

Old Lithuanian Songs

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LITHUANIAN is the oldest, that is, the most archaic in form, of all living Indo-European languages¹. It still retains a complexity comparable to that of Sanskrit¹ and classical Greek. Various historical and geographical reasons are given by scholars for this "lack of development" so called out of deference to progressivism and evolutionism; but there can be little doubt that the direct reason why the language has been so remarkably preserved from decay is the presence, until very recent times, of a deep-rooted oral tradition powerful and vital enough to fulfill many of the functions of literature. We are accustomed to distinguishing between living and dead languages; but in the domain of living languages a further distinction could be made between those which possess a written literature and those which rely entirely on oral tradition, for there is no doubt that "the letter kills" and that among peoples who are almost wholly illiterate, language can possess a vitality—and in consequence a relative immunity from degeneration—which for us is almost unimaginable. This question has been treated elsewhere²; the question now to be considered is not one of language in itself, but it is not altogether unconnected, for the songs which are our theme were handed down from a remote past by that oral tradition which has helped to keep the Lithuanian language so intact.

Since these songs form part of what is often called "Lithuanian folklore", let us quote what Guénon says about folklore in general:

"The very conception of *folklore*, in the generally accepted sense of the term, is based on an idea that is radically false, the idea that there are "popular creations" spontaneously produced by the mass of the people; and one sees at once the close connection between this way of thinking and "democratic" prejudices. As has been very rightly said, "the profound interest of all so-called popular traditions lies in the fact that they are not popular in origin"³; and we will add that where, as is nearly always the case, there is question of elements that are traditional in the true sense of the word, however deformed, diminished and fragmentary they may be sometimes, and of things which have a real symbolic value, their origin is not even human, let alone popular. What may be popular is solely the fact of "survival", when these elements belong to vanished traditional forms; and in this respect "folklore" takes on a meaning rather close to that of "paganism", if we consider only the etymology of the word "pagan", and not its "polemical" use as a term of reproach. The people preserve, without understanding them, the relics of former traditions which even go back sometimes to a past too remote to be dated, so that it has to be relegated to the obscure domain of the "prehistoric"; they thereby fulfill the function of a more or less subconscious collective memory, the contents of which have clearly come from elsewhere⁴. What may seem most surprising is that, on the, closest scrutiny, the things so preserved are found to contain above all, under a more or less veiled form, abundant information of an esoteric order, which is, in its essence, precisely what is least

popular ; and this fact suggests in itself an explanation, which may be summed up as follows: When a traditional form is on the point of becoming extinct, its last representatives may very well deliberately entrust to this aforesaid collective memory the things that would otherwise be lost beyond recall; that is in point of fact the sole means of saving what can in a certain measure be saved; and at the same time, that lack of understanding which is one of the natural characteristics of the masses is a sure enough guarantee that what was esoteric will be none the less undivulged, remaining merely as a sort of witness of the past for such as, in later times, shall be capable of understanding it"⁵.

The four songs which follow illustrate every point which is made in the above quotation. As far as one knows, they were handed down entirely by word of mouth until the XVIIIth century; and in more recent times⁶ children used to learn them by heart at school. As to their deeper meaning, the veil is in many places a thin one, and many if not all the comments made in this article will seem superfluous to the reader who has a knowledge of symbolism. In any case, it is preferable not to break up the text with comments, but to let each song be read uninterrupted as a poem, for they certainly have their rights in this respect. Would it be an exaggeration to say that the fourth and last of those given here is one of the greatest lyrics in the world? And through it, do we not breathe something of the fresh air of a remote antiquity?

The translations given here are taken from a little volume entitled *Old Lithuanian Songs*⁷ which is an anthology of forty seven songs, selected and translated into English by Adrian Paterson. Let us quote what he says of them: "I have tried as far as possible to render the grace of cadence of the originals, and for this reason I have avoided regular rhymes, which would have given an effect too hard and glib; instead I have done my best to reproduce something of the Lithuanian assonance".

1. *Moon took to be his bride
Sun in the first spring tide.*

*When Sun woke up at dawn,
Moon from her side was gone.*

*Moon, as alone he roved,
Morn's Star beheld and loved.*

*Then Thunder, wroth, with His blade
cleft him in two and said :*

*Why didst abandon Sun?
Why, Morn's Star minion,
by night didst rove alone?*

The language of symbolism is universal, and the Sun, whether it be feminine as here and in the Germanic tradition, or masculine as in the Hindu and Greek traditions, always has a spiritual or celestial significance in relation to the Moon which, in a positive sense, stands for earthly or human perfection. Thus in Christian iconography the Cross is often represented with the Sun on its right and the Moon on its left because Christ, the second Adam, unites in himself two natures, heavenly and earthly; and with the same symbolism the creation of the first Adam, also possessed of two natures, is represented in this song

by the marriage of the Sun and the Moon in the first Spring.

The Sun, as Spirit, is the daughter of God (*Dievo dukrytė*⁸). God Himself is *Perkurnas*⁹, literally "Thunder"; and according to the discourse which Plato, in his *Symposium*, puts into the mouth of Aristophanes, primordial men were of a two-fold nature until Zeus, who like Perkurnas has thunder for his chief attribute, cut them in two. But the doctrine of the song is more complete than that of the discourse, for it tells of a double scission: firstly and "vertically" there is the separation of Sun and Moon, that is, Spirit and soul; then, as a result of man's loss of connection with his higher possibilities, there is a "horizontal" scission within the soul itself. Man is inwardly divided, since he now lacks contact with the transcendent principle which alone can resolve opposites into complements. In other words, he has become subject to the "Knowledge of Good and Evil". It is this division within the soul of man which is represented in the song by the cutting of the Moon in two. The soul-dividedness of fallen man, as Titus Burckhardt remarks¹⁰, is as it were the starting point of alchemy; the "chemical marriage", that is, the "Marriage of Sulphur and Quicksilver", would thus be, in Lithuanian terms, "the putting together again of the two halves of the Moon, whereas the "mystical marriage", would be the "remarriage of the Moon with the Sun"¹¹.

The Morning Star, *Ausrinè*, is in some respects none other than Lucifer, whereas in other respects she is comparable to Eve. In the song which follows, and which needs no comment, the correspondence is to Lucifer. But in the third song, *Ausrinè* represents, like Eve, the fallen human race as a whole.

2. *Sun, 'ils time you went
over the firmament,
Sun, 'tis time to fare
through the air.
Sun, 'tis time you counted
if all the stars are mounted.

Whether I count or no,
already one will not show,
and that the star most bright
which rose up with the light
and retired late at night.*

3. *Morn's Star held a wedding feast.
Thunder galloped through the gate
and struck down the green oak tree.

The blood of the green oak tree trickled,
and stained my apparel,
and stained my garland.

The Sun's daughter wept,
and for three years gathered
withered foliage.

And where, o mother mine,*

*shall I wash my apparel,
where wash away the blood?*

*O daughter mine so youthful,
go to the lake there yonder
where are poured the streams of nine rivers.*

*And where o mother mine,
shall I dry my apparel
where in the wind shall I dry it?*

*O daughter mine so youthful,
in yonder garden green
where are flowering nine roses.*

*And when o mother mine,
shall I put on my apparel,
put it on in its whiteness?*

*O daughter mine, so youthful,
on that same day of singing
when there shall shine nine suns.*

Owing to a difference of symbolism this song appears on the surface very different from the first, except that the Morning Star's wedding feast clearly recalls the illicit union which, in the other song, likewise provoked the wrath of Perkunas. But if we consider the relationship between certain symbols, in particular the Sun and the Tree, we shall find that the theme of the first song is altogether comprised within the song of the Morning Star and the Oak, though this last song takes us further, tracing out not only the Fall but also the path of return to the Primordial State.

The Tree of Life rises from the centre of the Earthly Paradise connecting earth with Heaven. Man's loss of connection with his higher possibilities is thus, in the language of *Genesis*, his loss of access to the Tree of Life, and we have also seen this same loss symbolized also by the Moon's separation from the Sun. In our third song the Tree of Life is the oak which in the Lithuanian tradition is the most holy of trees¹², being especially sacred to Perkunas¹³. It might at first seem strange that the Thunderer should strike his own tree; but history offers examples of great sanctuaries being destroyed by Heaven in reprisal for human sacrilege, and here also it is in reality against man's connection with the sanctuary that Perkunas aims his bolt. Ultimately therefore this symbolism comes close to that of *Genesis*, at least in the sense that in both cases man has lost his access to the Tree of Life. But in the song this scission is also represented by the separation of the leaves from the tree. The analogy between the leaves and the human soul (and therefore the "Moon") is clear enough if we remember that when the Cross symbolizes the two natures of Christ, the horizontal line denotes his human nature, which is likewise represented by the leaf-bearing branches of the Tree of Life, whose trunk, like the vertical of the Cross, stands for his Divine nature. The symbolism of the leaves becomes even clearer when we consider that the Tree of Life is sometimes also called the "Tree of the World" or the "Axis of the World"¹⁴ and as such it is occasionally represented with its roots in Heaven¹⁵ and its branches constituting this world or, microcosmically, the human

soul.

If the separation of the foliage from the tree corresponds to the separation of the Moon from the Sun in the first song, the subsequent scattering of the foliage corresponds to the cleaving of the Moon, that is, to the psychic disintegration consequent upon the Fall. The gathering together of this foliage is thus the first phase of the spiritual path, the reintegration of the psychic elements. When all the foliage has been gathered, fallen man turns again to the Spirit. It is as if the Moon, now on the way to regaining his primal fullness, were to turn once more to the Sun ; but the song we are now considering shows us another aspect of the Sun. Instead of being man's Celestial Bride, she is here, as in most other Lithuanian songs, his Divine Mother. For if she is the daughter of Perkunas, she is also, as the Hindus would say, his *Shakti*, and as such she is the personification of Mercy and the other "feminine" attributes of the Divinity.

In the purification by the elements, that is, by water, wind and sun, which now takes place under the direction of the Spirit, the element earth is not mentioned, perhaps because man himself is in a sense earth.

Nine, which is, one might say, the very essence of this song, is a celestial number. There are nine celestial spheres, and nine degrees in the hierarchy of the Angels. Moreover nine corresponds, geometric-ally, to the circumference of the circle¹⁶, and therefore to the movements of the heavenly bodies, and to the visible form of the firmament which is itself the great symbol of Heaven. Nine is therefore also—and here lies the key to this song—the symbol of the Earthly Paradise which, as the chief reflection of Heaven upon earth, is always represented as circular; and although in the perspective of later and more "sedentary" religions the restoration of perfection is the "squaring of the circle"¹⁷—the Heavenly Jerusalem, for example, is square—in the earlier and more nomadic perspectives the inverse of the Fall is always a return to the Earthly Paradise. It is therefore not surprising that the number nine should be so much stressed in this song whose theme is, precisely, the recovery of the Primordial State.

In particular, as regards the "nine suns", there may be here an implicit reference to the restoration of the Tree of Life, for in various traditions there is mention of the shining of a plurality of suns at the end of the cycle, and as Guénon remarks ; "The image of the sun is often connected with that of the tree, as if the sun were the fruit of the Tree of the World"¹⁸. He mentions, as regards the Hindu doctrine of the end of the cycle, "the tree whose fruits are twelve suns"¹⁹. He also draws our attention to the fact that even where there is no specific mention of suns in connection with the Tree of Life, it is often represented as bearing "solar" fruits : "The fruits of the Tree of Life are the golden apples of the Garden of the Hesperides ; the golden fleece²⁰ of the Argonauts, which was also placed on a tree and guarded by a serpent or a dragon, is another symbol of the immortality which man has to reconquer"²¹. Finally he mentions that in China one finds also, as a symbol of the completion of the cycle (which in the macrocosm means a new Golden Age and in the microcosm the return to the Primordial State), the tree with ten suns ; and this brings us back to our song for, as we have already seen, nine and ten are sometimes inter-changeable in that both can represent the circle which is itself the figure of cyclic perfection. Analogously one can say of the Garden of Helicon which, as Dante tells us, is none other than the Earthly Paradise, that it, bears the seal of nine or of ten according to whether or not we count, with the nine Muses, Apollo himself who is the

centre round which they form the circumference.

4. *Fly little hawk,
near to the lake,
near that same lake
where a whirlpool seethes.*
- Near to that whirlpool
there's a rue garden.
In that same garden weeps a maiden.*
- I have no mother,
a dowry to gather,
I have no father
to apportion my share.*
- I have no brother
to saddle horses,
I have no sister
to plait a garland.*
- Sun, thou mother,
Sun, thou mother,
Sun, thou mother,
gather me a dowry.*
- Moon, thou father,
Moon, thou father,
Moon, thou father,
apportion my share.*
- Star, thou sister,
Star, thou sister,
Star, thou sister,
oh plait my garland!*
- Greatwain, thou brother,
Greatwain, thou brother,
Greatwain, thou brother,
oh drive me through the meadows!*

The hawk, with all the other members of its tribe, above all the eagle, is a solar bird, and as such a symbol of the Spirit. But in particular it may be remembered that whereas the eagle is the bird of Zeus, the hawk is one of the emblems of Apollo, God of inspiration, and in this song the prayer of the maiden is clearly uttered under the inspiration of the hawk, whereas there can be no doubt that the initial imperative addressed to the hawk is a divine command. In ancient Egypt the equivalent of Apollo was Horus; and it is perhaps not irrelevant to recall here, especially in view of the end of the song, the temple paintings which represent him as the hawk-headed usher of righteous souls into the Presence of Osiris.

Rue has been used from time immemorial to ward off evil influences and to purify sanctuaries and habitations in cases of pollution, so that among plants it is one of the outstanding symbols of purity. As such it plays a particularly important part in Lithuanian tradition²². The "rue garden" or "Garden of Purity", which is difficult of access and "guarded" by the whirlpool as by a dragon, and which is, moreover, to be the starting point of the maiden's celestial journey, can be none other than the Earthly Paradise. This is also confirmed by the out-standing "simplicity", "childlikeness", and "spiritual poverty" of the maiden herself, these being among the terms in which readiness to enter "the Kingdom of Heaven" is universally described by religion.

The "garland" mentioned in this and in the previous song (there the "staining of the garland" means loss of innocence) is the garland of rue which in Lithuania was traditionally part of the insignia of maiden-hood and especially of the virgin bride who wore it as a wreath on her wedding day.

The "dowry" which the "Sun" is to "gather"²³ is contrasted with the "share" to be "apportioned" by the "Moon". Together they represent the maiden's title to be married, that is, since the marriage is celestial, her "eligibility" in the eyes of Heaven. As such, the solar treasure can be nothing other than spiritual riches, whereas the lunar "share" consists of the human virtues which are the "reflections" of those riches. Being of this world which is the world of forms, the virtues can be analysed²⁴, differentiated, counted and measured²⁵. But the synthesis of the spiritual treasure itself is above form and beyond all reckoning it is therefore to be "gathered" and "stored up" but not "apportioned".

This song begins where the previous song ended; its theme is not the Lesser Mysteries but the Greater Mysteries, for the starting point is the state of human perfection. The Sun and the Moon are once more in their primordial relationship, and the maiden is to set off on her journey wearing the Crown²⁶ of Purity.

Anyone can say the prayers, repeat litanies and keep fasts many times and read the Qur'an. Even an old woman can fast, pray at night and read a few chapters of the Qur'an. The vocation of the men of God is different That comprehends three things. First, anxiety as to what they shall eat and what they shall wear does not enter their heart. A dervish into whose heart concern for what he shall eat and what he shall wear has entered is no good at all. Secondly, in private and in public they remain absorbed in God : that is the essence of all spiritual striving. Thirdly, they never utter anything with the idea of pleasing people and attracting them towards themselves.

Shaikh Fariduddin of Ajodhan.

¹ It is also the *nearest* of the European languages to Sanskrit, not only in virtue of its undegeneracy but also by reason of its "orientality". Lettish, the language of Latvia, is the only other surviving member of the Baltic group of languages to which Lithuanian belongs, but it is less archaic than Lithuanian.

² A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy* ; and Martin Lings, *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, pp. 8-15

³ Luc Benoist, *La Cuisine des Anges, une esthétique de la pensée*, p. 74.

⁴ "This is an essentially "lunar" function, and it is in fact to the Moon that the mass of the people corresponds astrologically, which is a clear indication also, of the purely passive character of that mass, incapable as it is of initiative or of spontaneity"

⁵ *Le Saint Graal in Symboles fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée*, pp. 50-51.

⁶ That is, between the two World Wars. In 1940 the Soviet army occupied Lithuania, whereupon such members of the government as could not escape were sent to Siberia, and a carefully chosen Communist government was set up, whose first act was to request the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union. The request was granted. Except for the scarcely less terrible period of German occupation during the war, Lithuania has been swallowed up in Russia ever since, with no apparent hope of liberation except that the Western powers have never formally recognized the annulment of her independence. After the war, until about 1953 when they were finally rounded up, hundreds of thousands of young Lithuanian men and women took refuge in the forests of their country, preferring to live there in great hardship rather than be victims of the mass deportations to Siberia and elsewhere which were part of the Soviet method of russification and sovietization.

⁷ This now very rare book was published in Lithuania only a few weeks before the war. One or two complimentary copies reached Western Europe, including one for me, since I had written the preface. I was intending to return, after the long vacation, to the University of Vitautas the Great in Kaunas (then the temporary capital of Lithuania) where I was lecturer, but the way back was blocked in the first days of the war, and I have never returned there since. Nor have I any reason to suppose that the entire edition, except for the few copies mentioned, was not destroyed during the terrible years which followed. The translator had left Lithuania several years previously, and at the time of publication he was in Egypt, where he died the following year.

⁸ The Sanskrit equivalent, *Déva-duktri*, may be mentioned to show how close, on occasion, these two languages can be.

⁹ In Sanskrit *Parjanya*, whom the *Rig-Veda* mentions as having thunder for his attribute.

¹⁰ *Alchemy* (Stuart and Watkins, London, 1967), ch.11.

¹¹ In alchemy the "chemical marriage" is sometimes also called "the marriage of the Sun and the Moon", but in the Lithuanian perspective the Sun is always transcendent.

¹² As also for the Celts and others. See René Guénon, *Le Roi du Monde*, p. 21, note 1.

¹³ We see here yet another connection between Perkunas and Zeus who is not only the God of thunder but also the God of the oak.

¹⁴ See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, ch., IX, note 1.

¹⁵ A symbol, being merely a reflection, can never show every aspect of the higher reality which it symbolizes. To have a fuller representation of the relationship between Heaven and Earth we have therefore to conceive of the Tree of Life as a tree which grows not only upwards, in the direction of man's spiritual aspirations, but also downwards, because it is in fact rooted in the Spirit, that is, in the "Sun". In the case of the "normal" tree the sun is, as we shall see, the fruit ; but there is no contradiction here, for the fruit contains the seed which is itself virtually the root.

¹⁶ As Guénon remarks, 10 is the number of the circle, being the number of cyclic perfection, and he adds : "1 corresponds to the centre and 9 to the circumference . . . It is because 9, and not 10, is the number of the circumference that it is normally measured in multiples of 9 (90 degrees for the quadrant, and then 360 degrees for the whole circumference)". *La Tétraktys et le Carré de Quatre*, in *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée*, p. 128.

¹⁷ As regards the relationship between the square and the circle, see Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West*, p. 18, and as regards the roundness of nomadic and semi-nomadic sanctuaries, see *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ *The Symbolism of the Cross*, p. 52.

¹⁹ *ibid.* (See also, by a strange coincidence, p. 29, note 3, of this journal. Ed.)

²⁰ A doubly solar symbol, in virtue of the solar animal as well as the solar metal.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Rue (Lithuanian *ruta*, Greek *rute*), is also called in English "herb of grace" which suggests that its symbolism was originally the same here as there. But already by Shakespeare's time it had acquired a somewhat sorrowful significance (see for example the last lines of Act III in *Richard II*), no doubt because of frequent punning on it and the verb "rue" which, etymologically, is quite unconnected with the name of the plant.

²³ This is somewhat free though adequate translation of *kloti* which means literally "cover". The reference is no doubt to the bridal treasure which the mother would store up for her daughter and which would not be displayed, whereas the "share" is the marriage portion which would be assessed by the father.

²⁴ Since light is a symbol of knowledge, reflected light, of which moonlight is the outstanding example, is a symbol of indirect, "analytical" knowledge that is, individual, human, mental knowledge. In other words, moonlight is a "mental" feature of the macrocosm just as the mind is a "lunar" feature of the microcosm; and it is to be noticed how persistently in the Indo-European languages this profound yet not immediately obvious connection between man (characterized by mind) and moon (Lithuanian *menuo*) is stressed by the recurrence of the root MN in connection with things or actions specifically mental and therefore, reflective or analytical, such as *mind* (Sanskrit *manas*, Lithuanian *manyas*, Latin *mens*) and *memory* (the lost N is found in *reminiscence*, Lithuanian *mintis*, Greek *mama*). Let us cut short this list of examples, which could be a long one, with the name of the Roman Goddess of learning, that is, of indirect knowledge, *Minerva*, whose bird is the owl, nocturnal and lunar, as opposed to the hawk which is as we have seen the bird of Phoebus Apollo, the God of inspiration, that is, of direct knowledge.

²⁵ The lost N is found in such words as *incommensurable* which are closer to the Latin *mensura*.

²⁶ *Vainikas*, "garland", is also the ordinary word for "crown". The Star is not named ; but if she is *Ausriné*, the Morning Star, then it is at the very least a remarkable coincidence, as the translator once remarked to me, that according to the Jewish tradition Lucifer was, before the fall of the angels, *Hekathriel*, that is, the "Angel of the Crown".