



LIMINAL SOURCES OF DANGEROUS POWERS: A CASE OF THE BLACK RAM

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a semiology-inspired model for the description of “demonic characters.” In this model, an image of a mythological character is seen as a kind of sign with a twofold plane of expression because Egyptian signifiers combine visual and verbal components. Each of these components could be expressed through text and/or display, as in the case of the “Lord of Power” described verbally in the Pyramid Texts and depicted visually in the Book of Two Ways as a Black Ram. An incarnation of the pharaoh in the Pyramid Texts, in the Book of Two Ways the “Lord of Power” is one of the “judges” threatening the deceased. Viewed from different perspectives (e.g., inhabitants of the Netherworld, the pharaoh, the noble deceased, the sun-god), the Black Ram and related characters of the later sources seem to be dangerous and hostile creatures not as much “by nature” but by context and situation in which the solar energy exists in a particular moment and to whom it is opposed. More generally, this essay shows that characters often perceived as demonic genetically can possess positive divine, even solar, energy, which in some contexts can receive dangerous, aggressive manifestations.

The absence of substantial narratives is a much-discussed feature of Egyptian religious texts.¹ This is especially the case with lower mythology or demonology full of minor deities² of intricate appearance and composite names. The long and compound names of these creatures often allude to a mythological situation that sometimes stays obscure to us. Such names can be labeled as “folded mythologemes”³ representing in a compact way some mythological episode which otherwise could be extended to a narrative.

As John Baines and Katja Goebis have argued, “such narratives are often not attested in the record since they were likely transmitted orally.”⁴ Spells from medical or funeral contexts available to us were

meant to be effective by merely actualizing proper mythological events and facts and not to explain or communicate these events and facts to someone unaware.⁵ However, sometimes we are quite lucky to unfold these mythologemes and trace these elusive narratives through correlation of images and mythemes scattered throughout different monuments. We are going to share one such investigation dealing with the “Lord of power,” portrayed as a black ram.

The character in question represents the broad cluster of the inhabitants of the Netherworld, specifically those who are dangerous and repelling for the living and the dead. Pyramid Texts⁶ spell 255 gives a good example of Egyptian notion of an image

and allows explication of a structure of demonic image in particular:⁷

PT 255

i hbd pw
hbd kdw
hbd irw

O Hateful one,
Hateful of nature (character)
Hateful of form

The address to this quite abstract character begins with vocative. It specifically marks the first part of this passage as a verbal component and thus we relate it here to the Egyptian category of name (*rn*). The other two categories seem to represent opposition of a character's nature (*kdw*) and its visible manifestation (*irw*). We can associate these categories with semantic (signified) and visual components of a demonic image. In these terms, we can outline the process of our interpretation of religious texts as follows: sources give us names and visible manifestations of dangerous creatures (two-fold signifiers), and we are trying to clarify their nature (signified). For the purpose of analysis, we label visual and verbal components of a demonic image as "icon" and "mytheme." Each of these receives its realization through text and/or display.

At the Predynastic sources all aspects of demonic image are expressed through display without any textual complement. Decorated ceramics, slate palettes and small-sized sculptures present various desert animals and reptiles—the typical incarnations of danger and destructive powers of chaos. In the Pyramid Texts—the first extensive textual corpus fixed at the end of the Fifth Dynasty—dangerous entities, on the contrary, are realized through textual medium only.

PT 287

nni-mwt=f
nni-mwt=f
i=k rr m nn
i=k rr m nn
M31 tfl

Weariness-of-his-mother,
Weariness-of-his-mother,

You are really as that
You are really as that
LION, be off!

PT 299

dd-mdw
dt r pt SP3-hrw r t3
tb.t Hr š3s=f
nb hwt, k3 tpht
šnt n šnt=i
nht Wnīs nht=f
htt Wnīs htt=f
gmy Wnīs m w3t=f
wnm=f n=f sw mwmw

Recitation:

Cobra, to the sky! Horus's CENTIPEDE, to the earth!

Horus is with sandalled feet when treading on
The Lord of Enclosure, the Bull of the Cavern
šnt-snake, do not oppose me!
Unas's sycamore is his sycamore,
Unas's stick is his stick:
Anyone whom Unas finds in his way
He will devour

PT 254

GFWT=f ZNT-TP.W
sw3 Wnīs hr=tn m htp

You, his APES WHO CUT OFF HEADS,
Let Unas pass by you in peace!

In these examples, icons and mythemes are easily distinguishable in different kinds of references to "demons." Determinatives and phonetic denotation of such creatures as lions, centipedes, and apes are iconic in nature in that they appeal to realistic, natural images. These images are different from those of slate palettes only by medium—verbal versus display. In terms of the scheme outlined above we regard them as an icon (*irw*)—visual component of "demonic image."

However, the Pyramid Texts introduce a new dimension to the demonic image by characterizing names such as "Hateful one" in our first example and "Belligerent-of-Face" in the next passage:

PT 251

i hrw-wnwt
tp-^c.w-R^c
ir.y w³t n Wnīs
sw³ Wnīs
m-hnw phr.t nt H³W-HR

O you in charge of hours,
 Who precede Re,
 Make way for Unas!
 Let Unas pass
 Within the circuit of those BELLIGERENT-OF-
 FACE!

These references are quite obscure but seem to have themes of aggression and fear in their core. As a token of some mythological context and a kernel of a possible mythic narrative, such names could be labeled as mythemes.

For the first time, real interplay of textual and visual representation of the Netherworld and its inhabitants occurs in the Middle Kingdom on the magical wands and in the Coffin Texts, in the Book of Two Ways⁸ in particular. We still can see quite simple examples of icons (in depictions of snakes, rabbits) and mythemes (in names such as “Terrifying,” “Trembling,” “Burning” [CT 1041]). However, a distinctive feature of demonic images in the Book of Two Ways is the proliferation of characters that are hybrid, or *mixamorph*⁹ in appearance (combining nature of several beings—mammals, reptiles, humans) and have compound names (“folded mythologemes”). For example, CT 1076 refers to characters “He-who-spits-Hapi” (*bs-hpy*) and “He-who-eats-his-mothers” (*wnm-mwt=f*). Nevertheless, the texts accompanying these characters are still concise. It is the distribution of these creatures that allows us to make a step further in understanding the nature of their dangerous powers.

In the Book of Two Ways, the majority of “demonic” characters are shown in the vignette with a map of ways of the Netherworld. Two non-overlapping bending roads—by water and by land—are inhabited by demons living in their curves. There is a lake of flame between the roads excluding any possibility to change the road. However, both of these ways lead to the same destination: the palace of Osiris in Abydos.

In accompanying texts the focus is on the descrip-

tion of the overall situation and the space in which these dangerous creatures are located. They guard the gates and the bends of the road. In iconic dimension (*irw*) there are many snakes among them, e.g., *ḥtt*-snakes (CT 1034). Most of the names (mythemes) describes the hostility and aggression of these characters: “He-who-destroys-by-his-face” (CT 1033), “He-who-punishes-the-destroyer” (CT 1037), and “Cutting-those-who-are-loud-of-voices” (CT 1053).

It is interesting to note that the water path (CT 1038–1053) adjoining the lake of fire is inhabited by demons often of fiery nature: “Flaming” (*ššbw*), “Wakeful” (*rsy-hr*), “Fluctuating flame” (*nhd-ns*) (CT 1044; cf. also CT 1039, 1041, 1045, 1053).¹⁰ The land road (CT 1055–1067), which curves and obstacles are formed by water flow, lakes, and marshes, is guarded by the creatures living mostly in or by the water (CT 1061, 1062, 1064). Fire in the first case and water in the second can form an opposition to the substance of the safe roads (water and land respectively) and represent the chaos. Falling into it in the context of the Netherworld is comparable (or synonymous) to being unjustified and means eternal death: “you shouldn’t pass on it” (CT 1053).¹¹ Thus, guards and gatekeepers, located on the border of the cosmos and chaos, are the representatives and embodiment of the latter.¹² They are depicted and referred to in terms of icons and mythemes associated with chaos—the element of danger—in that particular situation.

In their intricate appearances and names, characters of the Book of Two Ways form a visual embodiment of the liminal state and transition, which are always fraught with danger. In the hands or feet of certain keepers guarding the portals and turns of the road, there are long, sharp knives, threatening the deceased. The images of these creatures often lack well-defined form (CT 1070–1071): their heads are placed on the body, devoid of imagery—they do not have the typical “stands” of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic bodies.¹³ The editors of the Book of the Two Ways thus tried to portray the mysterious, invisible, and formless otherworld beings. This lack of the body (some in CT 1070–1071, and some on the map vignette) as well may be a consequence of the danger for the deceased. The creatures belonging to “other world” in the funerary texts sometimes are shown not in the full form, but as “crippled” or schematized.¹⁴ The body not adapted to movement or the lack of it emphasizes also the literal “attach-

ment” of these creatures to their place of dwelling. Thus the “Lords of offerings” inhabiting the “House of Judges” are shown as scarabs on threadlike veins-legs (CT 1070).

The “House of Judges” is located next to the image of Ro-Setau. This is a place that in the Egyptian sacred topography is thought to be a corridor (CT 1035). Here the deceased is subjected to the greatest number of hazards, among them being the “Lords of power”. CT 1071 was created to help the deceased to pass them by:

CT 1071

q³-st³w.w rn=f pw
pr.w
r n sw³ hr snw nt hr=f
nb-³t rn=f pw
nhs.w
ink q-hrw m ³ht
wr=tn is
hr.jw=tn nhs.w
ir w³.t n nb=tn
Ink pw
bs.w rn=f pw
r n sw³ hr=f snw nt hr=f
sd.t-hr rn=f pw
nb.w-wsr.wt
iw hr ink m wr
ph.y=i m wrwt
ink nb-wsr.tjw
h³.sf- ir.w rn=f pw
r n sw³ hr snw nt hr=sn
m³=sn m-hr.t w³.wt
h³=f-hr rn=f pw
nbw-n³w rn=f pw
ink hms hr ir.t-hr tp.y-hmt
wd-mdw m snw n Dhwti
mk.tw ink pw mk.tw Dhwti

High-of-winds (*q³-st³w.w*)—is his name.
 Equipped!
 This is a spell for passing him by and those
 who are under his authority
 LORD OF POWER (*nb-³t*)—is his name
 Awakened!
 I am—High-of-voice in the horizon
 greater than you
 Down on your faces, you awakened!
 Give the way to your lord!
 It's me

Flaming (*bs.w*)—is his name
 Utterance to pass him by, and those who are
 under his rule.
 Fire-faced (*sd.t-hr*)—is his name.
 Lords of strength (*nb-wsr.t*)!
 My face—is the (face of) the Great One,
 my power—is in the crown Wereret:
 I'm the lord of strengths (*nb-wsr.tjw*)
 Tired by his forms (*h³.sf-ir.w*)—is his name.
 This is a spell for passing him by, and those
 who are under his rule
 They see the way forward.
 His-hindhead-is-in-front (of him)—is his name
 (he-whose-face-is-turned-back)
 The-lord-of-flame/complaints (*nbw-n³w*)—is his
 name.
 I sit at the Eye of Horus as the first of three,
 to judge the Two for Thoth.
 My protection is the protection of Thoth

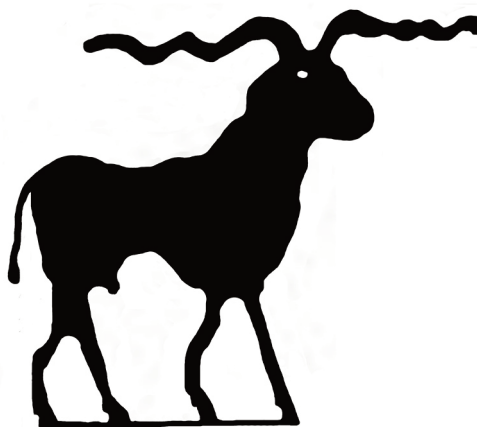


FIGURE 1: The “Lord of power.” From CT 1071.

The “Lord of power”—mighty creature—of this spell is depicted as a black ram, or rather, his silhouette filled with black paint (FIG. 1). He is one of the judges in this scene.

An image similar in its iconic and mythemic representation appears already in the Pyramid Texts, in the spell 246, as one of the forms acquired by the deceased pharaoh:

PT 246

m³ ḥᶜ.t Wnīs pn m b³
ᶜb.wy tp=f sm³.wy
n ṭwt īs zī km
z³ zīt km.t
ms.w zīt b³k.t
snk.w fd.t w³p.t
īi r=tn ḥr ḥsbḏ-ir.ty
s³=tn ḥr dšr-ir.ty
mr-³t
n ḥsf b³=f

Behold arising of this Unas as a ram
 Two wild-bull horns on his head
 For you are a BLACK RAM
 Son of a black ewe,
 Born by a white ewe,
 Suckled by four sheep!
 Blue-eyed Horus has come against you
 Beware of Red-eyed Horus!
 With hurtful power,
 Whose might cannot be opposed

This spell is located in the passage between the Funeral Chamber and the Antechamber allowing us to relate these themes of danger and aggression of the sacred character with his liminal state.

Another Pyramid Texts spell also mentioning the “Lord of power” allows us to shed additional light on formation of an image of “a black ram”:

PT 255

ir tm=k dr=ṭw ḥr st=k...
īw.k³ wnīs ḥr=f wr pw
nb-³t
wsr m nkn ir.t im=f
rdi.k³[=f nsr ny ir.t=f]
pḥr=s ḥ³=tn

If you do not remove yourself from your place
 ...
 Unas will turn his face into the Great One
 The Lord of Power,
 Who grew strong through the injury which was
 done to him.
 [He] will give [the flame of his eye]
 So that it surrounds you

The term *nkn* designates the Horus’s mutilation as opposed to Seth’s mutilation (*iy*), which were

received by them in the mutual conflict. Thus, damage mentioned in the spell is the blinding of Horus. For example, in ritual spells the Eye of Horus is characterized by an epithet “because of which he (that is, Horus) darkened (*kk.t*)” (PT 74). During his lifetime, the pharaoh was considered as an incarnation of the god Horus and a son of the sun god.¹⁵ Thus, the mythological situation of blinding and treatment of Horus represents one of the basic models describing the resurrection of the pharaoh, which is his transition from a condition of death to eternal life in the world of gods. However, being of a solar nature, the pharaoh in his condition of death, seems to appear also as the “darkened” sun in the image of the Black Ram (a dark solar being)¹⁶ in addition to Horus with Red Eyes—the damaged Eye and at the same time the Eye radiating with heat of the desert.¹⁷ Remaining in this state, the pharaoh threatens the cosmic order, and that is the focus of the further formulas of PT 255. This spell also shows how this power of mutilation turns into power protective for the pharaoh aimed to gain him a place in the Netherworld and by this resolving the dangerous liminal state itself. It should be noted especially that both Pyramid Texts spells mentioning the “Lord of power” are connected to purification and thus are protective spells. Spell PT 255, in particular, contains a note about burning incense, and its flame is associated with the heat of the Eye of Horus.

In this case, the liminal state of the pharaoh represented through the image of Horus with the damaged Eye is the source of the dangerous power, which threatens to destroy the world if the pharaoh is not given the place in the sky. Here the binary opposition of cosmos and chaos is represented by the opposition of light and darkness. In the image of the black ram, a solar creature is painted in the color of darkness and danger. We can trace this iconic motif further in several visual stems during the later periods.

During the New Kingdom in the “royal version” of the Book of Amduat¹⁸ the image of the black ram appears several times. The middle register of the third hour shows a character *šfy* (232).¹⁹ He is depicted as a human figure wrapped in a knee-length coat with ram’s horns on his head. His name, however, is written with the sign of a head and torso of a black ram. Being one of the main characters in the barque *p³ḥt*, he may represent one of the forms of the hidden sun.

In the upper register of the fifth hour, there is a

zooanthropomorphic character with the head of a black ram. His name is *b³ pf jrj-mwt.w*, “The soul who belongs to the damned” (355). In front of him holding in her hands the sign “dead” (*mwt*) stands a goddess, “The demolishing one, who cuts the damned to pieces” (356). This scene seems to demonstrate the darkness of the damned souls who have not prepared for the light and rebirth.

In the middle register of the eighth hour Tatenen is shown as a ram (598–601). The creatures of this hour are crying out to the god with the “voices of mysterious rams” in the ground where the “Horus hid the gods.”²⁰ When the god continuing his way leaves them, they are enveloped by the darkness. In the lower register of this hour a zooanthropomorphic god with a ram head is named *nb rhyt*, “Lord of *Rekhit*-people” (605).

In all these cases from the Book of Amduat the mentioning of a black ram is connected with the hidden souls of those who are damned to remain in the ground, in the dark. These images as well as presence of the black ram among judges and executioners in the Coffin Texts suggest an association with the image of the “shadow” of the sun as the “Sun-destroyer.” Apparently in the later iconography of these characters they will have the form of the “black sun,” which take all the attacks of evil forces against the sun god upon itself. It “absorbs” all the evil and sin²¹ during the judgment protecting the deceased as a good companion of the sun god.

The image of the “black sun” occurs, in particular, in the tombs of the New Kingdom. One example is in the tomb of Irunefer (TT 290) at Deir el-Medina in a scene illustrating Chapter 92 of the Book of the Dead. Going forth to light, the deceased is strong, illuminated by the sun, and his shadow is free. Shadows of those who want to harm him will be captured in the Netherworld, in the darkness. By the exit of the tomb the “darkness” is shown in the form of a black sun, which will absorb all the evil plotted against the justified deceased.²² In the papyrus of Ani (also made for his burial at Deir el-Medina) the text of this chapter mentions some villains residing in the Duat (in the flesh of Osiris), and threatening the deceased:

BD 92

ihh.w r hr.w=sn

imy.w ʿwt Wsir

And the darkness will cover their faces,
those who are in the flesh of Osiris

The word “darkness” is written with a surprising determinative of the shining sun. Thus this icon depicts a “shining” black sun, portraying a dark place for sinners.

We can point out that the presence of the black solar creature or black sun itself is closely connected with a situation of “the judgment in the Netherworld.” Initially in the Pyramid Texts the deceased enters the Netherworld as an alien being threatening the cosmic balance by his liminal state. To be appeased he claims a definite position in the afterlife. Recognition of this right and granting him a “place” by the god in itself functions as pacification of the dead and turns his aggressive, destructive energy into the merit of protection of the cosmic order. Later monuments show the black sun as a character who devours evil and sin of damned souls and in this way protects the beatified dead and the cosmic order in the whole during and after the judgment of Osiris and going forth by the day.²³

These cases show that characters often perceived as demonic genetically possess positive divine, even solar, energy, which in some contexts can receive dangerous, aggressive manifestations. Aggressive manifestations are connected to chaos or violation of the cosmic order *m³t*, and connection to the border between cosmos and chaos is reflected both in appearance and in the name of the demon. The nature of the being was often defined not only by his character but also by properties of the border between cosmos and chaos at which it resides—that is how in a certain situation the chaos is represented: for example, as darkness, desert, fire, watery abyss, marsh. Regarding the character as positive or negative depends on the “point of view”:

- of inhabitants of the Netherworld viewing the furious pharaoh;
- of the pharaoh viewing the hostile character usurping his place in the sky;
- of the dead approaching the terrible guard ;
- of the solar god protected by these terrible guards from intrigues of evil forces.

It is noteworthy to point out that the other component of demonic image of the black ram-mytheme *nb*

ꜥt in later periods is sometimes associated with such fighting solar god as Horus of Behdet, illustrating the ambiguity of this character as dangerous and protective at the same time.²⁴

Thus, the Black Ram seems to be a dangerous and hostile creature not as much by nature but by context and situation in which the solar energy exists in a particular moment of time and to which character it is opposed. Particularly this mythological image (the "Lord of power" depicted as the Black Ram) portrays the solar energy in a liminal and therefore dangerous state.

Structuring a demonic image in terms of icon and mytheme as its components and their specific realizations through text and display proved to be very helpful when applied in comparative analysis of the sources of different historical periods and executed in different materials and techniques.

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- designation of a demon as such) as noted, among others, by Rita Lucarelli (2010). A useful point concerning "lower mythology" is made by V. V. Ivanov, who distinguishes it in accordance with the higher degree of involvement of "minor" supernatural beings in everyday life of common people (1988, 216). It seems noteworthy that this mode of interaction, together with local instead of universal importance of its outcomes, can result in texts describing contacts with genies and demons being closer to folklore than to substantial mythological narratives.
- ³ Chegodaev 2001.
- ⁴ Goebis 2013, 132.
- ⁵ Cf. "Such a narration does not aim to inform any particular reader of something of which he is unaware; rather it is a mechanism which ensures the continual flow of the cyclical processes in nature itself" (Lotman and Graffy 1979, 162).
- ⁶ Spells of the Pyramid Texts are cited in accordance with Sethe 1908 and with respect to Allen 2013.
- ⁷ Here we are talking about an image in a broad sense as discussed, among others, by Laboury (1998). It is hard to draw a definite line between text and image in Egyptian representations. In fact, investigation in semiology of Egyptian image by Tefnin (1991) seems to show that Egyptian practices of signification are a hard case for European semiology. To begin with, an Egyptian sign should be regarded not as twofold (signified and signifier) but as threefold because Egyptian signifiers are twofold themselves, combining visual and verbal components. In what follows, we are trying to adjust this semiology-based attitude to emic Egyptian categorization. Sensitivity of Egyptian culture to this aspect of artistic representation seem to surface, for example, in designation of artist as *sš kdwt*. In the term itself ambivalence of textual and visual is expressed, and in the context of working process it also relates to representation of initial design. Cf. Laboury 2013. This process of realization of an idea actually mirrors signification in terms of semiology. In this respect, PT 255 is especially useful as it shows all aspects of representation. It is noteworthy that the character in question is not necessary a demon: it is someone who was in the shrine but is demanded to free the place

NOTES

- ¹ See, for example: Hellum 2001; Eyre 2002, 1–6.
- ² Distinctions such as "higher" vs. "lower" mythology or "major" vs. "minor" deities can be traced back to the beginnings of comparative mythology. See, for example: Waardenburg 2011, 9–13. Concerning characters of Egyptian texts, this distinction helps to highlight the fact that there is no strict boundary between gods and "demons" in Egypt (as well as any special

for the pharaoh. So, whoever this character is in this spell, his identity is construed anew from the beginning as someone hateful and thus deserving such a violent attitude.

⁸ De Buck 1935–1961; Hermesen 1991.

⁹ Wengrow 2014. This term is commonly applied in Russian tradition of art history; see, for example, Kononenko 2002.

¹⁰ The exact statistics here are problematic, as not all texts are devoted to description of gatekeepers (acquiring offerings is also important) and not all of the latter are specified in terms of fire/water opposition; symbols of danger such as knives and loud voice are applied, as well. All these characteristics are accumulated in CT 1053 that sums up this path and is designated among others as “Spell for passing on the path of the fiery ones” (CT VII, 305f).

¹¹ See also Abbas 2010.

¹² Cf. Lotman and Graffy 1979, 167:

It is not difficult to notice that characters can be divided into those who are mobile, who enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place in the structure of the artistic world and cross the frontier, the basic topological feature of this space, and those who are immobile, who represent, in fact, a function of this space.

Looked at typologically, the initial situation is that a certain plot-space is divided by a single boundary into an internal and an external sphere, and a single character has the opportunity to cross that boundary; this situation is now replaced by a more complex derivative. The mobile character is split up into a paradigm-cluster of different characters on the same plane, and the obstacle (boundary), also multiplying in quantity, gives out a sub-group of personified obstacles—immobile enemy-characters fixed at particular points in the plot-space.

¹³ Wengrow 2014, 56.

¹⁴ Such as hieroglyphic mutilation in PT and CT; cf., for example, Mathieu 1996. These practices were also applied to elite tombs and coffins decoration; cf. Kanawati 2005.

¹⁵ Berlev 2003.

¹⁶ Although solar interpretation of this passage may be somewhat hypothetical, association of rams with the sun god and of a black ram as his night form in particular are well known from later periods. Cf. Redford and Redford 2005. Particularly noteworthy is proposed association of oracular practices related to the Ram of Mendes with homophony of *sr* “ram” and *sr* “foretell,” as in the spell in question this very designation is used.

¹⁷ Cf. Hussein 2010.

¹⁸ Hornung 1963.

¹⁹ Hornung and Abt 2007.

²⁰ Manassa 2008.

²¹ Posener 1970, 30–35.

²² See also Hornung 1994.

²³ In this context, noteworthy is the remark of K. Goebis concerning analogies between violent characters of the Pyramid Texts Cannibal spell and later texts, judges of the Declaration of Innocence in the Book of the Dead (chapter 125A), in particular: “one may wonder whether these ‘demons’ did not originally belong in the context of the solar cycle, and might even represent manifestations of the sungod himself” (Goebis 2008, 224 n. 567). It seems that such comparisons give an interesting perspective on the evolution and transformation of Egyptian sacred literature through centuries. See also Lotman and Graffy 1979 for the evidence for the splitting of characters in the process of evolution of linear narratives.

²⁴ Leitz and Budde 2002, vol. III, 559.