

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

“Foreword to Old Lithuanian Songs”

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Source: Temenos Academy Review 12 (2009)

pp. 17-30

Published by The Temenos Academy

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Foreword to *Old Lithuanian Songs*

MARTIN LINGS

Introductory Note

In his essay 'Old Lithuanian Songs', first published in 1969,¹ Martin Lings examined the perennial symbolism preserved in four traditional songs. He noted that 'the translations . . . are taken from a little volume entitled *Old Lithuanian Songs* which is an anthology of forty-seven songs, selected and translated into English by Adrian Paterson'. In a footnote, he added:

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.

At least one copy has however survived in Lithuania itself: in the library of the Department of English Philology at Vilnius University, which has inherited the collection of the English Department at Kaunas where both Dr Lings and Adrian Paterson taught.²

The 'preface' to which Dr Lings refers above, a discussion of the nature of tradition and the esoteric basis of folklore, inevitably overlaps to some

1. This essay first appeared in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 3:1 (Winter 1969) 3–10; somewhat revised, it was republished as 'The Symbolism of the Luminaries in Old Lithuanian Songs' in *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991), pp. 83–97. (Ed.)

2. I am very grateful to Professor Jonė Grigaliūnenė, of the Department of English Philology at Vilnius University, both for having called the book's existence to my attention, and for her kindness in supplying me with photocopies of portions of the text. The editors also wish to thank Mrs Lings for granting permission to republish the foreword here. (Ed.)

extent with the 1969 essay but is in most respects an autonomous composition. As such, it seems high time that it was made available. Written in 1939, it must be one of the very first of Dr Lings's published writings.

In a note of acknowledgement appended to the foreword, Dr Lings spoke of the depth of his indebtedness to the writings of René Guénon:

Without these, as it is clear, the foreword could never have been written; and indeed, as far as we know, there are no other works through which modern Western people may gain understanding of the eastern traditional doctrines. The texts of these traditions, springing from a point of view that is far beyond the reach of modern so-called 'philosophy', are too difficult for a first-hand study by anyone who is hampered, like nearly all Westerners of today, with the prejudices of the antitraditional outlook.

The profundity of Guénon's influence is indeed evident throughout the text. After leaving Lithuania, Dr Lings settled in Cairo, where he was closely associated with Guénon for many years.

In presenting the foreword below, I have ventured to intervene in only one respect. At several points Dr Lings refers to details in one or another of the songs: since these are of course given in the book itself, he saw no reason to quote them *in extenso*. To assist the reader in following the discussion in these cases, I have inserted Adrian Paterson's translations with some consequent adjustment of wording: the original text is supplied in footnotes. *Editor*

In considering things traditional there is one point which must always be remembered: we are living in a civilization which is completely antitraditional, unlike all those that have gone before it, and the modern Western outlook is based, not on truths which have been handed down from time immemorial, but on various assumptions made quite recently by certain individuals whose thoughts happened to suit the general tendency of the times. Take, for example, the modern Western so-called 'higher education': it is concerned with facts about details which are simply to be hoarded up in the memory. It is, in fact, learning for learning's sake; and if the various branches of learning be likened to points on the circumference of a circle, the modern idea of advance is to move outward further and further from

the centre; the more a man specializes in 'his own subject', the further he moves from all things else, so that, for example, a modern 'advanced' mathematician has no connection at all, as regards study, with a history 'specialist' or philosopher or geographer. All this is what has been very aptly described³ as 'profane' learning; but in a traditional civilization everything is sacred and learning is never for its own sake but only exists as a means to an end, and that end is knowledge of the Infinite and the Eternal. The sacred sciences, to use the same figure as before, all lead from the circumference towards the one centre, and the more deeply they are studied, the nearer they approach one another, since they are all concerned with creating harmony and serenity in the human soul so that it may be calmed, like water, to receive a reflection of superhuman or intellectual⁴ light which alone can guide to the Truth.

Such sciences existed in medieval Christendom, and still exist today among the Hindus, the Chinese, in Thibet, in Islam, and wherever else the tradition has not succumbed to modern Western influences; and together with the sacred sciences are the sacred arts, every work of which is simply destined to express some aspect or aspects of the One Truth. This is the sole point of art, which is entirely sacred in origin, and modern or 'profane' art is simply a degeneration. Thus it has been said⁵ that 'the profound interest of all so-called popular traditions lies in the fact that they are not popular in origin', and M. Guénon adds, in connection with the Holy Grail:⁶

Where, as is nearly always the case, there is question of traditional elements in the true sense of the word traditional, however deformed, diminished and fragmentary they may be sometimes, and of things which have a real symbolical value, it is all far from being popular in origin, not even human in origin. What may be popular is solely the fact of 'survival', when these elements belong to vanished traditional forms, and, in this respect, the term folk-lore takes on a meaning rather close to that of 'paganism', only considering the etymology

3. René Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, ch. II.

4. The word *intellect*, in its original and proper sense, does not denote a mental faculty at all, but rather the spiritual faculty which connects man with the higher states of existence, and this faculty is dormant in nearly all men of today. See, by the same author, *L'Homme et son devenir selon le Védānta*, p. 49 and also ch. VII.

5. Luc Benoist, *La Cuisine des Anges*, p. 74.

6. *Le Saint Graal* from the February number of *La Voile d'Isis*, 1934, p. 47.

of the latter, without the 'polemical' and injurious intention. Thus the people preserve, without understanding them, the relics of former traditions which even go back sometimes to a past too remote for any possible determination, so that it is thought enough, for this reason, to relegate it to the obscure domain of the 'prehistoric'; in this it fulfils the function of a sort of collective memory that is more or less subconscious, its contents having clearly come from elsewhere.⁷ What may seem most surprising is that, on 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 of itself an explanation which we will just indicate in a few words. When a traditional form is on the point of dying out, its last representatives may very well entrust, if they will, to this aforesaid collective memory, the things that would otherwise be lost without 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, the people's natural lack of understanding is a sure enough guarantee that what was esoteric in character will be none the less undivulged, remaining merely as a sort of witness of the past for such as, at other times, shall be capable of understanding it.

It will be seen at once how closely this quotation bears upon the contents of this volume, which might otherwise have been entitled 'Lithuanian Folk Songs'. There can be little doubt that the pre-Christian traditions of Europe have vanished except for such fragments as are referred to above; but, since all traditions proceed from the same source, their different forms being like different robes worn by the Truth which is One, it is possible, by studying those traditional doctrines that are still fully alive, to understand something of what these fragments contain. We will not attempt to explain here most of the songs in this book, since such a task would call for a far more detailed knowledge of the other traditions than we possess, and much more time for reflection than we have been allowed. Many of them, especially those towards the end of this volume, which are no doubt not so old as those placed at the beginning, seem to contain a very large

7. That is an essentially 'lunar' function, and it is to be noted that, according to astrology, the mass of the people corresponds in fact to the moon, and this indicates, at the same time, their purely passive character, incapable of initiative or spontaneity. R.G.

admixture of what is popular. But there are at least some of the earlier ones which, far from being mere fragments, seem to be full sacred poems that date from a time when the tradition was still flourishing, and we will dwell a little on these, since there is much to be said about them.

All the traditions look back to an age when the earth was a paradise for man, and they all teach that at a certain time man lost his most precious possession, which can only be regained with great difficulty by increasingly fewer of earth's inhabitants, and that since then he has gradually degenerated more and more, while earthly conditions, having grown worse and worse, will continue to do so until, by divine intervention, the 'Edenic' state is restored once more. What man has lost is sometimes described as the 'third eye' or the 'eye of the heart'; without this faculty, which is, in fact, the intellect in the true sense of the word, man is shut within this world, being barred from all spiritual knowledge and unable to look into eternity. Now this world is the world of the soul, and the soul itself in all traditions is symbolized by the moon, just as the spirit is symbolized by the sun. This can be seen from the first song.⁸

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, wrath, with His blade
cleft him in two and said:

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

8. I have inserted this clause, and the text of the song itself. The original text reads at this point: 'Thus, in the first song, which begins: "Moon took to be his bride/Sun in the first spring-tide"'. (Ed.)

The marriage of the sun and the moon signifies man in his primordial state, the primordial hermaphrodite as he is sometimes called, in full possession of his twofold nature, divine and human. The world of the spirit, which is made up of the different heavens, is the world of unity, just as this is the world of duality, and by losing his sight of heaven man lost the sense of unity, which explains the significance of the words 'cleft him in two'; this corresponds to what, in the three latest traditions, Judaeism, Christianity and Islam, is described as eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, that is, becoming subject to duality; and it will be remembered, in connection with the Lithuanian version, that Lucifer was none other than the Morning Star, whose fall from heaven song IV clearly refers to:⁹

Sun, 'tis time you went
over the firmament.
Sun, 'tis time to fare
thorough the air.
Sun, 'tis time you counted
if all the stars be 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.

It is also interesting to remember in this connection a passage in Plato's Symposium where Aristophanes speaks about primordial men, who, according to Greek tradition, were hermaphrodites until the time came when Zeus, whose power is symbolized by thunder, cut men in two.

The sole purpose of the various traditions is to teach such men as are capable how to regain the lost sense of eternity, either in this life or after death, and this task is usually represented as a difficult journey, past many obstacles and through many ordeals, back to the lost centre, which is the meeting point of heaven and earth. Now heaven and earth, the world of the spirit and the soul, are termed by the tradi-

9. I have inserted the text of the song here. (Ed.)

tions the 'Upper Waters' and the 'Lower Waters' respectively; their origin, the division of the waters, is thus described at the beginning of Genesis; and this explains the frequent references in traditional writings to two waters or seas, as, for example, in the Qoran, where it is written that Moses said to his servant: 'I will not stop till I reach the confluence of the two seas, or for years will I journey on'.¹⁰ It is at this confluence that the Tree of Life grows, and here also springs the Fountain of the Waters of Life; and to eat of the tree or drink of the waters is to regain this lost sense of eternity. The first verse of Song XVII seems clearly to refer to this centre which must be reached; as to the rest of the song, it is hard to know what to make of it, unless it signifies an attempt to gain spiritual knowledge which almost, though not quite, succeeded.¹¹

Where the deep meets the shallows
a holm lies,
and on the holm, on that holm,
a green oak does rise.

Once, when young, I swam out to it
and clambered up on to it:
Oh turn thyself, oak tree,
into my father!

Oh turn those green branches
to fingers white
and that green foliage
into words sweet!

Once, when young, I went away from it
and wept much over it;
for the oak never turned
into my father,

10. *Surat-el-Kahf* (the Cave), v. 60. See also *Surat-el-Furqan*, v. 55.

11. In the original text, the first clause of this sentence reads 'The first verse of the song on page 34, "Where the deep meets the shallows"'. I have inserted the text of the song itself. (Ed.)

nor turned those green branches
to fingers white
nor that green foliage
into words sweet.

It is interesting, however, to note that among the Druids also the Tree of Life was represented by the oak;¹² and it may well be that the tradition which produced these songs was closely connected with the Celtic one.

The lost centre is also often symbolized by a garden, such as, for example, the Garden of Eden, or the Garden of the Muses with its Fountain of Helicon and its sacred laurel tree. In the Lithuanian tradition it seems that the Tree of Life is often, as it were, replaced by the plant rue, whose evergreen nature makes it a symbol of immortality; thus the so often mentioned rue garden signifies the earthly paradise, and in Song VI it may be that the whirlpool is the equivalent of the fountain.¹³

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.

12. See René Guénon, *Le Symbolisme de la Croix*, ch. IX, and also *L'Homme et son devenir selon le Védānta*, p. 68.

13. I have substituted 'Song VI' for 'the song on page 10' in the original, and have inserted the text of the song itself. (Ed.)

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!

Now the hawk, with other birds of its tribe, above all the eagle,¹⁴ is essentially a bird of the sun, being a symbol of the spirit which 'descends' upon the soul so soon as the soul has reached the necessary state of tranquillity. This state is described in the traditions also as a state of childlikeness, of psychic death, of simplicity, of virginity, and of spiritual poverty, and the maiden's condition is one which recalls the words 'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted' and 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'. Her extreme poverty signifies her lack of attachment to earthly things,

14. It will be remembered that in the Christian tradition the eagle is used to represent St John who, most of all the apostles, stands for what is esoteric.

which enables her to pray whole-heartedly for spiritual riches and to receive them. The moon, in its benefic sense, symbolizes perfection of the human or individual nature, after the soul has died and been born again, and the words 'apportion my share' bear out the symbolism very clearly, since the function of the soul's faculties is analytical,¹⁵ belonging to the world of measurement in time and space, as opposed to the function of the spirit, which is synthetic, as the words 'gather me a dowry' imply.

Song VII, where, as so often, there is mention of something lost, may refer in its last stanza, to the different periods of this cycle of humanity.¹⁶

Yesterday at sundown
my lamb from the sheep pen strayed.
Ah me, will no one aid
in finding my one lamb?

I went and asked Morn's Star.
Morn's Star replied:
In the early morntide
the Sun's fire I must kindle.

15. A symbol is not something arbitrarily chosen but is based on the knowledge of the correspondences between the things in the different worlds, each world being analogous in every respect to the others. This knowledge is clearly not human, but was possessed by man in his primordial state. It will be remembered too that Adam is said to have given things their names which are also symbols; and the symbolical connection between various things in this world, which clearly could not be known from within this world, may be inferred even from the modern languages, which however degenerate they are, all spring from the one primordial language which comes by divine revelation. It may be noted, for example, how persistently the root MN occurs, in European languages, where things specifically human are concerned, as in the words *man*, *moon*, *memory* (Lithuanian *mintis*, the lost N being found in English in the word *reminiscence*), *mind* (Latin *mens*, the faculty which analyses, its function being defined by the Lithuanian *manyti* and the German *meinen*), *measure* (Latin *mensura*), and also in the name of Minerva, the Roman goddess of indirect human knowledge, whose bird is the owl, nocturnal and lunar, as opposed to the eagle which is the bird of Phoebus Apollo, the god of direct spiritual knowledge.

16. For more information see the article by René Guénon, *Quelques remarques sur la doctrine des cycles cosmiques*, the October number of *Études Traditionnelles*, 1938. [I have substituted 'Song VII' for 'The song on page 12' in the original, and have inserted the text of the song itself. (Ed.)]

I went and asked Eve's Star.
 Eve's Star replied:
 The Sun's bed at eventide
 I have to make ready.

I went and asked the Moon.
 The Moon replied:
 A sword has cleft my side,
 sad is my appearance.

I went and asked the Sun.
 The Sun replied:
 Nine days I'll search far and wide;
 on the tenth I'll not set even.

According to the traditions, and the Hindu doctrine gives the most detailed information on this point, each cycle is divided into four ages, which were known to the Romans as the Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages, each one being considerably shorter than the last. Within this period, at moments when the world or some part of it appears to be on the brink of chaos, the Divinity descends eight times to restore order, and the end of each Iron Age, when the disorder is most terrible, is marked also by a descent which enables the next Golden Age to begin. Thus from the beginning to the end of each cycle there may be said to be ten such descents, the ninth of this cycle corresponding to the first coming of Christ and the tenth to His second coming which will mark the restoration of mankind once more to his 'Edenic' state. This is perhaps the tenth day referred to in the song, and it is natural that the sun, symbolizing the spirit, is represented as the only one that can restore the loss.

In some of the songs it seems that man is not considered as having been driven away from the Tree of Life, but that the tree itself, or its equivalent the rue plant, is described as being injured in some way. So it is in the remarkable Song III, where the bloodstain clearly represents the taint of 'sin' incurred by man in his 'fall'.¹⁷

17. I have substituted 'Song III' for 'song on page 5' in the original, and have inserted the text of the song itself. (Ed.)

Morn's Star held a wedding feast.
 Thunder galloped through the gate
 and struck down a 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.

But the song as a whole remains very obscure for want of a more detailed knowledge of the tradition. It is difficult, for example, to account

for the number nine, though it recalls the number of the Muses in the Garden of Helicon; however, the day referred to in the last stanza is clearly the end of the cycle.

As to the Lithuanian tradition itself, it was almost certainly one of the most ancient of this *manvantara*, that is, of this cycle of four ages, being no doubt an offshoot, like the Celtic and Hindu traditions, of the great primordial tradition which is said to have come from the North Pole.¹⁸ Indeed, in the Vedic hymns of the Hindu tradition there is the clearest possible evidence, through frequent references to long days and nights and long dawns and sunsets, that its people lived in some region of the Arctic;¹⁹ and, among these songs Song II, where the sun is described as being for a long time out of man's sight, seems to suggest that the Lithuanian people also once lived in such a region.²⁰ Incidentally, it will be remembered that of the living European languages, Lithuanian is the closest to Sanscrit; and there is a remarkable illustration of this in the song in question, for the opening words, *Dievo dukryte* (God's daughter), would be, in Sanscrit, *Deva-duktri*.

We have said almost all that we can about the contents of this volume, and it is to be hoped that subsequently others, looking also from the traditional standpoint but possessing greater knowledge of these and other such relics, will be able to throw more light on the sacred art of the Lithuanian tradition. But there is one more point which calls for immediate explanation in connection with these songs, and this is that in Lithuanian²¹ the sun is feminine and the moon masculine, whereas in most traditions the sun, representing the spirit which in relation to the soul is active, is masculine and the moon feminine. But this depends upon the point of view; and from another point of view the spirit is passive in relation to a still higher principle which transcends the world of manifestation symbolized by the two

18. It may be remembered, incidentally, that even modern geologists agree that the present severity of the Arctic climate is due to a cataclysmic change in the surface of the earth and that in earlier ages the climate of those regions must have been quite mild; but naturally the tradition does not need to be corroborated by modern so-called 'authorities', and we merely mention this for the sake of those who, looking from an antitraditional standpoint, might find at first glance something incredible in the above statement about the primordial tradition.

19. See *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, by B. G. Tilak.

20. I have substituted 'Song II' for 'the one on page 4'. The first verse runs 'Beloved Sun, God's daughter,/where so long tarriest thou,/where so long dwellest thou/when from us thou removst thyself?' (Ed.)

21. This is also the case in Arabic and in German.

waters, and which in Lithuanian is symbolized by Perkunas, the god of thunder. Also, the pilgrim himself, from his own point of view, appears to be active on his journey in quest of what remains static; and thus the spirit is often represented by a woman (as in many esoteric narratives, some of which have only come down to us in the form of 'fairy stories'), whose hand can only be won after the suitor has passed through many ordeals. Often there is a combination of symbols, and it will be remembered, for example, that Hippomenes was only able to win the hand of Atalanta by means of the golden apples from the Garden of Hesperus, or in other words, by means of the fruit of the Tree of Life, and in the Divine Comedy it is only when Dante reaches the centre of the Earthly Paradise, on the top of the Mountain of Purgatory, that he comes face to face with Beatrice. From this point, according to all traditional teaching, the spirit may guide the pilgrim through the different heavens and beyond them to the final state of Supreme Identity with the Truth, which is what the Hindus describe as the state of a *Yogi*, the Chinese as of *Sheun Jenn* (Divine Man), and the Moslems as of a *Sufi* or of Universal Man. It is the same as that which St Bernard describes as the state of loving God with the Love with which He loves Himself, and beyond this, which is the End that all traditions lead to, there is nothing that can be desired.

Kaunas, June 1939

