Acknowledgments

One of the best-known characters in Russian folklore and fairy tales is the deadly Baba Yaga. She is the archetype of the fearsome witch or sorceress, hideous to look at, with a mercurial nature, who cannibalistically devours those who naively stumble upon her domain. (Baba Yaga tales inspired the story of Hansel and Gretel.) She is also known as ‘Baba Yaga Kostianaya Noga’ (Baba Yaga Boney Leg), because in spite of her ferocious appetite, she remains as thin as a skeleton. She flies or rides in a mortar, using a pestle as a sort of paddle. (The womb-like vessel and the phallic pestle seem to represent her dualistic feminine and masculine nature.) Never one for leaving a trail behind her, she sweeps away all traces of her path with a broom.

Throughout the Slavic region, the term baba connotes an old woman, and the Russian word yaga means ‘hag’. In addition to this name, this well-respected mythical elder is also referred to as the Guardian of the Underworld, the Mistress of the Forest, the Goddess of Death and Regeneration, the Wolf-Goddess, the Bone Mother, the Mistress of the Animals, and the Guardian Spirit of the Water of Life and Death. Baba Yaga rules over the elements, and her realms are the impenetrable forests of old Russia. She is the guardian of the frontier between the territory of mortals and the spirit world.

In the folk tales, Baba Yaga lives in a hut in the forest, a hut that seems to have a personality of its own. It can move about at will on its large chicken legs, and can even run after visitors who stumble into its domain. A fence made from the leftover bleached-white bones of Baba Yaga’s victims, whose blazing eye sockets illuminate the darkness, surrounds the hut. This fence is a clear signal to anyone who would dare to pass through its gate that he or she must be prepared for an initiatory underworld experience, a trial that could end in sudden death or life-altering enlightenment, depending upon the wits and attitude of the initiate.

Baba Yaga is a very misunderstood figure. She is not merely a stereotypical wicked witch; she is much more labyrinthine than that. She represents a highly complex duality. Although she is mostly portrayed as a terrifying old crone and monster, she can also play the role of a helper and wise woman. She is not good, but she is not entirely evil; she does eat people and decorates her fence with their skulls, but like all forces of nature, though often wild and untamed, she can also be kind. She is an ugly old woman, but at times she turns into
a young beauty. She sometimes gives advice and magical gifts to heroes and
the pure of heart. Her home is at the same time a cemetery and also a place of
divine magic.

Baba Yaga, this all-powerful Great Mother, is the giver of the gift of adulthood
but also the giver of death. She is the Bone Mother who destroys but she is also
the one who collects our white bones and pours the Water of Life and Death
upon them, while singing her magic songs, helping us to be reborn. She is a
magic symbol, the allegoric representation of a guide who helps people in their
transition into adulthood, making young people responsible members of society.
Her oven represents creation – the womb – a symbol of life and birth.

The heroes or heroines of the Baba Yaga tales often enter her domain
searching for wisdom, knowledge and truth. Her hut is the place where these
transmutations occur; it is the dark heart of the Underworld, the dwelling place
of the dead ancestors who are symbolized by the grinning skulls around her
hut. All who come to her hut ask to be fed or are eaten. She destroys and then
she resurrects. In Baba Yaga stories, people symbolically experience a death,
darkness, depression, or spiritual emptiness. They journey to Baba Yaga’s hut,
a place where they might, with skill and luck, be reborn.

The stories of Baba Yaga in a condensed form parallel the riddle that is Russia.
Those who enter her domain – searching for wisdom, thirsting for knowledge,
hungry for truth – do it at their own risk. But the journey will be worth it.
Restoration, renewal, nourishment and enlightenment can only be found by
taking this journey into Baba Yaga’s underworld. In this book we make an effort
to look for the truth and knowledge that such a journey can bring us.

Just as the people in the Baba Yaga tales look to the old woman for
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Fontainebleau, France

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