

'YOUR TREES LIVE HERE'

The image of the tree is a central one in my work. It occurs in a marked way in the following poems: *Arboretum*¹, 'Against the Wood', 'The Tree of Man', 'the Apricots Blossom', 'The Price of Leaves', 'Votive', 'Reaching for the Heavenly Foreigner', 'Between two Glasshouses'², 'Our Willows are not your Willows', 'Berryman Falling', 'Ésos Árboles', 'School Year Start', 'Under the Elm', 'Lemon Grove', 'Willow Pattern', 'Visiting Chris Kiely at the J.F.K. Arboretum', 'Hang By Me'³, 'Voice Under the Elm' and 'A Drifting White Thorn'⁴. Associated references to various shrubs and flowers occur across a wide variety of poems, such as 'Hibiscus'⁵, 'Bécquer Forgives'⁶ (image of the honeysuckle), 'This Other Umbria' (Bianconi's mulberry and sycamore trees), 'Letter to Connla' (Yggdrasil), 'Telling the Bees'⁷ (various nectar and pollen – producing trees and shrubs), and *Near St. Mullins*, where Suibne overnights and rests in a variety of branches.

The tree is not only a more recent central Christian symbol but also an earlier archetypal one found across different earlier cultures and histories of cultures⁸. There is the common motif of a particular Tree of the world signifying the whole of the Cosmos⁹. The Irish Great Yew, Crom Castle is one such. As envisioned from Mide, Ireland was intertwined with the limbs of deity¹⁰. Jung quotes the Thracian Orpheus in this regard:

' [The] works of mortals on earth are like branches'.¹¹

¹ Ennis, where the names of trees read like an incantation.

² Ennis, *In a Green Shade*.

³ Ennis, *Down in the Deeper Helicon*.

⁴ Ennis, *Night on Hibernia*.

⁵ Ennis, *In a Green Shade*.

⁶ Ennis, *Down in Deeper Helicon*.

⁷ Ennis, *Telling the Bees*.

⁸ M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*; J. Campbell, *Masks of God, Primitive Mythology*.

⁹ Eliade, *Ibid*, p.11.

¹⁰ M. Dames, *Mythic Ireland*, pp. 192-193.

¹¹ C.G. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p.325;

Cnoc a Bhile is a reminder of the ideal world Tree

‘for lack of which all the forests of the world fall into danger’¹².

In ‘Letter to Connla’, Connla’s unnamed twin, seeking answers to the transience of beauty, youth and the lack of any abiding ‘mythos’, (while remembering his Norse roots through his mother), despairs of his world tree whose limbs not only spread over the world, but also stand above heaven and whose roots penetrate the abyss (where the worm gnaws continuously):

‘I beat my skull against our fond Yggdrasil,
I swear the old tree wept with me in blood
as the truth of the quernstone took me in.
Sweet Connla, whom I’ll not see again,
Uisnech has fallen.....’¹³

The Unnamed’s primary points of reference in the poem are Cnoc-a-Bhile and Uisnech, both places with symbolic tree associations. In the mindset of the Unnamed, the tree represents unending renewal, regeneration and the source of life and youth, representative of a child’s vanished Eden for him and Connla.

A particular tree can signify the whole of the Cosmos and make available a meta-physical understanding of it; through its contemplation or remembrance, the individual experience is galvanised or ‘awakened’ into psychic action in an attempt to ‘live’ the universal. But if these concepts break down, or to the degree of their breakdown, the door to the universal is to that extent closed¹⁴. This is the plight of the Unnamed.

cf. Christ’s injunction, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’ ... *John* 15: 5-6.

¹² Dames, *op. cit.*, cf. ‘The stone of the Tree’ in Lough Gur. ‘In myth the divine tree has the power to engreen the entire earth’, p.79.

¹³ Ennis, *Telling the Bees*, p.11.

¹⁴ Eliade, *op. cit.*, p.19.

On the other hand, the very evocation of the symbol of the Tree is suggestive of renewal or regeneration, of the source of life and youth, of immortality and of absolute reality¹⁵. The sonnet ‘Hang By Me’, (with its evocation of the lyric ‘Stand By Me’ and the good thief on the Calvary Tree) partakes of this yearning for regeneration and immortality¹⁶.

Joseph Campbell writes that

‘all of the high civilisations of the world are to be thought of as the limbs of one great tree, whose root is in heaven’¹⁷.

This idea is given organic expression in *Arboretum*, a poem which is a coalescence, or distillation, of the symbol ‘tree’. The tree has traditionally had a life-giving function, acting in ancient times almost as intermediary between God and king, – or between the divine and temporal order, if we wish to use a more contemporary approximation¹⁸. Both orders can unite *on* the tree.

‘I ween that I hung on the windy tree,
Hung there for nights full nine;
With the spear I was wounded, and offered I was
To Odin, myself to myself,
On that tree that none may ever know
What root beneath it runs’¹⁹.

In this manner, the God Odin hung in the way of a sacrifice to himself. There is a clear overlap here with the Christian symbology of the Tree of the Cross. The image of regeneration through ordeal is central. Jung, in his discussion of the psychological aspects of the Mother Archetype, refers to ‘the tree that is also man’ suggesting that the unconscious of

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.19.

¹⁶ Ennis, *Down in the Deeper Helicon*, p.87.

¹⁷ Campbell, *op. cit.*, p.149.

¹⁸ H. Weisinger, *Tragedy and Paradox of the Fortunate Fall*, p.70.

¹⁹ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.191.

present-day man, alienated from both past and future, naturally gravitates to the symbol of the cosmic tree

‘rooted in the world and growing up to heaven’²⁰.

This ‘tree’ is suggestive of a way of life, a painful growth into the eternal which does not change. Springing from a union of opposites the tree makes union possible by its seemingly eternal presence. It remains a symbolic reality. Embracing it, we can find our way back to a world where we do not feel complete strangers.²¹

The tree, then, represents a regenerative continuum. It is sometimes represented in primal phallic format. Thus, in Tamil mythology, during the pursuit of the God Muragan, the latter transforms himself into a phallic tree²². In the Old Testament, Jesse²³ is shown sleeping and a tree grows from his loins. At the top of this tree, in its final and perfect flowering, we find a virgin with an infant in her arms. In Christian Art, Christ is also shown at the top of the tree with doves representing the Holy Ghost fluttering about his head²⁴. The tree of celestial ascension is a related concept: in shamanistic rite, the shaman climbs the birch tree as if mimicking an ascent to heaven: in so doing, he further mimics the cries of animals and birds as if spokesman for creation²⁵. Suibne’s glide down the evolutionary scale is a close mythic and artistic equivalent to the same cult practice²⁶.

²⁰ Jung, *op. cit.*, p.109.

²¹ Ennis, *In a Green Shade*, cf. epigraph from Kenneth White, *The Bird Path*, ‘I have come in under the trees making love to them with my inarticulate hands.....’. Cf. Seán Dunne speaking of *Arboretum*, ‘Like those Indian villagers who hug trees in protest against deforestation, he [Ennis] embraces and celebrates the arboreal world’. Book Review, *The Cork Examiner*, 9/02/1991.

²² B. Stannard, *The Cosmic Context*, p.31.

²³ *Old Testament, Is.* 11.1. The tree in the Bible is, also, symbolic of longevity, strength and pride; cf. *Prov.* 3: 18, *Eccles* 4:3, *Ps* 1:3.

²⁴ ‘Jessie Trees’ are found in medieval sculpture, paintings and church windows. Cf. Windows of Cathedral in Chartres, France.

²⁵ Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁶ Ennis, *Near St. Mullins*, sections I and IV.

A concept associated with the Tree of Generation, or Regeneration, is that of the Tree of Enlightenment – Enlightenment seen both as Illumination and Knowledge²⁷. The seven steps of the Buddha may be seen as analogous to the Siberian Shaman's ascent to heaven by means of the steps cut in the ceremonial birchtree or to the ladder with seven rungs which is mounted by the initiate in the mysteries of Mithra²⁸. On his way to the Tree of Enlightenment, the Buddha had to proceed alone. Emaciated, he was strengthened by a bowl of milk. The speaker in *Arboretum*, also alone, is sustained by a collation. It is essential to remember, as Campbell remarks, that Enlightenment cannot be communicated, only the way to Enlightenment. The truth beyond names and forms remains hidden in oriental and platonic traditions. Whereas scientific 'truths' are communicable (as rational hypotheses based on observable facts) – ritual, mythology and metaphysics are but signposts to the edge of any transcendent illumination. The final step has to be left to each person and must be taken in one's own silent experience²⁹.

The Buddha overcomes both *desire* and *fear*, as well as *fear of death* in his quest. Campbell equates desire and fear with the two mainsprings of delusion recognised in modern psychiatric schools – desire and aggression, eros and thanatos, the twin motivations of life. Christ's temptations are analogous states of testing – he overcomes the economic and political sirens first; he conquers lastly the call of pride – the 'inflation' of the mystic mind believing itself to be superior to humble mortals, or to be elevated above the ordinary earthly³⁰. In this context, Suibne's original curse turns into a state of continual temptation as well, however ridiculous he appears on his various perches³¹. Christ is caught between earth and

²⁷ J. Campbell, *Occidental Mythology, The Masks of God*, p.352 ff.

²⁸ Cf. Ennis, *Telling the Bees*, for reference to Mithraic Rites, p.73.

²⁹ Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp.33-34.

³⁰ J. Campbell, *Occidental Mythology, The Masks of God*, p.352 ff.

³¹ Ennis, *Near St. Mullins*; Suibne is continually brought back to earth as in sections VI and X, pp. 8 and 12.

sky on the pinnacle of the temple and returns, like Buddha, to teach the community the way of service, dedication and virtue: in the Christian 'mythos', this way is taken to the ultimate in a most menial self-sacrifice. Christ is the dead wheat grain come back to life.

Buddha and Christ may be envisioned as ultimate paradigms of perfection. The Buddha beneath the Bo Tree and Christ on the Tree of Redemption are analogous figures³². They embody the archetypal world saviour and the world Tree motif of primordial antiquity. The immovable spot and Calvary can be taken as images of the world navel, or world axis³³.

The victories on the two trees are also 'creative' victories. The Buddha, with his thought, shattered old conceptions, old heavens and hells, all the old constituents and reshaped them in a glorious renewal. Christ's body in its parts and at its most injured, defiled and shamed, reappeared in human guise that once recognised, was approachable. He breathed life into old shades in 'Hell' and forged for those in his care a new synthesis of creator and created.

Ordinary mortals may not achieve such a final equilibrium even if they were to aspire to it. The 'tree' is a difficult reality to negotiate. The symbol itself can be ambiguous. In some traditions it can embody a life and death dualism. This is reflected in the depiction of Yggdrasil itself in Norse mythology,

'The ash Yggdrasil suffers anguish,
More than men can know:
The stag bites above; on the side it rots:
And the dragon gnaws from beneath'.³⁴

³² J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.33.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 33.

³⁴ J. Campbell, *The Masks of God, Primitive Mythology*, p.120.

In Hawaiian myth, the soul entering the next world encounters a tree with a gathering of little children round it who give directions. One side of the tree looks fresh and green, the other is dry and brittle: the successful soul is required to climb to the top by the brittle side and descend by the same side to a level, 'the casting-off place', where the children would direct it: the breaking of any green branches would precipitate the soul into annihilation. Another version suggests that it is a branch of the green side that must be grasped which, breaking, hurls the soul into the labyrinth to the underworld. Either way a precarious prospect, this tree of deceptive branches.

There is a living contradiction in the image: what would seem to be dead must be known to be living and what is alive, dead. Understanding this contradiction, the secret of death, one passes safely through³⁵. 'Many are the traditions in which the soul of the dead man... climbs a tree: in Egyptian "to clutch" is a euphemism for to die'³⁶.

Campbell quotes Jung on this matter:

'I am convinced that is hygienic to discover in death a goal toward which one can strive: and that shrinking away from it is something unhealthy and abnormal which robs the second half of life of its purpose.....
From the standpoint of psychotherapy it would therefore be desirable to think of death as only a transition – one part of a life process'.³⁷

Myth, then, would have us grasp and painfully climb the dry branches, not the green, of the universal tree around which the heavens spin. This is a further dimension of the shamanic climb – the higher the shaman could make his 'nest' in the tree, the stronger would he be, the more would he know and the further would he see³⁸. But such aspiration remains always

³⁵ Campbell, *Ibid*, p.119.

³⁶ Eliade, *op. cit.*, p.116.

³⁷ Campbell, *The Masks of God, Primitive Mythology*, quoting Jung, p. 124.

³⁸ Campbell, *Ibid*, p.256.

very precarious, the ‘nest’ itself, being temporary, as Suibne knew, ‘no lasting city’³⁹. But through endeavour the tree is ‘shamanised’ – it, too, grows during the rite figuratively reaching the divine summit.

The rite has obvious analogies with the creative act as envisioned by Shakespeare in his famous quotation, ‘the poet’s eye....’ and by Colin Falck in our time⁴⁰. My poems listed at the beginning of this section attempt to create the same aura: ‘Against the Wood’ with its final translucence of bluebells in the woody gloom⁴¹; ‘The Tree of Man’, where assembling each precious ‘leaf’ was done despite Patrick White’s being almost unable to breathe tortured as he was with asthma⁴²; ‘The Apricots Blossom’ where the trees enfold father and children in their ecstasy⁴³; ‘The Price of Leaves’ where the image of the Christian and the Muslim religion is reduced to a dreaded vision of ash⁴⁴; ‘Votive’ where the vine is asked to ‘Shade in us the vulnerable citrus’⁴⁵; ‘Reaching for the Heavenly Foreigner’, an address to a mother from whose side new trees grow⁴⁶; ‘Between two Glasshouses’ where,

‘The poplar’s silken leaves
Release new music from their sleeves’⁴⁷.

Similarly, the sorrowful willows of ‘Wang Wei are our willows’⁴⁸. Berryman falling becomes the fate of any fruitful tree⁴⁹. The name Gorman, like a deciduous tree, ‘lives on at

³⁹ Ennis, *Near St. Mullins*, section IX, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Cf. C. Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature*, ‘Towards a True Postmodernism.’

⁴¹ Ennis, *In a Green Shade*, p.99.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.56.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.119.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.125.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.63.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.114.

⁴⁸ Ennis, *Down in the Deeper Helicon*, p.44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.38.

Corbetstown⁵⁰. On a warm second of September day at the start of a new school year, with new readers,

‘Wind fills the elm. The dry leaves ache and they are rustling’⁵¹.

Voices of the dead elm speak as if eternally⁵². Chris Kiely’s ‘weeping ash is jubilant’, even in November⁵³.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp.59-61.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.67.

⁵² *Ibid*, p.68; cf, also, *Night on Hibernia*.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.79.