* belongs to the same family, while *bug* ›insect‹ practically recurs in Russ. *bukaška* ›small insect‹. The sound string *buk* calls to mind Engl. *Puck*, Engl. dial. *Pook* (with its doublet *spook*, from Dutch?), and OI *púki*. Their resemblance to Welsh *pwca* ~ *pwci* and Irish *púca* was noticed long ago, but the usual question about the direction of borrowing (from Germanic to Celtic or from Celtic to Germanic?) does not do justice to the wide geographical distribution of the *bug-* ~ *buk-* ~ *puk-* group. The Slavic-Iranian word for ›god‹ is said to mean ›wealth giver‹: cf. Russ. *bog* ›god‹ and *bogatyj* ›rich‹ (the opposite of *bogatyj* would be *ubogij* ›miserable‹; *u-* is a prefix). Yet the most ancient gods, particularly in polytheistic religions, were thought of as multitudes (like OI *guð*, neuter plural) sending diseases and derangement. When propitiated, they dispensed benefits, but their image

was frightening rather than pleasing. *Bog* and *bogatyj* (as well as their Iranian cognates) would form a perfect folk etymological pair only at a later period. Russ. *bog* and Engl. *bogy* were often compared in the 19th century. Serious philologists rejected this comparison, perhaps with needless haste.

The *rag-* group may have had a similar history. All over Europe, words beginning with *rag-*, *arg-*, and *wrag-* mean ›devil‹.<sup>21</sup> Their original relations can no longer be reconstructed. Perhaps *wrag-* was an ancient doublet of *rag-*, and both coexisted with their metathesized forms *warg-* and *arg-*, but they may have started as different (sound imitative?) entities<sup>22</sup> and influenced one another to the point of merger. As suggested above, *arg-* and *rag-* should in some cases be kept apart. A demon (*Ragman* or *Rageman*), most likely, made his first appearance in what is now northern Germany or the Netherlands. He then surfaced in England and Scandinavia (as also seen in numerous verbs designating erratic movement), reached French-speakers (but *rage* has nothing to do with his expansion: the ultimate etymon of *rage* is *\*rabia*, so that a bond between it and *Ragemont* can be due only to folk etymology) and possibly Italy and the Slavs.

If there is any foundation in the conjecture that both *buk-/puk-/bog-* and *rag-* as the names of fearful demons spread over half of Eurasia, is it possible that *Svarog*, the supreme Slavic deity of fire and the sun, was *Sva-rog* rather than *Svar-og*, with its unetymologizable *-og*? Pisani suggested such a division,<sup>23</sup> but his Iranian-Slavic interpretation ›horned dog‹ is strained. So is, of course, mine, and I am offering it without much conviction for what it is worth. Can *Sva-* be related to the root of a possessive pronoun (Latin *suus*, etc.), as in OI *Sif* (Engl. *sib*, G *Sippe*), the name of a family goddess, G *Schwaben*, and many other words, including Russ. *svat* ›matchmaker‹? The whole would then mean ›a furious demon of ours‹, with *rog-*, from *rag-*, under the influence of folk etymology or for any other reason.

The origin of few Italian words has been researched so thoroughly and with such meager success as that of *ragazzo* ›boy, youth‹. The earli-

21 See, among other sources, VASMER: 1950–1958, *vorog*, and FEIST: 1986, *wraks*.

22 Cf. Russ. *ryk* ›roaring‹ and *vorčat* ›grumble‹; see them in VASMER: 1950–1958.

23 PISANI: 1950, 56; according to his statement, his hypothesis was first offered fifteen years earlier.



est, 14th-century recorded meaning of *ragazzo* is ›stable boy‹. Kluge traced Fr. *garçon* ›boy‹ to southern Gmc *\*wraġjō-* (both G *Recke* ›warrior‹ and Engl. *wretch* once meant ›exile, fugitive‹).<sup>24</sup> I think that his etymology has little to recommend it, but the use of Germanic words in medieval Romance slang is probable, as is the syncretism devil/servant/youth. In English, *devil* may »conno[te] playfully the qualities of mischievous energy,... knavery, [and] recklessness«,<sup>25</sup> that is, such qualities as typically characterize the young. Servants and apprentices are sometimes called devils too. *Printer's devil* means ›an errand boy in a printing office‹ and ›the youngest apprentice‹. There also is *devil* ›a junior loyal counsel who does professional work for his leader without fee‹ and *devil* ›one employed by an author or writer to do subordinate parts of his literary work under his direction; a literary hack; and generally one who does work for which another receives the credit or remuneration or both‹.<sup>26</sup> According to this usage, a ghost writer would be a classic ›devil‹. *Imp*, originally ›a young shoot of a plant‹, came to mean ›child‹ in the 14th century, but today *imp* is only ›mischievous child‹ and ›little demon‹. The history of Engl. *boy* is more complicated, but its modern meaning ›young male child‹ emerged late; in the 13th century, *boy* meant ›male servant; man or youth of low estate‹. In Chaucer, *boy* ›devil‹ occurs. The path from ›devil‹ to ›poor devil‹ and ›servant‹ (because in folklore the Devil is often duped into working for the hero?) and from ›servant‹ to ›youngster‹ was short.

The Germanic origin of *ragazzo* has been suggested several times, but never in this context. If the word is Germanic, it consists of *rag-* ›devil‹ and an Italian suffix (compare the structure of Lith. *ragúota*). For an interplay ›servant‹ ~ ›youth‹ cf. It. *mozzo* ›shipboy; stableboy‹ (note that *boy* in the English glosses means ›servant‹, as it does in *cowboy* and *busboy*) versus Spanish *mozo* ›young man, youth; conscript, draftee; shipboy; bachelor; servant‹ (the latter with the specifications that match It. *mozzo*: *mozo de cuadra* ›stableboy‹, *mozo de tahona* ›baker‹, etc.). It causes some surprise to observe how many neologisms were needed for the designation of a stableboy.

24 KLUGE: 1916; 1921, 684–685; 1922.

25 *The Oxford English Dictionary*: *devil* 4b.

26 *Ibid.*, *devil* 5a, b, c.

Everything in the story presented here is uncertain. We do not know whether Sw. *raggen*, Engl. *ragamuffin*, Fr. *Ragemon*, Lith. *rāgana* ~ *rāgius*, let alone Slavic *Svarog* and It. *ragazzo*, belong with one another and with Du. dial. *raggen*, Dan. dial. *raggen*, and the rest. Yet a phantom seems to have once walked over Europe or even Eurasia, the phantom of the furious devil Rag(e)man, a sibling of Wodan ~ Wuotan ~ Óðinn. His fury was spent centuries ago, but the sound that occupies linguists remains, and none of the riddles he asked has gone away. Such is the nature of all etymological devilry.

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