

MAN IN NATURE

Pre-Christian Eastern Slavic Reflections on Nature

Molly Kaushal

What follows is a simple account of how, in earlier times, the Eastern Slavs, particularly the pre-Christian Russians, interacted with nature. Pre-Christian Slavic religion was mainly based on nature worship. Fire, Earth and Water figured prominently in its beliefs and ritual practices. The forces of nature were personified, feared, and revered, and the Slavs developed a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses. However, the three main gods of their pantheon were linked together not in a hierarchical way, but in a mutually complementary way, where each was incomplete without the other. A whole cycle of rituals revolved around various forces of nature and their personified images. The arrival of Christianity as the official religion and the establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church culminated in the banning of many folk ritual practices which were pre-Christian in origin, and in the persecution of those who practised them. Yet, a complete annihilation of earlier beliefs and practices could never be accomplished. Pre-Christian beliefs and gods exerted such a strong influence upon the Russian mind that the only way to come to terms with them was through incorporating them in the mainstream of the Christian order. Water, Fire, and the Mother Earth Goddess were, and have remained, the most powerful images of Russian religious beliefs and practices, and folk memory has remained loyal to the personified and non-personified images of these elements.

According to some scholars, Rusi, or Russians as we call them, have their origins in the word *Roce*. Although conjectural, this view is of a direct relevance to the paper, and I shall dwell upon it a little more. *Roce* was the name of an ancient river, a stream of the Dnieper, which flowed in the city called Rodnei. Rod or Svetovit was their clan god, and the bear their totem. Ancestor worship was common, and the dead were cremated. The central god — Svetovit or Belbog (the white god or the god of heavenly lights) later came to be represented by the thunder god Perun, the most revered god of the Eastern Slavs as late as the seventeenth century. If Belbog or Perun was the god of the heavenly lights, Chernobog — the black god — represented death. It has already been stated that the relations between these deities were not hierarchical; these three deities formed, as it were, the triangle of the Slavic religion.

The richest temples belonged to the Svetovit. Perun was worshipped outdoors in a grove, where stood an oak tree. Perun represented justice and order. He was the purifier, as well as the devil's principal adversary. His actions were manifested in lightning and thunder; and ancient men heard his voice in thunder, and believed it drove away the devil and other evil forces. Many scholars see the origin of music, use of musical instruments and bells, and the beating of drums as attempts to imitate the voice of Perun, and part of the magical efforts to protect the world from the evil forces and spirits. The sacred animals of Perun are the bull and the he goat, his birds the dove and the cuckoo, his weapons the axe and the arrow. His influence on the Eastern Slavic people was so strong that the Church had to come up with another image — Ilya the prophet — to combat the worship of Perun. Ilya was different only in name. His actions, roles, and attributes were identical to those of Perun. The bull, which was earlier sacrificed to propitiate Perun, was now offered to Ilya. Perun was in the image of a man with a wooden body, silver head, and a gold moustache. The Perun cult, as stated earlier, is considered to be associated with the initial god of the slaves Rod or Svetobog. This cult is also associated with phallus worship. Scholars see in Perun, a god of common Indo-European heritage, and liken him to Indra. Perun represented the *arbor mundi* and the *axis mundi* in the Slavic religion.

Frequently, the image of Perun overlaps with that of the sun-god (Dashbog), and he is often represented as the youthful sun-god. The personified sun (Dashbog) appears throughout Slavic folklore. Each morning he rides out from his golden palace in the east in a two-wheeled horse-drawn chariot, beginning each day as a young man, and dying each night as an old one. The sun god is attended by two lovely virgins (the

morning and the evening stars), seven judges (the planets), and the comets. As a year god, or the god of the seasons, he ages with each season, and the burning of the birch tree symbolizes his death.

The cult of the dawn was common among all slaves. According to some scholars, the slavic deity — Zaria, or the heavenly bride — has its origins in what is known to us as *Usas*. The primary female figures in slavic religion are the goddesses of fate, death, Baba Yaga, and the moist mother earth. In the Kievian pantheon they are represented in the image of a female deity Mokosh. She has a large head and long arms. At night she spins flax and shears sheep. She is associated with spring and the wet soil. She spins the threads of life and death, and is the dispenser of the water of life. Mokosh was later transformed into the eastern slavic deity Paraskova Pyanitsa, associated with spinning, water, fertility, health, and marriage. Like Perun, Mokosh is also seen as a goddess of water, fecundity, fire, and thunder. Mat sera Zimlia, or moist mother earth, is pure, powerful, and pregnant. The earth was believed to be in confinement until the 25th of March each year; it was a sin to strike the earth, and ploughing and digging were forbidden before that date.

Mother earth, as the corn goddess, made crops grow. At harvest, she was present in the last stalk of the grain left standing in the field. In some areas the mother goddess in the form of a doll (made of straw) or a wreath was symbolically drenched in water and kept till the next spring season, when some of its grains from the previous season's last stalk were mixed with new seeds at the time of planting.

Apart from these gods and goddesses of the main pantheon, there existed a number of spirits associated with rivers, forests, houses, hearth, air, etc. However, as stated earlier, Perun remained the central god. As the thunder god, he enters into an union with the mother earth (or sometimes creates it), and impregnates it through rain water, thus forcing her to yield and generate life. Thunder is his voice, and the winds and the tempests his breath. Water represents Perun's blood or tears. The sun and the moon are his eyes. Man receives his flesh from the fire that comes out of his eyes, and his soul from his breath.

One of Perun's main roles is to restore the earth's productive powers after the multi-headed snake demon steals the holy waters, takes away the earth's moisture, and renders her infertile. After killing the demon, Perun releases the holy waters which come pouring down to restore the earth's fertility. Closely associated with this is the belief that the rains, especially, of the spring season bless all those, who bathe in its waters, with strength, health, beauty, and fertility. These waters are also a protection against evil forces and spirits. The sun, which is referred to as the divine eye, also ages with the seasons, bathes in these pure waters and becomes healthy and youthful again. These waters are believed to cure human blindness, and there are a number of tales and legends in which the hero regains his sight after washing his eyes in the holy water collected at the crack of dawn before the "crow has bathed her children" from the seven springs or wells.

Rain is a happy omen and, falling before a new endeavour is commenced, guarantees its success. The sick are given rain water, or water collected from the seven springs to drink. Rain water, or the water of life, as it is called in Russian, heals wounds, makes mutilated parts of the body grow, rejuvenates the old, and resurrects the dead.

Russian folklore has two distinct variants of these life generating waters: live water, and dead water. Contrary to its name, however, the latter does not bring death; rather, it makes mutilated bodies whole, and heals wounds. But unlike live water, it does not possess the power of resurrection. Folktales are replete with motifs of dead and live water. Like the spring rains which first melt the earth, purify her, make her whole, while the following rains resurrect her, the dead hero too is first sprinkled with dead water, and then with live water, before he comes to life again. And like Perun, the hero in the Russian folktales drinks large quantities of holy/live water (or beer or wine, both of which appear as metaphors for live water) before the final battle, gaining strength with every sip till he becomes the strongest among the strong, and lifts the heaviest swords (the lightning is seen as Perun's sword), and like Perun, strikes the enemy dead with one blow.

What is the source of these waters? This brings us to the *arbor mundi*, the world tree. There, in the centre of the universe stands the oak tree, on its top sits the bird of paradise, the eagle, under its roots lies the snake demon. Two springs flow out from under the tree — one of live water, and the other of dead water. Near the springs sit three women, the fortune tellers. One knows the past, the other the future, and the third, the present. They decide what should be and what should not be, and the fate of every being. They bring death or life, and continuously work over the creation of the world (Here I may add that one of the magical values of live water is that it imparts wisdom and power to tell the future).

The *arbor mundi* is seen as a mediator between the world of the dead and the world of the living. The fight between the eagle and the snake demon is eternal, and represents the cycle of life and death, and of the seasons. The defeat of the demon results in the release of live waters. Death in slavic folklore is seen as a temporary state, a state of sleep. Nothing dies till the end. Every spring the sun comes out of the clutches of the forces of darkness; every spring Perun overpowers the snake demon, and life returns to the earth. *Arbor mundi*, associated with the theme of the constant revival and renewal, is seen as one of the attributes of Perun.

After Perun and the *arbor mundi*, I now come to the role of the stone in slavic folklore and mythology. The sun in Russian folklore is metaphorically called Ognioni kamen, or Bel goruch kamen — the white hot stone. Perun either holds the fire-stone — the fireball — in his hands, or his thick eyelashes hide the fire underneath them or, at times, he himself represents the sun. On the one hand, the sun the fire-stone dies every winter or, having become weak, is overpowered by his adversary the dark forces of winter and revives every spring after having bathed in the pure waters released by Perun. On the other hand, Perun has himself to drink first the living fluids of the celestial wells before he is able to kill the snake demon, and send life generating rains down to earth. The sun as the eye of god Perun or, as the fire hidden in the eyes of god, can burn and destroy everything when they are open but, soaked in holy waters, it generates life-giving forces. These attributes of the sun and Perun are transferred on the earth to stones.

Stone, like the oak tree, is seen as a mediator between the two worlds. The grave stone represents death. Like the oceans, it also separates the worlds of the dead and the living. The stone appears as a frequent symbol of death in folktales. The death of the hero is represented by his turning into stone. But since death is not absolute, the hero, like the earth in general, is brought back to life after he is sprinkled with live water, after which he invariably asks, "Oh, did I sleep too long?"

A dry stone represents death; soaked in water, it represents life. Perun is himself incapable of impregnating the earth without having first drunk the fluids of life from the celestial springs. The sun gets his strength and energy back only by bathing in the pure spring rains. The sun and fire are attributes of Perun. Fire is masculine in slavic religion, and water feminine. Both are seen as good phenomenon; neither can tolerate any impurity. One burns, and the other washes away or drowns all impurities. The pigeon (blue) book refers to fire as king, and water as queen. They are husband and wife. Through their union, procreation takes place. It is of interest to point out here some laments of orphans in Russian folklore:

(1) Oh, what a bitter orphan I am

as if born from stone

(2) I, it seems, was planted by stone

(3) I was born from the dry earth

from father, all from stone.

Perun, the sun, and stone are thus dry seeds unless soaked in female waters. In many places, Perun is

said to be married to the celestial water maiden. He places stones in the wombs of women, thus blessing them with children.

In the Pigeon (blue) book we read the following verse:

White Latir stone is father to all stones.

Why is he father to all stones?

From under the stone, from under the white stone, flows the river, the fast flowing river. This flows on earth, in the whole of the universe, so as to heal the world, so as to feed the world.

These are the same celestial springs which spring out of the roots of the *arbor mundi* — the world tree.

It is not accidental then that in birth rituals, stone, water, and fire play important roles. The woman in confinement is brought to a preheated bath house (*banya*) for delivery. The bath-house is on the periphery of the house. Its specific association with water and fire made it the most important part of the various rituals related to the life-cycle. Three stones or burning coals are brought to the bath house and placed in the water tub. The mother and the child are given bath in this water; the mother and the mid-wife also drink this water, which is also sprinkled on the guests who come to see the child. The hot bath-house with water and stone stand, on the one hand, for the continuity of life, or represent life itself. On the other, it also plays a magical role in the preservation of life. The second dimension of this agent lies in its purificatory, evil-warding powers.

In birth rituals, water represents continuity, and the preservation of life. In death rituals, it is predominantly purificatory. In the marriage rituals, its role is associated with fecundity.

The bride to be becomes an absolute stranger, and is not allowed to perform any household chores. She does not come out of the house, and covers her face in a black scarf which is similar to a death mask. On the day of the marriage, before going to church she is given the ritual bath, and the groom's clothes are also sprinkled with holy water. The bride also gives the groom water to drink. He drinks some of it and sprinkles the rest on those standing beside him. After marriage, in some versions of the ritual, the mother welcomes the groom with a bucketful of water, and gives his horse water to drink. In some other versions marriages are solemnized by the bride and the groom going round a water source thrice, and the bride is blessed so that she may be "healthy like water".

The ritual food also includes the three elements, except that stone is replaced by grain (barley in the birth rituals, and rice and raisins in the death rituals). Hot porridge is made in an earthen pot which is decorated with flowers and ribbons, brought to the table and broken. The porridge is then distributed to the guests. The symbolic value of this food is the same as that of water, stone, and fire in the bath-house.

Honey and wine are very often used as metaphors for live water. In many regions the bride's hair was rubbed with honey. It was because of their metaphorical significance that it was a common practice to pour honey and wine on the graves of relatives at the beginning of the spring season.

Fire, water, and grain are important not only in life-cycle rituals, but they also play an important role in agrarian rituals and festivals. It is not possible to discuss these at any meaningful length in so short a paper. But it may be noted that lighting a fire, dips in ice-holes or river waters, shooting of fire arrows, worshipping the corn mother in the form of a virgin dressed up in green leaves and wearing on her head a wreath made from straw are some of the prominent images of Eastern Slavic agrarian festivals.

In the beginning I had mentioned that Belbog, Chernobog, and Perun formed the fundamental axes of the Eastern Slavic religion. I end by saying that fire, water, and earth are the fundamental axes of their pantheon. The relationship between the three can never be hierarchical, as life can be generated only

when the three come together. The male fire, or the male dry seed/sun/fire, soaked in the female waters enters the womb of the mother earth (again female) and keeps the eternal rhythm of life going.

I would like to sum up this presentation with the following lines from a folk tale:

On the wall hung a sword and flask with live water. When sprinkled with this water the dry wooden stump will yield young offshoots and get covered by winter leaves; only then will arrive the moment of deliverance.