Nature as Metaphor in Romanian and Slavic Ritual Wedding Poetry

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Traditional weddings in Romania and the Slavic world are rich events that are the social and ritual experience par excellence of communities there. A wide array of folklore – from rituals and dance to verbal genres – is closely linked to weddings[1]. Wedding verse includes lament and other song forms that articulate the importance of marriage as a life-cycle transition. It is oral ritual poetry marked by formulaic symbolic language that reflects the critical concerns especially of the bride. Through an economy of words yet depth of meaning, these lyric genres communicate powerful messages. In this essay I address the expressive language of wedding ritual poetry in the Russian and southeast European traditions – laments and songs that speak for and to the bride. I focus on language that indexes the bride's wedding journey in metaphors that feature nature imagery.

I examine wedding poetry in Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Bulgaria, which together comprise a broad cultural continuum. Russia is in the east Slavic sphere, while Romania, Serbia, and Bulgaria form part of the Balkans. Historically they were all predominantly traditional, agricultural societies that were and are by and large Orthodox Christian. They were (and are) also highly patriarchal. Strong gender roles have long distinguished these worlds. Indeed, fundamental to understanding the dynamics of wedding poetry and traditional marriage is the fact that Russian and southeast European residence patterns were (and continue to be in some cases) patrilocal. When a couple gets married, the bride departs – symbolically "forever" – from her childhood, family, and community and relocates in the home of her in-laws, becoming part of the domestic "workforce" there. She becomes a player and proverbial "pawn" (especially of her mother-in-law) in the household; among her most important "duties" is to bear children. Expectations for traditional brides were high, and the experience for these "girls" (who were often still adolescents when they became brides) was typically frightening and agonizing. Accordingly, poetry

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[1] On traditional weddings in Romania, Russia, and the South Slavic world, see Gorovei 2002, Kligman 1988, Marian 2000, Şeuleanu 1985, Levaniouk 2012, Olson, Adonyeva 2012, Zlatanović 2003, and Ivanova 1984.

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performed during the complex of traditional wedding rituals typically voices the depth of fear and anxiety that the bride felt in the face of marriage.

In this essay, I present a discussion of the metaphoric language of nature that informs laments and wedding songs – verses that articulate the separation of the bride from her past when she gets married. The traditional groom progressed from boyhood to manhood when he was wed. By contrast, the bride moved not only from her role as maiden to that of wife but also from the security of her own parents' "hearth" into her permanent adult home, inhabited by "strangers". As a result, she underwent especially dramatic changes in her status when she got married. The majority of wedding rituals and songs in the Russian and southeast European world, therefore, center on the bride.

Arnold van Gennep's seminal work in 1909 on rites of passage (van Gennep 1960) provides a useful theoretical framework for this exploration. Van Gennep observed a tripartite sequence that underlies life-cycle events: moments that people celebrate in cultures throughout the world. He outlined the three large phases of ceremonial behavior as separation, transition, and incorporation and argued that each involves particular rituals that the protagonists in these events undergo as their various passages are articulated and facilitated. In weddings in the Russian and southeast European traditional world, attention turns most fully (although not exclusively) to rituals that engage the bride (Zlatanović 2003)[2]. Rites of separation focus on her departure from her childhood, family, and community. As we will see, a sense of the bride's rupture and leave-taking from her former life is movingly rendered in wedding laments that express separation. The transitional sequence covers the period in which the bride and groom are in a liminal stage: neither unmarried nor yet married. Finally, incorporation consists of the rituals surrounding the arrival and welcoming of the bride into her in-laws' home. At this time she joins her husband's family as a married woman. It is indeed a new life for the bride and although difficult, it also offers the potential for new experiences of joy and fulfillment.

Viewing weddings as passages, again primarily of the bride, in a vertical as well as horizontal sense also provides a useful paradigm. Laura Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva point out that "the wedding ritual marks two different transitions, each centered on the bride. It symbolizes the horizontal movement of the families toward one another, and the vertical movement of the bride from daughter (…) to the role of wife" (2012: 97). The bride's transition from daughter and sister in her own family to wife, daughter- and sister-in-law in her adopted household centers on her separation; it also can be interpreted as movement in a vertical direction. This trajectory relates to her personal progression over time: her maturing and transitioning into a new phase of life. But marriage for her is also a shift from one place to another. She moves, quite literally, from "her" home and community to "his". Indeed in traditional society, the "wedding ritual was first and foremost designed to suit the needs of the community, and only secondarily to suit the needs of the bride" (Olson, Adonyeva 2012: 112). As Gail Kligman points out, "Marriage is fundamentally social, honoring in dramatic form the communal self" (1988: 149).

[2] As Sanja Zlatanović observes, the bride is the "ritual subject who most radically changes her social position and for whom the rite of passage is the most expressive" (2003: 75).

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This view of movement for the bride can also be equated with her embracing an assumed, expanded social role as her half of the married couple that she will, along with the groom, become.

Thus wedding laments and songs reinforce norms of the larger community, to be sure, but they also poignantly voice the apprehensions of the bride. Through the laments that the bride conveys, she speaks for herself but also for the sisterhood that is in her midst: her girlfriends and mother in particular, although other female relatives also belong to the bride's gendered world. These dimensions are all vividly represented in wedding laments and song: on the one hand the "vertical", personal, bride-centered repertoire and on the other, the "horizontal", community-oriented poetry in which acceptance and incorporation of the bride into the groom's and in-laws' household is projected. Both are informed by separation, departure, and relocation.

I explore, in the pages ahead, how traditional bridal laments and wedding songs from the east Slavic and southeast European cultural continuum share rich symbolic language that evokes nature, most often plants and animals. It was nature as a phenomenon, composed of flora and fauna, that furnished the most familiar and telling realities for brides, their families, and friends. Throughout these traditions there is a core of metaphors that reference nature and collectively represent the ideas repeatedly expressed by and for brides. It is the bride's voice that is most often rendered in this poetry although she is not always the performer. In some of the poetry, it is her girlfriends – who inevitably will also eventually experience the apprehension and pain that the bride feels in the moment – who sing. And in Romania, often *lăutari* (professional male Romani poet-musicians, sg. *lăutar*), who are hired at traditional weddings, perform songs addressed to the bride[3]. The examples that I offer in this comparative discussion are drawn from published collections of poetic texts made over the past two hundred years[4] and include observations from my own fieldwork in southern Romania since the late 1990s[5].

I begin with a brief discussion of bridal laments and wedding poetry in Romanian and Slavic traditional society. This is followed by three central sections illustrated by poetic texts. In the first, I explore symbolic language that references plants in the bride's own journey, with an emphasis on her passage over time and separation from childhood. Olson, Adonyeva remark that the "vertical plane focuses (…) on the bride's individual growth. Here the bride's agency and choice and expression of personal emotions" (2012: 97) are evident. Vegetation, with its conspicuous cycles of birth, growth, and death, offers a likely rhetorical framework for the narrative of the bride's own maturation. I next discuss how metaphors involving birds bridge the bride's urgent sense of personal grief and her dreaded transfer to her in-laws. This is due to the symbolism of birds as beautiful creatures that sing (and mourn) poignantly as well as fly, effortlessly crossing boundaries. Olson, Adonyeva explain that the "horizontal plane involves the creation of new

[3] See Beissinger 2016.

[4] I turn to wedding poetry published in Gorovei 2002, Kligman 1988, Marian 2000, Tocilescu 1981, Levaniouk 2012, Propp 1975, Karadžić 1975, Zlatanović, Forsyth 1996, Ivanova 1984, Ivanova, Zhivkov 1981, and Rice 1994.

[5] I have undertaken fieldwork in rural and urban south-central Romania since 1998 exploring, in particular, the performance of wedding repertoire by *lăutari*.

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social bonds, contributing to social cohesion in the community and between communities. In this plane, (…) [the bride's] actions are predetermined by tradition and community expectations" (2012: 97). Indexing both vertical and horizontal aspects of the bride's journey, birds provide effective metaphors for her experience. In the third and final section, I treat how plants and birds alike are tropes for both bride and groom in wedding verse that represents the bride's projected move to her husband's home – also typified by horizontal passage. Through her imminent relocation and incorporation into her new world, two households and communities will connect. Moreover, through her joining the groom's household, a new family will be formed.

1. Bridal Laments and Wedding Song

Weddings in Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Bulgaria revolve around a core of comparable traditions, one of the most influential being the wedding poetry that articulates the permanent rupture from her past that the bride undergoes. The language of marriage "draws on metaphors of separation and demise", and this separation "embodies a social death" (Kligman 1988: 16, 146). Indeed, the traditional language of lament turns frequently to tropes expressing departure from youth, family, and home as well as death. As Olson and Adonyeva remark, "the structure of the wedding itself is designed to allow the bride to feel that she is entering a new social role by symbolically marketing (lamenting) the death of her former identity" (2012: 46). My attention is focused in large part in this essay on the verses in traditional wedding poetry that articulate the bride's separation, comprising her most heartrending pain and loss. The poetic details embedded in the "bride's" songs during the separation phase of the wedding metaphorically represent a break from her past. The bride undergoes a type of figurative demise and departure from her former life as she shifts her allegiance to her "new" family (Propp 1975)[6]. Lament is a genre that articulates a "permanent" farewell. In the case of death, departure truly is final, while for the bride in traditional marriage, as Kligman notes, "marriage represents a symbolic death" (1988: 72). It traditionally signified a new situation that was virtually irreversible: "the inexorable wedding ritual was a fact of life that [brides] did not question" (Olson, Adonyeva 2012: 100).

The transition to wedded life is typically rendered as a challenging adjustment. The laments and wedding songs provide cathartic expression for the bride's apprehension of her future situation Propp 1975)[7], including "feelings of loneliness and betrayal" (Olson, Adonyeva 2012: 61). Marriage as destiny was something that the sisterhood of women – from the bride's mother, to her grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and female age-mates – in traditional society either already were familiar with or knew they would also eventually face. It was a shared experience of anxiety, dread, and fear, eloquently articulated in highly figurative poetic language.

[6] Vladimir Propp notes that the "closer the day of separation from her own home comes, the more concretely is the picture drawn of the young woman's future in a strange family" (1975: 20).

[7] As Propp remarks, "the laments from the moment of the betrothal are directed mainly toward the future. These songs are unusually strong (…) portrayals of the hard fate of the young Russian peasant woman" (1975: 20).

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Traditional laments and wedding songs voice collective sentiments that are stylized, symbolic responses to the immensity of the changes that the young bride must undergo as she transitions to becoming a wife. Many of the recurrent words, thoughts, and meanings in these songs are nouns and epithets that resonate in traditional Russian and southeast European communities: imagery that refers to the immediate world around the bride in her rural, natural setting. These include, very importantly, plants and animals (especially birds) (Bovan 1991)[8]. Laments are "collective" statements that women in the patriarchal, virilocal milieux of traditional Russia and the Balkans knew and could both identify with and relate to. As Olson and Adonyeva point out, "the moment of marriage implies the bride's movement from one patriarchal institution of control (her birth family) to the next (her in-laws' family)" (2012: 105). Laments are personal statements of grief and adjustment on the part of the bride. The language of these genres is forceful, succinct, and formulaic, providing for an intense discourse of pain, anguish, and the unknown. But, as we will see as well, wedding songs eventually also express the potential for love and realization, as the bride anticipates incorporation into her new family and home. These, then, are no longer laments but rather joyful verses of hope and the eventual promise of new life.

2. Bridal laments: the poetics of plants

The imagery that symbolically depicts the bride's "vertical" movement is her personal, albeit traditional and formulaic, transition from maidenhood to married life. As Olson and Adonyeva remark, this "vertical plane (…) enacts the bride's own passage. (…) Much of [this] poetry sung by the bride and her girlfriends (…) reflects the bride's own journey" (2012: 97). I argue that the wedding poetry that articulates this passage frequently turns to plants as emblems that express the bride within her personal trajectory during this life-cycle shift.

The bride is metaphorically referred to, both in the songs that she sings and in those sung to her by others, as a variety of plants and vegetation. Plants symbolize beauty and fertility yet are short-lived and can be uprooted. They exemplify passage over time in a microcosm. Vegetation is frequently situated in gardens and orchards, themselves meaningful representations of domestic security: family and home. Most of "the songs of separation (…) are about the bride's leaving home to live among strangers and her not being a maiden any more" (Kligman 1988: 89–90). The end of the bride's maidenhood is often equated, as Olga Levaniouk remarks, with "green spaces – meadows, woods, orchards" (2012: §84). As we will see, before the bride's marriage, songs mirror her youth, "greenness," and untainted beauty. She is equated with flowers, fruit, herbs, and trees in full blossom; as a maiden, she reflects untouched purity and sexuality. After marriage, however, she is no longer a virgin and thus no longer a blossoming plant. Her beauty, in this rhetorical language, then withers and dies. This "death" is ritually necessary as the bride prepares to be "reborn" as a wife.

[8] Vladimir Bovan's observation, referencing Serbian wedding songs, that "[p]oetic details are taken (…) most often from animal and plant life" (1991: 156), is relevant for all of the wedding verse examined here.

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Flowers are common motifs for the bride and are called forth in traditional wedding poetry as she sets forth from her childhood family and home. In a Russian lament, the bride appeals to her father, reminding him that he used to protect, love, and call her a flower, while he expresses, in this excerpt, his own futile wish that she remain with him and the rest of the family. Here the "green orchard" symbolizes the parental home as the father tells his soon-to-be-bride daughter[9]. "Посажу тебя, дитятко,/ В *зелён сад* под окошецько,/ Обтыню-то тыноциком,/ Назову-то *цветоциком*".// "I will seat you, my child,/ In the *green orchard* under my window,/ And will put a fence around you/ And call you a *flower*" (Levaniouk 2012: §69).

The rose is a strong symbol of the bride's beauty. As the wedding guests gather, before she marries, the traditional Serbian bride is more radiant than the sun or moon; she is likened to a rose: "Što se sjaje preko Budve grada?/ Al' je sunce, ali jasan mjesec?/ Nit' je sunce, nit' je jasan mjesec,/ Nego snaha medju djeverima;/ Poljevša je *ruža* od *vijole*,/ Kako naša snaha od djevera" (Karadžić 1975: 93).// What is shining over the city of Budva?/ Is it the sun, or the clear moon?/ It's neither the sun nor the clear moon,/ But the daughter-in-law among the wedding attendants;/ The *rose* is more beautiful than the *violet*,/ Like our daughter-in-law among the wedding attendants[10]. In Serbian wedding poetry, "songs sung between the engagement and the actual wedding ceremonies reflect the anxiety of the [bride-to-be] as she anticipates her new life"; these songs "depict her feelings vividly, from her secret sighing – usually symbolized in the image of a melancholy flower – to her loud wailing" (Bovan 1991: 156).

Until the moment of marriage in a Romanian song, the bride is a rose in her mother's garden (a reference to her family home). Here, as the bride is addressed, her marriage is likened to a purchase, in other words, a betrayal; a sense of time is also invoked: "Fost-ai *rujă* de Rusalii/ În *grădina maicii* tale./ Când ai înflorit mai tare/ Mă-ta ţi-a făcut vânzare".// "In the late spring, you were a *rose/* In your *mother's garden*./ When you blossomed the most/ Your mother sold you" (Kligman 1988: 104). Speaking through poetry addressed to her in the well-known Romanian "Cântecul miresei" (The Bride's Song), the bride, employing flower imagery, asks first her mother and then father to remember her. The carnation denotes love, while the rose represents beauty and innocence: "Să mă vezi sara prin casă,/ Ca şi-o *garoafă frumoasă.* (…)/ Să mă vezi primblând pe jos/ Ca şi-un *trandafir frumos*" (Marian 2000: 397).// May you remember me in the evening at home,/ As a *beautiful carnation*. (…)/ May you remember me as you stroll around/ As a *beautiful rose.*

As Kligman notes, flowers are "symbols for virginity, (…) the vitality of youth and blossoming sexuality" (1988: 93). Flowers stand for the bride's maidenhood and purity, which she will lose once she is married. From that time on, she will never again be a flower or, as in "Cântecul miresei," she will never again "wear a flower". Even in the midst of the wedding, the bride as flower is the bride in the past: a bride before she was a bride. She is already mourning as she marries. On

[9] I have put the nouns and epithets (relating to plants and birds) in all of the following excerpts in italics.

[10] The translations into English from Gorovei (2002), Ivanova (1984), Ivanova and Zhivkov (1981), Karadžić (1975), Marian (2000), Pop (1976), Pop, Ruxăndoiu (1978), Tocilescu (1981), and Zlatanović (2003) are mine.

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the wedding day, a *lăutar* sings to her, briefly assuming her voice as she hangs on to her last moments of youth even as she anticipates the future, expressing her youth in the past tense: "Când eram la maică fată,/ Ştiam *floarea* cum se poartă;/ Dar dacă mă măritai,/ *Floare*-n cap nu mai purtai" (Tocilescu 1981: 73).// When I was a maiden at my mother's,/ I knew how a *flower* is worn;/ But when I got married,/ I no longer put a *flower* in my hair.

As the wedding day begins, and a bridal crown is placed on her head, a Romanian bride is told: "Plânge, mireasă, cu jele,/ Că n-oi mai purta petele, (…)/ După ce v-ăţi mărita/ Horile nu-ţi mai juca,/ *Florile* nu-ţi mai purta" (Gorovei 2002: 91–92).// Weep, o bride, with sorrow/ Since you'll never wear *flowers* again, (…)/ After you have gotten married,/ You will never dance again,/ You'll never wear *flowers* again. In another Romanian example, the bride, a carnation, is viewed in a passage of time, rendered by verbs that allude to the flower's growth. Yet it will not produce fruit, a reference to the bride's lost youth and maidenhood once she marries: "O *mândră garofă*/ Care de crescut creşte/ Şî de-nflorit înflore/ Da' de rodit nu rode".// "A *beautiful carnation*/ Which to grow, grows/ And to blossom, blossoms/ But to bear fruit, does not bear fruit" (Kligman 1988: 105).

The bride views her still-single girlfriends also as flowers. The demise of the bride's own flower – because her maidenly lot will cease after she gets married – is often juxtaposed to the vitality of the flowers within her unmarried cohort. This image is central to the wedding-song symbols. In the Russian tradition, she laments to her still-flowering companions; green meadows indicate the verdant nature of youth. Her own "bright-red flower", an emblem of passion and youth, however, has another fate, yet as the elemental imagery suggests, it is a natural and inevitable process (and her own friends will also experience it soon enough): "Пойдите вы, подружки-любушки,/ В *зелёны луга* на гулянушку/ Ваши-то *цвены алые*/ Стоят при долинушке/ А мой-то *цветочек аленький*,/ При бугринушке./ Дождичком-то его так и сечет,/ А солнышком-то его так и печет".// "Go, my beloved friends,/ To play in the *green meadows*./ Your *bright-red flowers*/ Are in the valley/ While my *bright-red flower*/ Is on a hill./ The rain is lashing and lashing it,/ The sun is burning and burning it" (Levaniouk 2012: §83).

The pain that the bride feels is linked intimately to her inescapable departure from her parents and move to live among "strangers", her in-laws. She begs her girlfriends to take her own flower to her mother and father: "Сорвите-ка вы, подружки милые,/ *Цветок аленький*,/ И снесите-ка его, подружки милые,/ К родной матушке,/ И к родному батюшке:/ Они на *аленький цветок*/ Не взглянут ли,/ А меня во чужих людях/ Не вспомянут ли?"// "Pluck, my dear friends,/ The *bright-red flower*,/ And take it, my dear friends,/ To my mother,/ To my father:/ Perhaps they will look/ At the *bright-red flower*,/ Perhaps they will remember me/ Among strangers" (Levaniouk 2012: §83). In another Russian song, the bride invokes her friends, who are blossoms still very much alive in a grassy field, and juxtaposes her own "death", represented by her lifeless flower. Again, a progression of time (seasons) is implied for the bride, who is growing up, with a sad destination – marriage: "Пройдет зима холодная,/ Придет весна красная,/ Взойдут *травы муравые*,/ Расцветут *цветы лазоревые*,/ Пойдут-то мои подруженьки,/ Пойдут-то мои голубушки/ Во *чисто поле*, со раздольице,/

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Сорвут-то они по *цветочку*./ Мой *цветок спосох*, *споблек* –/ Помянут меня подтуженьки,/ Помянут меня голубушки”.// “The cold winter will pass,/ The pretty spring will come,/ The *meadow grasses* will come up,/ The *sky-blue flowers* will bloom,/ My friends will go,/ My darlings will go,/ Into the *wide field*,/ The open space,/ And each one will pick a *flower*./ My *flower* is *dry and faded* –/ My friends will remember me,/ My darlings will remember me” (Levaniouk 2012: §81).

The bride’s state of pre-marriage angst is filled with vegetation tropes. The blossoming “greenness” of her previous maidenhood is virtually over, while her friends remain happy and free. As female attendants form the bride’s hair into two braids (the traditional hairstyle for married women), a Russian lament is sung to bride Katen’ka: “Недолго *цветочку* да в *садике* цвести,/ Во *саду* цвести./ Недолго нашей Катеньке в девушках сидеть ,/ В девушках сидеть./ Недолго Ивановне русу косу плесть,/ Русу косу плесть”.// “The *flower* does not have long to bloom in the *garden*,/ To bloom in the *garden*./ Our Katen’ka does not have long to be among maidens,/ To be among maidens./ Ivanovna does not have long to braid her blond braid,/ Braid her blond braid” (Levaniouk 2012: §112).

The iconic flower, along with other plants in bridal laments, wilts, is trampled, uprooted, or thrown away, corresponding to the bride’s farewell to youth and independence and the symbolic death associated with traditional marriage. Levaniouk notes that in Russian wedding poetry, this

> is part of an extensive system of metaphors having to do with flourishing and then withering of plants, perhaps the most prominent theme of the ‘maiden party’ and the wedding week. The bride’s parting with the freedom and luxury of the maidenly life is expressed through images of plants that wither, are cut down, or have to be abandoned by the bride (Levaniouk 2012: §79).

On the wedding day, in the Russian example that follows, an unmarried girl’s “green orchard” is comprised of “silky grass,” “pink flowers,” and “sugar trees,” all representative of her pure, verdant state: “И до сегоднишна Господня Божья денечка,/ И на горы стоял у девушки *зелёный сад*,/ И край пути стоял ведь сад до край дороженьки,/ И на красы-басы стоял да на угожестве,/ И возрастала в *саду травонька шелковая*,/ И росцветали всяки *розовы цветочики*/ И сросли *деревца* в *садочику сахарнеи*!”// “Until this Lord God's day/ On a hill there was a maiden’s *green orchard*,/ It stood at the side of the path, at the side of the road,/ In a beautiful place it stood, in a pleasant place,/ And *silky grass* grew in that *orchard*,/ And all kinds of *pink flowers* bloomed,/ And *sugar trees* grew in that *orchard*!” (Levaniouk 2012: §79). But the bride’s voice, changing to the first person, declares that she is about to shrivel up and “die”: “И вдруг на этой на урёчной на/ И вдруг за чудушко у нас да причудилось,/ И в *зеленом саду* за диво объяв илось:/ И посыхать да стала *травонька шелковая*,/ И вдруг поблекли тут *цветочики лазуревы*,/ И вдруг позябли тут *сахарни деревиночки*”.// “And suddenly this appointed week,/ What a strange thing happened here,/ A wonder took place in the *green orchard*/ The *silky grass* began to grow dry,/ The *sky-blue flowers* faded,/ The *sugar trees* were bitten by frost” (Levaniouk 2012: §79). Likewise, in “Cântecul miresei,” the maiden’s flower of youth is discarded in her anticipation of becoming a wife. The *lăutar* assumes the bride’s first-person voice: “Când eram la maica fată,/

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Ştiam *floarea* cum se poartă;/ Dar dacă mă măritai,/ După uşă o aruncai" (Tocilescu 1981: 74–75).// When I was a maiden at my mother's,/ I knew how a *flower* is worn;/ But when I got married,/ I threw it out the door.

The maiden is also, in the symbolic language of wedding poetry, a ripe fruit. A Bulgarian song, heard at betrothals, traces a mother's role in the life of a girl ("golden apple"). But by "selling" the "apple," the mother is betraying her daughter: "Имала майкя, чувала,/ Чувала *златна ябука*./ Лете я майкя чувала/ Ю нойна *буйна градина*./ Зиме я майкя чувала/ Ю нойна десна пазуха./ Сега я майкя продаде./ Не ми йе било *ябука*,/ На ми йе добра девойкя,/ Сега я майкя йожени".// "A mother had and guarded,/ She guarded a *golden apple*./ In summer the mother guarded it/ In her *glorious garden*./ In winter the mother guarded it/ Tucked safely in her bosom./ Now the mother is selling it./ It wasn't really an *apple*;/ It is a fine girl./ Now the mother is giving her in marriage" (Forsyth 1996: 442). And in traditional Serbia, when "the wedding guests come with the bride", she (Mara) stands out in her splendor – as both fruit and flower: "L'jepo ti je niz *polje* gledati/ *Žutu dunju* medju *listovima*,/ Kano Maru medju djeverima;/ Mari djever riječ govoriše:/ 'O snašice, *pitoma ružice*!'" (Karadžić 1975: 87–88)// How lovely to look down the *field*/ At the *golden quince* among the *leaves*,/ Like Mara among the wedding attendants;/ The best man said to Mara:/ O little daughter-in-law, o *little garden rose*!

Other tropes for the bride in these wedding songs are trees and flowers that never ripen or are cut down. Trees are important emblems in wedding poetry. Before her marriage, songs mirror the bride's youth, her "greenness," and pure beauty, which are about to be extinguished. In a Russian lament, a mother imagines her daughter as a young apple tree in a song sung by the bride's girlfriends; the mother's perspective is presented. She reared her "apple tree" but sees no fruit as the bride's timeline is also invoked: "Уж ты *яблонька*, ты *кудрявая*,/ Я садила тебя, насадила себя,/ Поливала-укрывала,/ От мороза берегла;/ Я на *яблоньке цветика* не видывала,/ Я *сахарного яблочка* не кушивала".// "Oh my *apple tree*, my *curly apple tree*,/ I planted you, I planted you,/ I watered you, covered you,/ I protected you from frost,/ I have not seen the *flowers* on the *apple tree*,/ I have not tried its *sugar-sweet apples*" (Levaniouk 2012: §59).

Sweet apple trees figure in Romanian wedding songs as well. The garden functions symbolically as the secure home of the bride's parents where, however, she will no longer dwell. Before having to leave home, the bride recalls: "Mă rugai, mama, cu milă,/ Să-ţi pui *măr dulce*-n *grădină*/ Să mă dai să-ţi fiu vecină" (Marian 2000: 398).// I beseeched you, Mama, with pity,/ To put a *sweet apple tree* in your *garden*/ So that I could be close to you.

In metaphors of deracination (here, of a grapevine), as the traditional Bulgarian bride is being veiled for the wedding, a group of girls who participate in the nuptial rituals sing to her[11]: "Колко ти пъти/ Я тебе рекох,/ Момина мале:/ "Не сади *лоза*,/ Не храни мома./ Докьет сватове,/ Докьет кумове./ Скършикьет *лоза*,/ Вземекьет мома,/ Момина мале".// "How many times/ Did I tell you,/ O Mother of the bride:/ Do not seed *grapes*,/ Do not feed a girl./ In-laws will come,/

[11] This ritual is paralleled in Romania when "Cântecul miresei" is sung to brides as they are veiled.

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Godparents will come./ They will rip up the *grapevine*,/ They will take the girl,/ O Mother of the bride" (Rice 1994: 158).

Various herbs, especially basil and rosemary, are also metaphors in bridal laments. Basil is a special plant that figures throughout Russian and East European nuptial traditions as well as in Orthodox religious ceremonies and rituals. It is a holy plant, a symbol of purity, youth, and fecundity. Basil figures in wedding rituals of sprinkling holy water in the four directions at a well or village crossroads to ensure fertility (Pop 1976: 145). It is also used in the consecration of holy water in the Orthodox Church and is dipped in water and sprinkled by a priest in the four corners of homes in order to bless them. In a direct allusion to the passage of time, the bride recalls to her mother, in the following Bulgarian wedding song, how she raised her over the years. Her mother's "little garden" is where the bride's "maidenhood," in the form of precious basil, grows. She asks her mother to tend it with care: "Дето си мене носила/ Девет месеци на сорце/ И три години на роки./ На тебе, майчо, оставям,/ В *градинка ранен босилек*;/ Недей го, майчо, оставя,/ Ами го чьосто поливай –/ С росица сутрин и вечер,/ С дребни солзици по обед" (Ivanova 1984: 239).// When I was a child you carried me/ Nine months next to your heart/ And three years in your arms./ I leave to you, Mother,/ *Young basil* in your *little garden*;/ Don't abandon it, Mother,/ But water it often –/ With dew in the morning and evening,/ And little tears at noon.

Wormwood, a shrub with a distinctive bitter flavor, is juxtaposed to basil, symbol of fertility. In a Serbian nuptial song, the bride sows basil, but wormwood, representing death, appears: "Jer sam ja sirota nesretna devojka,/ Ja *bosiljak* sejem, meni *pelen* niče/ Oj *pelen*, *pelenče*, moje *gorko cveće*!/ Tobom će se moji svati nakititi,/ Kad me stanu tužnu do groba nositi".// "For I am an unfortunate unhappy maiden,/ I sow *sweet basil*, and *wormwood* springs up,/ O *wormwood*, *little wormwood*, my *bitter flower*!/ My wedding guests shall adorn themselves with you,/ When they carry my wretched body to the grave" (Bovan 1991: 165). Again, by "dying", the bride will be resurrected as a wife.

Indexing the "vertical" nature of the wedding as a time during which the bride is growing away from her past and moving into her future, rosemary is invoked as her movement is captured in a handful of verses in the following Serbian ritual song. When the wedding guests are about to set off from the bride's home, her family offers a plea, addressed to the groom, to care lovingly for her, a tender stalk of rosemary (a metaphor for love and devotion): "Predadosmo ti *struk ruzmarina*;/ Ako uvene *struk ruzmarina*,/ Tvoja sramota naša greota;/ Često zalivaj *struk ruzmarina*,/ Da ne uvene *struk ruzmarina*" (Karadžić 1975: 75).// We handed over to you a *stalk of rosemary*;/ If the *stalk of rosemary* withers,/ Your disgrace will be our shame;/ Water the *stalk of rosemary* often/ So the *stalk of rosemary* does not wither.

Tiberiu Alexandru writes that the "most important of all the wedding songs, known everywhere" in Romania, is "Cântecul miresei" (1980: 30). It is still a vital tradition at weddings there and is typically sung twice, framing the central wedding

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day[12]. It is heard in the morning, when the bride's crown or veil is placed on her head and then again at the end of the banquet, when it is removed and a "wife's" kerchief is put on to cover her hair. The bride takes leave from her family and friends in paratactic structures interspersed with plant imagery: the flower garden represents her home, and goosefoot and basil reference her still-unmarried girlfriends who are not yet leaving maidenhood behind. Unlike the bride, they can still frolic in the lane and flirt at the village dance: "Ia-ţi, mireasă, ziua bună,/ De la tată, de la mumă,/ De la fraţi, de la surori,/ De la *grădina cu flori*;/ De la *fir de tamîiţă*,/ De la fete din uliţă;/ De la *fir de busuioc*,/ De la fete de la joc"// "Bid, o bride, farewell,/ To your father, to your mother,/ To your brothers, to your sisters,/ To the *garden full of flowers*;/ To the *sprig of goosefoot*,/ To your girlfriends in the lane,/ To the *sprig of basil*,/ To your girlfriends at the dance" (Alexandru 1980: 190).

The performance of this iconic song typically generates tears on the part of the bride as, even in today's world, the importance of the moment is acknowledged, and she vents her emotions through catharsis. Indeed, in the Bulgarian context as well, the departure of the bride from her parents is especially "emotional," and weeping is "obligatory" (Ivanova 1984: 262). In "Cântecul miresei." the bride takes her leave of everyone and everything from her former life as the "vertical" character of weddings comes into clear focus. As oral traditional poetry, "Cântecul miresei" is performed in countless ways throughout Romania. Yet "relatively unified in terms of its structure and metaphorical meaning through the entire country, the poem lyrically enumerates the essential stages of the bride's separation and their symbolic resonance, in a gradual succession" (Pop, Ruxăndoiu 1978: 200).

The example below contains rich figurative imagery of flora: the bramble, a thorny, coarse, vine or shrub, also an emblem of pureness (representing the bittersweet nature of weddings); flowers (virginity); basil (purity and fertility); the fir tree (stamina and everlasting life); and the walnut tree (wisdom, knowledge, and understanding). Here farewells to family and friends alternate with vegetation tropes exemplifying the past and anticipating the future: "*Frunza verde mărăcine*,/ Ia-ți, mireasă ziua bună,/ De la fraţi, de la surori,/ De la *grădina cu flori*,/ De la *strat de busuioc*,/ De la fete, de la joc,/ De la *frunza* cea *de brad*,/ De la puiul cel lăsat,/ De la *frunza* cea *de nuc*,/ Rămâi maică, eu mă duc" (Pop 1976: 145).// *Green leaf of the bramble*,/ Bid, o bride, farewell,/ To your brothers, to your sisters,/ To the *garden full of flowers*,/ To the *bed of basil*,/ To your girlfriends, to the dance,/ To the *leaf of the fir tree*,/ To the chicken left behind,/ To the *leaf of the walnut tree*,/ Remain here, o Mother, I must go.

Later in the traditional wedding, after a meal at the bride's parents' residence, the bride would take leave of the home in which she grew up. In Romania, *lăutari* would sing special songs for the bride's leave-taking from her family members, termed "iertăciunile" (Şeuleanu 1985). They are characterized by the bride's asking for forgiveness from her family members for any past transgressions. This is a ritual genre that is meant to permit the bride to depart from her family in order to join her

[12] In the numerous weddings that I have attended since 1999 in southern Romania at which *lăutari* have performed, "Cântecul miresei" has virtually always played an important role in the nuptial-day rituals.

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new family "with a clean slate." The songs are reminiscent, in structure and imagery, of "Cântecul miresei". Plant motifs abound, including the beautiful xeranthemum, representing undying love and eternity: "*Frunza verde mărăcine*,/ Ia-ți copilă iertăciune,/ De la fraţi, de la surori,/ De la *grădina cu flori*./ *Frunza verde mărăcine*,/ Ia-ți copilă iertăciune,/ De la mamă, de la vere,/ De la *strat cu garofele*,/ *Foaie verde siminoc*,/ Cere-ți iertare pe loc,/ De la fete, de la joc,/ De la *strat cu busuioc*" (Pop 1976: 151).// *Green leaf of the bramble*,/ Beg, o child, for forgiveness,/ From your brothers, from you sisters,/ From the *flower garden*,/ *Green leaf of the bramble*,/ Beg, o child, for forgiveness,/ From your mama, from your cousins,/ From the *bed of carnations*,/ *Green leaf of the xeranthemum*/ Ask for forgiveness right now,/ From your girlfriends, from the dance,/ From the *bed of basil*. Songs of forgiveness are also customarily accompanied by "requisite" ritual crying (Pop 1976: 152).

In the traditional Serbian wedding repertoire, in which similar songs are sung, the cherry tree is a metaphor for the bride since it is the

> fruit tree that blooms and ripens first, with white blossoms and red fruit. (…) The cherry, a symbol of spring and new life, (…) always bears and gives forth fruit. Like the cherry, the bride is also uprooted from the family in which she was born; she abandons her village or region (…) in order to be transplanted to another place, another home, where she also will give birth (Zlatanović 2003: 76).

When the bride is led out from her home, a song in which she expresses remorse to her family for any past actions is typically sung "with a very sad inflection" (Zlatanović 2003: 75). It also includes plant metaphors for the bride's being plucked out of her childhood home: "*Trešnja* se od *kornja* kornjaše,/ Moma se od majke deleše,/ 'Prošćevaj, majko, prošćevaj,/ Prošćevaj cela rodbino./ Do sad sam majku slušala,/ Od sada slušam svekrva,/ Svekrva, zalva, jetrva,/ I toj malo deverče'" (Zlatanović 2003: 75–76).// The *sweet cherry tree* was uprooted from its roots,/ The maiden was separated from her mother,/ "Forgive me, Mother, forgive me,/ Forgive me, entire family./ Up to now I listened to my mother,/ From now on I'll be listening to my mother-in-law,/ My mother-in-law and my sisters-in-law,/ And my little brother-in-law (husband's brother)". A comparable genre is also sung by the bride at traditional Russian weddings: the bride "says farewell to [her relatives] and asks them to forget anything she has done to anger them" (Propp 1975: 22).

3. Bridal laments: the poetics of birds

The most common animals represented in Russian and southeast European bridal laments and wedding songs are birds. Like plants, they are symbols of exquisite female beauty; birds also possess an ability to sing with intensity. Moreover, due to their ability to fly, birds epitomize freedom, which brides proverbially lose when they get married. Birds are ancient motifs of boundary crossing – as are brides, who adopt patrilocal residence when they wed. I argue that birds provide powerful tropes in marriage, illustrating what Kligman calls the "rich, highly condensed symbolic language" (1988: 16) of wedding poetry.

Among the most frequent epithets that figure as metaphors for the bride in Russian wedding poetry is "white swan," denoting purity and beauty. Mixing bird

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and tree imagery, the bride refers to herself in one lament as a "*белу лебедь*-то со *белой* со *березоньки*"// "a *white swan* from a *white birch tree*" (Levaniouk 2012; §53). The color white reinforces the chaste, virgin bride whose soon-to-be former home, the white birch tree, also represents purity and security. In another Russian lament, the bride speaks to her brother referring to herself as "white swan": "Ой-ко слушай, братец ты родименький (…)/ И держи-ко ты *белую лебёдушку*/ Что во красных во девицах./ Жалко от тоски бажоной вольной волюшки,/ Хочется пожить у желанных у родителей/ На своей на родинке".// "Listen to me, my beloved brother (…)/ And keep your *white swan*/ Among the pretty maidens./ I long so much for my beloved willful freedom,/ I want to live with my beloved parents,/ In my native land" (Levaniouk 2012: §108). Both swan and swallow are emblems for the bride as she laments, first in her own words and then as the voice of her mother; the two braids denote the hair style of traditional wives: "И я гляжу смотрю, невольна красна девушка:/ И вдруг подходит же родитель-матушка,/ И унимае меня, *белую лебедушку*, (…)/ И говорит мне-ка родитель таково слово:/ 'Перестань да плакать, *белая лебедушка*,/ И ты не плачь, моя *косата летна ластушка*, (…)/ И ты послушай, моя *белая лебедушка*,/ И ты желанную родитель свою матушку!'"// "And I am looking, me the oppressed pretty maiden,/ And all at once my parent, my mother, comes to me,/ And comforts me, the *white swan*, (…)/ And speaks to me these words:/ 'Stop crying, my *white swan*,/ And do not cry, my *two-braided summer swallow*, (…)/ Listen to me, my *white swan*,/ Listen to your own beloved mother!'" (Levaniouk 2012: §57). The mother's voice continues through her daughter's lament, even rebuking her for leaving: "И того жаль мне-ка, кручинной головушке:/ И твои плечика, *лебедушко*, узешеньки,/ И твоя силушка, *лебедушко*, малешенька, (…)/ И не умела сдержать вольной да ты волюшки,/ И на девочьей ты на бладой на головушке!/ И молчи схватишься, ведь *белая лебедушка*,/ И по своей да по бажёной дорогой воли,/ И по девочьем украшённоем живленьице,/ И да ты хватишься, *лебедушко*, наплачешься!"// "This is what I am sorry for, me, the sad head,/ That your shoulders, my *swan*, are so narrow,/ That your force, my *swan*, is slight, (…)/ You did not know how to keep your willful freedom/ On your maidenly and young head!/ And you will look, my *white swan*,/ For your beautiful dear willful freedom,/ Or the maidenly luxurious life,/ And you will look and miss it, my *swan*, and you will cry!" (Levaniouk 2012: §58).

The bride calls her unmarried girlfriends white swans, something that she, sadly, will soon no longer be: "Вы спитё, да *белы лебеди*,/ Вы подружки мои милые,/ Вам спалось ли ночку тёмную?/ А мне да молодешеньке/ Не спалася ночка тёмная,/ Только много во сне видела"// "Are you sleeping, *white swans*,/ My dear friends,/ Did you sleep well this dark night?/ I, the young one,/ Could not sleep well this dark night,/ But saw much in my dreams" (Levaniouk 2012: §96).

In the Russian tradition, the bride also calls herself a "cuckoo" – a bird of sorrow and grieving in Slavic folklore. Referring to her own anticipated lamentation, she invokes the forest, mourning: "Закукует *кукушка* в *бору*"//"The *cuckoo* will begin singing in the *forest*" (Levaniouk 2012: §63). Here, cuckoos and other birds are invoked as the bride, knowing her inevitable fate, wishes to convey her pain as a songbird: "Попрошу я, горе бедное,/ Я у *ласточки* крылушек,/ У *касаточки*

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перышек,/ А у *голубя* голосу,/ У *кукушечки* звонкого”// “I will ask, me, the poor grief,/ A *swallow* for her wings,/ A *swallow* for her feathers,/ And a *pigeon* for its voice,/ A *cuckoo* for its clear voice” (Levaniouk 2012: §63).

As Levaniouk points out, most of the Russian “wedding songs and laments were performed by the bride in the company of her friends and by friends addressing the bride or speaking for her” (2012: §64). The following was sung by the bride’s girlfriends, who address her as “my pigeon”:

> Развесёлое житье девичье,/ Распроклятая жизнь замужняя!/ Не навек житье доставалося,/ Со белого лица красота сметалася!/ С черной грязью смешалася!/ Не летай, *голубь*, вдоль по улочке,/ Вдоль по широкой!/ Не воркуй, *голубь*, жалостишенько,/ Без тебя, мой *голубь*,/ Мне растошнешенько!”// “Maidenly life is full of joy,/ Married life is cursed!/ Maidenly life is not given forever,/ Beauty is swept away from the white face!/ It is mixed with black dirt!/ Do not fly, my *pigeon*, along the street,/ Along the broad street,/ Do not coo, my *pigeon*, so pitifully,/ Even as it is, my *pigeon*,/ I feel so sick at heart! (Levaniouk 2012: §64).

Other birds also afford tropes for the bride as various female voices address her. Her aunt calls her “*голубушка*”// “*little dove*” as she offers advice as one who has also experienced the trying separation from her family and past (Reeder 1975: 160). The bride, before she marries, imagines her girlfriends gathering with her in a green orchard so that they can all sing together: “И во моем да во девочьем *зеленом саду*/ И солетали *перелётны разны птиченьки*,/ И как *незнамы соловьи да говоручии*,/ И возжупляли оны разным голосочкам!/ И удивлялися им добры столько людушки,/ И любовалися спорядны вси суседушки/ И на мой да на девочей на *зелёный сад*!”// “And in my maidenly *green orchard*/ *All kinds of migratory birds* would gather,/ And *unknown clear-voiced nightingales*/ Would sing in different voices!/ And good folk would be amazed at them,/ And all the neighbors would delight in it,/ In my maidenly *green orchard*” (Levaniouk 2012: §79). When the wedding day arrives, the bride’s fears are expressed again through bird imagery: “И *малы птиченьки* – чего они спугалися –/ Из *зелена сада соловьи* розлетались!”// “And the *little birds* – who knows what scared them –/ All the *nightingales* flew away from the *green orchard*!” (Levaniouk 2012: §79).

The bride, anticipating her married life ahead, is poignantly depicted as a bird that escapes from her “internment” in her new home and flies back to her mother and sings to her. In a Romanian song, projecting the future conditions of hardship that she will have to endure, she laments: “Mă făcui d-o *păsărea*/ Şi zburai la maică-mea;/ Mă făcui d-o *păsăruică*/ Şi zburai p-o ferestruică,/ S-o văz sara cum se culcă,/ Dimineaţa cum se scoală…/ Ea se scoală tot oftând/ Şi se scoală tot plângând/ Şi din gură-aşa zicând:/ “Huş, o *pasere* d-acolo,/ Cu glas de la fata mea,/ Nu-mi mai rupe inima!” (Tocilescu 1981: 81–82)// I became a *bird*/ And flew off to my mother’s;/ I became a *little bird*/ And few off to perch on a little window,/ To watch how she goes to bed in the evening,/ And in the morning how she wakes up…/ She wakes up ever sighing/ And she wakes up ever weeping/ And saying this:/ “Shoo, o *bird* over there/ With the voice of my daughter,/ Don’t break my heart anymore!” Similar imagery is heard in another moving example as the bride imagines begging God to: “Fă-mă *pasăre măiastră*,/ Să zbor la mîndra-n fereastră,/ Cu mămuca să vorbesc,/ Cu mândra să mă iubesc,/ Dumnezeu de mila mea,/ M-a făcut o *păsărea*/ Şi-am

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zburat la măicuța" (Tocilescu 1981: 82).// Make me into a *miraculous bird*,/ So that I can fly to my darling [mother's] window,/ To talk with my dear mama,/ To love my darling [mother]./ Out of pity for me, God/ Made me into a *bird*/ And I flew to my dear mother. There, in verse after verse, she fancies telling her mother her woes as a new bride.

In a Russian lament, the bride's resentment to her parents for sending her away to her in-laws contrasts with the Romanian, yet she also wishes to become a bird to fly home. The juxtaposition of the bride's agony and the lush beauty of her mother's home, along with the explicit passage of time is striking: "Родимая маменька/ На гориюшко меня родила./ Не дала мне повырости –/ В чужи люди отдала./ Рассержусь я на матушку,/ Семь лет в гости не пойду/ На восьмое летичко/ Вольной *пташкой* прилечу./ Сяду я на *яблоньку* / На *кудрявую* в *саду*,/ Расскажу я маменьке/ Про участь горькую мою".// "My dear mother/ Bore me for grief./ She did not give me time to grow up –/ Gave me away to strangers./ I will get angry with mother,/ I will not come to visit for seven years,/ In the eighth summer,/ I will become a *bird* and fly,/ I will perch on the *apple tree*,/ On the *curly apple tree* in the *garden*,/ I will tell my mother/ About my bitter fate" (Levaniouk 2012: §61). The trope of a bird flying to see her long-lost family underscores the finality of separation and the symbolic death-like nature of the bride's departure. Birds, which figure frequently in the death laments of Slavic and southeastern Europe, are mediators between the world of the living and that of the dead since they are capable of transcending seemingly insurmountable frontiers.

Doves figure in Russian laments as the bride's unmarried girlfriends. In one, she addresses them and alludes to her not yet wanting to have her hair braided in two: "Просим милости, подруженьки,/ Мои *милые голубушки*,/ Уж ко мне вы, дороги гости,/ Уж в последние, в остатные!/ Попрошу тебя, *голубушка*,/ Моя милая подруженька,/ Не расплетай-ка мне русу косу".// "Welcome, friends,/ My *darling doves*,/ Come visit me/ For the last remaining time!/ I will ask you, my *doves*,/ My beloved friends,/ Do not undo my blond braid" (Levaniouk 2012: §106). Here, the bride tells her friends that she longs to be a maiden and sing glad songs with them. The subtext is, however, that her life has changed, and this will not be possible since she is about to be married and instead sings mournful songs: "*Сизые* вы *голубушки*,/ Милые вы подруженьки,/ Вы попойте, голубушки,/ Да развесёлых-то писенок"// "My *gray doves*,/ My dear friends,/ Sing, my darlings,/ The most joyful songs" (Levaniouk 2012: §75). Yet these "new songs" are part of a vital and obligatory step that the bride must take. As Olson and Adonyeva note, "At the moment of her marriage, the girl undergoes a separation from her peer group that is necessary for her to eventually rise to fully potent female adulthood" (2012: 105). It is entirely expected that each maiden sooner or later will join the ranks of married women and mothers.

4. Wedding songs, the bride and groom, and the poetics of nature

The tone of wedding laments is altogether dark and negative. The apprehension of young brides who, in traditional Russia and southeast Europe, leave their homes when they marry, dominates the many verses that are and were sung at weddings. Marriage in this cultural continuum was, after all, a "symbolic death".

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And yet, underlying the bride's sorrow and melancholy, there is, at times, a dynamic tension expressed in the poetry that subverts the overall pessimism. True, her youthful days are over, and she will indeed be deflowered, but in the midst of this, the bride will also find a new autonomy, dignity, and, indeed, "ripeness" (to invoke the metaphor of plants) as a young wife. She will fulfill the role that traditional society venerates and expects: experiencing her sexual self and its consequence – bringing forth her own "fruit". As Olson and Adonyeva note, "The poetics of the [wedding] ritual imply the bride's loss of freedom as a girl, but also (…) a new kind of freedom and power, and the beginning of her achievement of her life's goals (the cultural imperative to bear children)" (2012: 97). Indeed, this nascent force and joy involves both husband and wife, as songs that articulate the bride's imminent move to her new family, celebrate. This is also, at times, rendered in nature imagery.

The bride and groom figure in wedding poetry as a pair of birds proceeding to the wedding ceremony. Peafowl, known for their splendor and pomp, frequently represent them. A groom in Serbian wedding poetry is a "*paun zlatnim perom*"//a *peacock with golden feathers* (Karadžić 1975: 53). In the following song, the bride is a peahen, led by her peacock; the repetitive "vojno le!" creates a rhythmic refrain: "*Paun* šeta, vojno le! na venčanje,/ S' sobom vodi, vojno le! *paunicu*,/ *Paunicu*, vojno le! za ručicu" (Karadžić 1975: 69).// The *peacock* struts, vojno le! to the wedding ceremony,/ He leads, vojno le! the *peahen*,/ The *peahen*, vojno le! by the hand. Alternatively, she (Ruža) is right behind him (Ranko): "*Paun* šeta, vojno le! na venčanje,/ A za njime, vojno le! *paunica*;/ Osvrće se, vojno le! *mlad paune*,/ *Mlad paune*, vojno le! lepi Ranko,/ Ide l' za njim, vojno le! *paunica*,/ *Paunica*, vojno le! lepa Ruža". (Karadžić 1975: 69)// The *peacock* struts, vojno le! to the wedding ceremony,/ And behind him, vojno le! the peahen;/ He looks back, vojno le! the *young peacock*,/ The *young peacock*, vojno le! handsome Ranko,/ Behind goes, vojno le! the *peahen*;/ The *peahen*, vojno le! lovely Ruža. In a Bulgarian song, peafowl likewise represent the couple "when they set out for the church, for the wedding ceremony": "Паун коло поведе/ И пауница по него".// The peacock started to lead the dance,/ The peahen next to him (Forsyth 1996: 446).

The Serbian groom also features in wedding verse as a strong and stately falcon accompanied by his bride, a dignified and resplendent she-falcon (the falcon is a quintessential symbol for heroes in South Slavic tradition): "Ide *soko*, vodi *sokolicu*,/ Blago majci! Zlatna su joj krila" (Karadžić 1975: 86).// The *falcon* goes, he leads away the *she-falcon*,/ Happy is her mother! Golden are her wings. Similarly, in Bulgarian we hear: "*Сокол* иде, *яребица* води"//The *falcon* goes, he leads away the *partridge*. Sometimes she is a "*златнокрила яребица*"// *golden-winged partridge* (Ivanova, Zhivkov 1981: 394, 395).

Wedding songs that embrace bride and groom together are also performed after the wedding ceremony. Levaniouk notes that at the final wedding banquet, "the unripe apples, trampled flowers, and broken branches of the brides' laments are replaced in songs by flourishing grapes and ripe berries" (2012: §121). The Russian song below reflects the potential for joy and fertility that underlies the spectacle and significance of the wedding. This potential, set in the groom's orchard, is expressed in healthy and hopeful terms: "*Виноград* в *саду* цветет,/ А *ягода*, а *ягода* созревает,/ *Виноград*-то – Иван сударь,/ А *ягода*, а *ягода* – свет Прасковья его".// "A *grapevine* blooms in the *orchard*/ And a *berry*, a *berry* ripens/ The

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grapevine is master Ivan,/ And the *berry*, and the *berry* – his Praskovia" (Levaniouk 2012: §121). In a Bulgarian example, sung "on the way to the new home" (Ivanova and Zhivkov 1981: 384), the perspective is optimistic, filled again with vegetation imagery. The bride's strapping young husband is a "tall tree," while she has become a "golden apple" perched on it: "Слънце пекиало у момкови двори,/ Израсло ми е *дърво високо*,/ Развило *клоне* до гориа земя,/ Извило върше до видро небо,/ На вършката му *златна ябълка*" (Ivanova, Zhivkov 1981: 388).// The sun was shining in the groom's courtyard,/ The *tall tree* has grown,/ Its *boughs* have spread out to the top of the earth,/ It's reached up to the clear sky,/ At the top of it is a *golden apple.*

The joint portrayal in wedding songs of both bride and groom – as peafowl, falcons, and partridges as well as grapevines, berries, trees, and apples – is crucial. It reveals that a new, promising, mutually-experienced life is beginning for both. And while it had its ups and downs, especially for the traditional bride, there would also be moments of fulfillment and bliss.

5. Conclusion

The examples I have provided here – from Romanian, Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian ritual wedding songs – vibrantly illustrate how challenging and even painful a step marriage was for brides in the patrilocal worlds in which they lived. Yet it was inevitable. Against the backdrop of traditional village life, it was plants and birds that provided, throughout these various cultural traditions, the rhetorical language that offered resonant ways for brides to articulate the intensity of feelings experienced at this time. The symbolic language in this verse paints an eloquent picture of the monumental journey that traditional brides, in particular, took as they were separated from their childhood and made the eventful, often agonizing, passage to married life. The poetry that provided for emotional release and catharsis demonstrates how deeply evocative the language of nature in these poetic forms is, offering persuasive artistic ways to express dread and anguish but also hope and rebirth.

Plants and birds furnish telling metaphors for both fear and sorrow as well as happiness and fulfillment in the context of weddings. Anxiety, sadness, pain, and death were all part of that experience, as were beauty, happiness, satisfaction, and birth. Flowers, fruit, trees, and herbs as well as birds – swimming, flying, and singing – all permitted rich and meaningful symbolic expression of this fundamental experience of traditional life.

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Abstract

This essay is an examination of the figurative language of nature that informs bridal laments and wedding songs in Romanian and Slavic ritual poetry. Most wedding rituals and songs in these largely patrilocal societies center on the bride. I discuss oral traditional verse that articulates her separation from her past as both personal expression representing her "vertical" growth as well as a "horizontal" journey to a new life in her in-laws' home with implications for the community. Nature imagery depicts the bride through metaphorical language that invokes plants and birds. These tropes portray the bride, as well as her fear and anguish, in the symbolic "death" that traditional weddings signified for her. I also consider how, later in the wedding, the bride and groom figure together in the poetry as a couple. At this time, the tone shifts as images of death are left behind and the bride's imminent "rebirth" and incorporation into her new family and home are celebrated. I demonstrate how motifs of plants and birds in Romanian and Slavic ritual wedding poetry voice – through an economy of words yet depth of meaning – the profound concerns of the bride in the most significant rite of passage in the traditional world, marriage.

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