

# CÚ CHULAINN AND IL'YA OF MUROM: TWO HEROES, AND SOME VARIATIONS ON A THEME<sup>1</sup>

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## 0. Introduction

Cú Chulainn and Il'ya of Murom are certainly not the only exemplary heroes representing their two linguistic and cultural members of the wider Indo-European family — the Irish Celtic and the Russian Slavic - and in some ways they are more different than similar in the details of their legends or heroic biographies. Il'ya's generation and birth, for example, makes up a rather sparse and undramatic tale as compared to the famous triple-generation of Cú Chulainn, with its divine interaction and intervention, while there are no death-tales or songs attached to Il'ya's epic biography (though the number of oral accounts and versions of his adventures is very large).<sup>2</sup> In fact Il'ya's origin or parentage is specifically identified as peasant, and the only uncommon aspect of it is that his father and mother, Ivan Timofeyevich and Efrosinya Yakovlevna, had already “lived fifty years” before a son was granted to them - but this could be an evidence of Biblical influence on Il'ya's *epos*.

## 1. The heroic biography of Il'ya of Murom

Il'ya is conventionally precocious as befits a hero, his large size is noted, he has an extraordinary horse and wonderful weapons, marvelous weapons-skills (and a hero's bad temper),<sup>3</sup> he has combats with monstrous opponents (Nightingale the Robber, and a Dragon) as well as, more conventionally, with other powerful *bogatyrs*, and he has a troubled, confrontational relationship with a royal figure (here, Prince Vladimir of Kiev - though Il'ya also is called upon to defend Vladimir's city of Kiev). All these incidents or characteristics show distinct if not precise parallels to Cú Chulainn's career

<sup>1</sup> I am especially grateful to Dr John Carey, Dr Nina Chekhonadskaya, Professor Gearóid Mac Eoin and Professor Hildegard Tristram for their comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> According to Bailey and Ivanova (1998: 12) “the death of the hero [is] something that rarely happens in Russian epics” though death does come to the giant (and opponent of Il'ya) Svyatogor, of whom I will speak presently.

<sup>3</sup> Il'ya's “patience and forbearance” is sometimes cited (as peculiarly ‘Russian’ characteristics) rather than his heroic temper: see e.g. Aksakov 1880/1995. I am grateful to Dr Chekhonadskaya for bringing this point to my attention.

as they do to the biographies of many other epical warrior-heroes. (Like Cú Chulainn, Il'ya is a wanderer, not native to the place he eventually defends, and this wandering or errant habit or outsider's status *may* be indicated in the formulaic appellation he is frequently given in the *byliny* and *skazki*: *staryj kazak*, "the Old Cossack"). It is worth noting that Il'ya's "warrior-hero's strength" - his *bogatyrskaya sila* - does not seem to be innate or inborn, but comes either from the time he spent (the formulaic thirty-three years) curing himself of an enfeebling malady by sitting on an oven, *or* because this power was passed on to him by the dying Svyatogor.<sup>4</sup> Il'ya's accumulation of "heat" from that oven (and his concomitant "cure") of course associates him with the typical hero's heat or fiery nature; in the champion Cú Chulainn's Irish-Celtic case his *ferg*.<sup>5</sup> Il'ya, however, is no head-taker, as Cú Chulainn preeminently is; in fact the only head-taking in his heroic legend is perpetrated by his son, Sokol'nik, who kills his own mother and gratuitously cuts off her head (the beheading threatened by the "Tatar" enemy of course identifies them as barbarians, but then Sokol'nik has certain Tatar, that is, questionable "foreign" characteristics).

The mention of the hero's son of course activates the most striking similarity between the two stories of the Irish Celtic and the Russian heroes, for both are deeply involved in that extraordinary Indo-European (and, arguably, proto-I-E) theme, the *Vater-Söhnes-Kampf*, (or more properly, the *Söhnes-Todt*) scenario, where the heroic father wanders off, engenders a son, then eventually fights and kills this son. I have spent some time examining this Indo-European theme in its many, often intricate shadings and variations; it is very widely encountered, in allomorphisms that stretch from the original or "pure" form of father-son combat (in Medieval German, Norse, Persian, Indic, and of course Irish Celtic and Russian tales) through all sorts of other possibilities and permutations (even extending to certain comic and serio-comic confrontations) in any number of traditional societies and their heroic-epic and related sources (see Miller 1994-1996; 2000: 88-92). I suspect that there still are sub-types of and variations on this theme, and other cases, to identify.

<sup>4</sup> Astakhova 1958: 499. Note that in Bailey and Ivanova's version of the Sviatogor tale Il'ya refuses to accept the exceptional 'power' Sviatogor offers him while dying; his refusal parallels an incident in the Norse tale *Bósa ok Herraúðr* where Bósi refuses to accept the aid of the sorceress Busla because "he didn't want it to be known in his own saga" that he had accepted supernatural assistance: Miller 2000: 360-361.

<sup>5</sup> See Miller 2000: 272-273; Sayers 1985: 229-230.

## 2. *Söhnes Todt* drama in the bylina *Il'ya Muromets i Sokol'nik* and in the saga *Aided Óenfir Aife*

The “pure” narrative core of this eventually deadly heroic scenario is simple and soon stated: the hero travels to a far land, and there he meets and “weds” a woman, and leaves her (perhaps) pregnant. He gives her some sort of token or sign, and the instruction to hand on this token or sign to their son — if a son be born of the irregular union, and of course one is born. Later the son and the father meet, challenge one another, the recognition token either is not seen in time or it is ignored, and the father-with some difficulty — slays his own heroic offspring.

To set out the specific versions of this plot featuring our two heroes:

(a) In *Il'ya of Murom's* adventure he journeys to a far land, an exotic and eerie place; there (depending on the tale variant) he either meets and fights (and then has relations with) a female warrior (a *bogatyрка* — this is an Amazonian theme) or he meets an even more mysterious woman called by different names (Zlatygorki, Semigorki - names Bailey and Ivanova, and I think with some cause, believe to have a supernatural association).<sup>6</sup> *Il'ya* leaves behind his “recognition” tokens: a “wondrous cross” and a golden ring. The son is born, grows prodigiously in size and strength (as a hero's begetting should) and eventually he sets off for Kiev, announcing (to one of the bogatyrs he confronts there) that he has come to defeat and humble all of the city's warrior defenders, burn the city, behead Prince Vladimir, marry the Princess Apraksia, and so on. He meets his hero-father twice and in the first encounter almost defeats him. The two are then (briefly) reconciled, at which point *Sokol'nik* returns to his mother's land, kills her, comes back to Kiev and has another go at his father *Il'ya* - in fact he treacherously attacks him while his father is sleeping. But *Il'ya Muromets* is protected by his own “wondrous cross,” and, enraged, he grabs his son by his hair and throws him high into the air “but” says the bylina tersely “He didn't catch him.”<sup>7</sup> So *Sokol'nik* dies - at his own father's hand.

(b) “The Death of *Aife's* Only Son” (*Aided Óenfir Aife*) is the tale attached to the great *Táin Bó Cúalgne* in which the nonpareil Irish hero *Cú*

<sup>6</sup> Bailey and Ivanova 37; these editors also render *Sokol'nik* as “Falconer”; I have used “Little Falcon” elsewhere. Note that the *bogatyрка* is paralleled in *Cú's* narrative, for *Aife* is described as a “female warrior.”

<sup>7</sup> Astakhova 1958: 192, l. 298: “Он метал где Сокольника, не подхватывал”.

Chulainn, among other exploits, deals with his one son, young Connla. Aífe is the warrior-woman whom the hero had impregnated while he is overseas, “studying” heroic subjects with the Scottish witch Scáthach; the “recognition token” he leaves with Aífe is, again, a golden ring. The son who is born there (predictably) waxes in heroic strength and at the young age of seven sets sail for Ériu. One of the heroes of the Ulaid intercepts him as he prepares to land, but he is easily brushed aside, and eventually (with Cú ignoring the warning of his wife Emer) defending father and intruding son meet in single combat. Despite Connla’s child’s size he deals his father shrewd blows, and it in fact is only after the two are fighting in the sea nearby that Cú Chulainn, using “the trick of the *gae bolga*,” employs the uncanny weapon only he had been taught to use by the uncanny Scáthach, and he mortally wounds his son.

Two particularly significant elements appear to me to join these two heroic narratives together thematically (and so to differentiate them from the other “pure” father-son-combat tales). The first is that the two fathers slay their offspring in a way that is beyond (or unknown to) ordinary hand-to-hand heroic combat: Il’ya throws the youth high in the air and lets gravity, as it were, do the rest; Cú Chulainn employs the deadly secret weapon of the *gae bolga*.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, at least in these two confrontations usually included in the “pure” *Söhnes Todt* drama, the death of the heroic son and opponent is not, and cannot be, accomplished except in an extraordinary way. The second common thematic characteristic is that both of our paternal heroes explicitly or implicitly act to defend what is defined as their “community” against the destructive violence promised or threatened by the son. In a variant of the Sokol’nik tale the haughty if heroic young man is faulted for his lack of respect to the “elders” and to Kiev’s Prince Vladimir; in Cú Chulainn’s instance the hero grimly says (to his wife Emer) that whoever the stranger is “I must kill him for the honor of Ulster.”<sup>9</sup> I will go on to investigate this question of the relationship between “hero and threatened community.”

For now, I think it fair to say that among the many examples of the *Söhnes Todt* scenario we have available to us, the cases of Il’ya of Murom and Cú Chulainn have a flavour that is arguably more archaic, more

<sup>8</sup> Sayers is of the opinion that the *gae bolga* is a “water-weapon,” a sort of harpoon or weapon of reversal, and propelled by the foot not the hand; see Sayers 1987: 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> Kinsella’s (1969: 44) translation.

“traditional” if I may use that word (and I am absolutely ignoring here the early or the ‘modern’ date and provenance of all the texts provided by different epic creators, redactors, scribes or singers). The possible archaic-matrilineal reference in the drama of “the death of Aife’s [not Cú Chulainn’s] only son” has been recognised elsewhere;<sup>10</sup> I also think that we can detect this archaic quality in the supernatural elements introduced into the heroes’ “foreign” adventuring, and even more markedly in the exceptional way in which the death of the two extrageneric heroic sons is brought about; not in mere, canonical, hand-to-hand combat, but, as I have already mentioned, either using no weapon at all (Il’ya) or a secret, in fact an essentially unheroic weapon (Cú Chulainn).

### 3. The rationale behind Il’ya of Murom and Cú Chulainn’s drama

*Why* does the heroic father slay his own son - knowingly or (usually) unknowingly? I have suggested several answers to this question elsewhere: “enough is enough” is one (the potent hero’s son would be even more terrific, more powerful, than the father, and in fact much more dangerous to his host society).<sup>11</sup> Another possible response has to do with one aspect of the essence of heroism: the hero is the perfect solipsist; heroic “experiential” time is intense but brief, and it is not meant to continue- nor is any heroic “line” meant to continue after him. Like the Fates, the hero-father cuts short that thread of life, that extension of heroic “generation,” and of course this can be seen as a form of personal suicide for him.

But what we detect in these dramas of father and son is, without doubt, the precise opposite of the older (in absolute temporal terms), very well-known, psychologically “loaded” Greek drama of Oedipus. In a review of my own book *The Epic Hero* the reviewer, almost certainly a Classical scholar, noted my arguments on the importance of the father-son combat and the functional “uses” of the son’s death, and she asked the obvious question: How would I explain the “Oedipal Shift” in ancient Greece,

<sup>10</sup> See Gantz’s Introductory note to his translation of the tale: Gantz 1981: 147.

<sup>11</sup> This is a point surely understood by Shah Kâvuš, in the *Shâh-Name*, when he refused to us his kingly (magical) power to “cure” the mortally stricken Sohrâb, Rostam’s son, but a point not, I think, taken in by Joanne Findon, when she says that for Cú Chulainn to kill Connla “deprives Ulster of the survival of this warrior brilliance into the next generation” (Findon 1994: 139). What Kâvuš said was that “If his son remains alive I have nothing in my hand but dust” (VI. xx.80) - though the Shah evidently feared the “doubled” power of Rostam rather than the specific prowess of the extraordinary son.

where son slays father and takes his place?<sup>12</sup> Here I want to (slyly moving off our Celto-Slavic focus) briefly attempt to do just that, though the Greeks have a word for this manoeuvre, and that word is *hubris*.

There is an immense amount of scholarship available or focused on the Oedipal drama, but little of that vast treasury is of real use to me here; at one point I myself made an attempt to analyze one aspect of the Theban king, symbol of (primal?) sin, and in that attempt I put him next to another Greek mythic figure, the king-hero Theseus.<sup>13</sup> In fact the legends of Theseus bring in two themes that may be able to help or guide us. *First*, Theseus was responsible for the death both of his father (his human father, Aigeus) *and* his son Hippolytos; in neither case was he the direct cause of the fatality, but he was indirectly responsible, and we *could* say that he is sited right at the mythopoetic juncture between the older *Söhnes Todt* theme and the new Oedipal “shift.” *Second*, Theseus is identified as a “founding king,” specifically of Athens - and this point introduces a new form of human congregation or community, the city (or *polis*), into the dramatic equation (see Miller 2002, Allen 1996).

I am not taking the city as a social and political or “urban” construct here, but as a signature of the ideal shelter or enclosed refuge, more, as a sacred *topos*, and as such deeply marked by certain symbolic valences, especially the feminine - an idea continued in the post-Classical Greek thoughtworld as late as the period of the East Roman or Byzantine Empire, when the greatest imperial city was ritually described as the *chora*, the sacred, enclosed, protective space which was itself protected by the Virgin *Theotokos*.<sup>14</sup> In this long view the operative symbolism of Oedipus’s original “crime” then is not far to seek; he struck down the old king and took possession of the queen *and* the city (Queen Jocasta here has a signal but not a total similarity to the Sovereignty Goddess, the bestower and legitimator of kingly rule, and so we may detect a tonality very familiar to us from ancient Ireland).

Ireland, however, in terms of the legend of Cú Chulainn and his only son, has to be called “pre-political” (or pre-civic): Cú Chulainn stands in

<sup>12</sup> See review by F(rançoise) L(étoublon) (2004).

<sup>13</sup> And to Kreon, as these are “the three kings at Colonus” (Miller 1986) whom I attempted to draw into a trifunctional pattern, following the Dumézilian theoretical model. M. Bernard Sergent (Sergent 1998: 315-322) does not entirely agree with my conclusions.

<sup>14</sup> See Miller 1992: 255-256.

defence of the *túath* of the Ulaid (which is in fact not his own) and for the “honour” of its warriors (and, probably secondarily, in defence of its tribal king, Conchobar). The situation in Il’ya of Murom’s similarly archaic *epos* is different: Il’ya’s son Sokol’nik threatens not just to defeat all of the “Holy Russian” *bogatyr*s (and to slay the Kievan great-prince) but to destroy the city of Kiev *and* take the virgin princess for his own. Connla, then, is sufficiently dangerous; the hero Cú Chulainn’s unknown and unacknowledged son, born and nurtured in a foreign place thoroughly infused with the supernatural, described as already almost as powerful as his famous father, could not be allowed to achieve his full potential - all heroes can be as threatening to the society that produces them as they are useful as defenders of that society; such is the fatally doubled nature of the heroic, and its embodied, exceptional powers. With Sokol’nik, however, the hero-son’s threat is of a feral and monstrous opposition to any sort of Order; the “Tatar” son is out of control, acts barbarously (killing his own mother - which certainly was not *Oedipus*’s delict), and he obviously has abandoned even the most elementary sense of heroic chivalry or adherence to any code.<sup>15</sup>

At one time I thought that the problematic “Oedipal shift” was caused by some element extraneous to (using Dumézil’s theory) the Indo-European *idéologie*; now I am not so sure, for it seems possible to slot this “shift” right into the Indo-European heroic scenario we have been examining, using Theseus and his duplex career (as “founding” king and as far-venturing hero) as a pivot. Nor do I know how the idea of the “sacred city” (and the feminised city) was transmitted to the Russian epical consciousness, though I suspect that the idea came up the Dnieper from imperial Constantinople together with Greek Christianity, an alphabet, and any number of other cultural influences and transportable symbols.

Finally, it may be worthwhile to briefly re-examine and reassess the presence of the feminine and especially the “divine feminine” within the ambit of the Irish, Slavic and Greek tales I have dealt with here. The “marriage to Sovereignty” theme is easily identified in the *Táin*, though

<sup>15</sup> Now, for a Greek reflex of the theme of a feral and monstrous attack on the city, we have only to look at the roster of the out-of-control chieftains, led by Tydeus, portrayed in Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* - but of course the archepic in our Indo-European tradition, Homer’s *Iliad*, is among other things the story of an attack on a city - and an attempt to recover a woman. See Scully 1990.

not in the extramural episode where Cú Chulainn kills “Aífe’s only son” (see Mac Cana 1955-59; 1979: 448-449). A matrilineal relict has been suggested to explain this episode’s title, however - and for that matter a conflict between a matriarchal and a patriarchal order has been cited as the reason for Sokol’nik’s outrageous behaviour in his confrontation with his father Il’ya.<sup>16</sup> As regards the “divine feminine” and its powers the ancient Greek myths provide us with an interesting puzzle. I think it safe to say that the goddess Hera shows or retains some of the powers of a “Sovereignty goddess” (certainly this is true as she intervenes in the Heraklid *epos*). The anomalous mythic “birth” of Athena, however, introduced another sort of potency; Athena is *the* “political” goddess, the virginal divinity protective of cities (while, paradoxically, she also supports and protects certain of the heroes who *attack* cities - Achilles, most famously, for one, and the ferocious Tydeus for another). Perhaps we can see, in Athena’s attribute or embodiment of divine “wisdom,” a tentative movement toward abstraction and the gods’ “benevolent neutrality” insofar as the image of the proto-city, the new form of *communitas*, is concerned. At the same time we could say that the woman-warrior theme (a theme where Athena also resonates) has been *domesticated* (or ‘politicised’) in her case; brought into the city - as, in many Greek instances, hero-myths also were brought into the city, as particular heroes were claimed to have founded this or that *polis* and, upon their deaths, these “founding” heroes were often buried in or near the city’s gateway.

#### 4. Conclusion

Clearly the epic contest between father and son fits into a large complex of human themes, including (but not limited to) themes of *separation* (the *rites du passage*, hostage-giving and -taking),<sup>17</sup> the *occultation* of the son, *dislocation* of time and space, *replacement* (or displacement) of the normative family, male-female parental rôles - even questions of sin and guilt (not operative in this father-son fight, it seems). But: if the fatal combat between heroic father and heroic son - here shown in the particular cases of Cú Chulainn and Connla, and Il’ya Muromets and Sokol’nik - is

<sup>16</sup> A theory put forward by S. A. Avizhanskaya in 1947. Usually I am not that receptive to constructions that posit an *Ur*-conflict between a suppositious matriarchy and a patriarchy; matrilinearity is another matter entirely.

<sup>17</sup> I am reminded by Professor Tristram that the core of the medieval German example of the combat, “Hildebrand and Hadubrand,” was an actual hostage-giving incident.



indeed an archaic Indo-European scenario, then what does that “Oedipal shift” signify? I think that we see in the ancient father-son confrontation a solution to the implacable nature of the hero himself. To protect his community (against himself, essentially) he must be the last of his line, and he himself makes sure that this is so, and this effort is, we might say, pathetic but necessary. Yet the city - the *polis* - presents quite another problem. The city posits a form of spatial and social permanence, a continuation in time, and to *rule* in this sacred *topos* (a form of social organisation perhaps borrowed from outside the Indo-European thoughtworld and its social and cultural orbit) I think that a price has to be paid, and a new set of symbolic valences identified and mythically manipulated. The old king now must be replaced by the new, a new generation of rule or control, and the Athenian dramatists, carefully siting the “tragedy” in another city rather than in Athens, showed the ramifications of the “necessary sin” - not just the “sin” of Oedipus, but in the case of Creon as well (who of course is the king “doing his duty”). The more archaic “honour of Ulster” (taking Cú Chulainn’s words for his primary concern) is replaced by something like *raison d’état*. Hero and king are, in the constructions of imagination I have followed here, intricately opposed to one another - once again, but here in a slightly but significantly different way.

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SUMMARY  
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Кухулин и Илья Муромец:  
НЕКОТОРЫЕ ВАРИАЦИИ НА ТЕМУ ДВУХ ГЕРОЕВ

Кухулин и Илья Муромец могут быть определены как знаковые герои древнего (или раннесредневекового) ирландского и средневекового славяно-русского повествовательного контекста. Между ними проводится параллель главным образом как между непосредственными участниками одного и того же сюжета, известного под названием «конфликт отца и сына». Сюжет широко представлен в индоевропейском контексте: в его рамках герой (преднамеренно или непреднамеренно) убивает своего сына. Кухулин и Илья Муромец отчасти сопоставимы друг с другом: поединок в обоих преданиях имеет предельно жесткий, если не жестокий, характер и несправедливый исход. Между обоими персонажами обнаруживаются и другие соответствия: физическая сила, буйный нрав. Илья Муромец появляется в германских средневековых повествованиях (см. у де Фриса); вероятно, возможно проследить определенные связи с кельтскими источниками. Тем не менее, данная статья в целом посвящена поединку между отцом и сыном, контекст этого сюжета был расширен и усложнен в связи с привлечением данных греческой мифологии, а именно, мифа об Эдипе, где, напротив, сын убивает отца.