

The Tree of Life

FEW IF ANY OBJECTS in visible creation are rooted so deeply and soar so majestically in human consciousness as the tree. As the most evolved members of the plant kingdom, trees are perhaps the purest and most potent embodiment of nature's life force. They evoke for humans a wide range of feelings. They mediate intuition and aid the mind in objectifying thought. They seem to speak an organically entire language, be it through their lexicon of leaves, the articulate sculpturing of space, the gracious gesturing of branches, or the dazzling dissemination of light.

The very sight of a tree can calm the mind, stabilize breathing and give comfort as a strong, companionable presence. Whether growing alone or in large numbers, trees speak to our sense of singleness; they project for us an idea of individuality. Their columnar thrust provides a visual metaphor for the backbone of human effort and individual will. Trees remind us that a degree of solitariness is part of God's plan for us, that we grow in the Mind of God as a tree lofts into the atmosphere's vast embrace.

Trees may be the one representative of the natural world most suggestive of or inspiring the vision of eternal life. An individual olive or pine tree may live several thousand years. Trees are the Methusalehs of the plant kingdom.

Trees teach us patience, sacrifice, aspiration, groundedness, jubilant anonymity, endurance of adversity, and unconditional generosity. In the world of nature, the tree most closely represents the human physical figure, not only in its vertical



Henry Cowell Redwood State Park

Towering California Redwoods

and horizontal dimensions, but in the corresponding movement of forces indicated by those two directions—vital energies emanating like radii from the earth's center to the periphery and the lateral desire currents circling the earth, moving at right angles to, and thus intersecting, the vital forces. This crossing or crucifying of etheric and desire energies is the cause of human consciousness.

In particular, fruit-bearing trees are pioneers in the desire world, pressing for entry, but in a noble, patient, transcendent way that will make the group spirit directing their physical and vital being far more advanced when their human stage has been reached than were humanity at the onset of the Earth Period. Trees in their human stage, manifesting

during the Venus Period, will have the desire body as their lowest vehicle.

Given the discharge of millions of tons of toxic substances into our planet's atmosphere each year, oxides of nitrogen, sulfur, and carbon which combine with water vapor to form corrosive acids; given also rapacious clear-cutting and the indiscriminate burning of forests, we are warranted in describing the tree as being crucified on the cross of itself, or on the cross of a thoughtless humanity. The angelic spirit governing each genus could well be saying of this environmental despoliation, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

If animal flesh supports part of the world's population, even more so does the plant world, which is the ultimate food source for animals, including carnivores. Living trees provide shade, shelter, wind control, soil and temperature stabilization, animal habitat, compost, fruit, and nuts. From the flesh of trees we build houses, boats, furniture, libraries and derive linoleum, varnish, turpentine, waxes and soap. Various parts of trees' anatomy (roots, bark, leaves, flowers) provide condiments (cloves, cinnamon, pepper) and medicines, including: quinine from chinchona bark, the original cure for malaria; taxol from the yew tree, lapacho from the same-named tree, and laetrile from the apricot kernel—all used to treat cancer; salicylic acid, the main ingredient in aspirin, obtained from the white willow and used to treat rheumatism and pain. Ointments, liniments, plasters, and inhalants derive from tree sources.

Trees teach us fortitude, long-suffering, piety, symmetry, joy in service. Totally self-given, magnificent in silence, the tree is the plant world's type for Christ, as given in the eucharistic prayer: "This is my body which is given for you."

The powerful life force which trees embody is given generic recognition in Genesis in the Tree of Life. Here it refers to the life force in Adam and Eve and was not dissimilar from the vital impulse



Two frescoes: Left, Mausolino da Panicale (1383-1435); right, Masaccio (1401-1428), Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence

Fall of Man

Mausolino depicts the Tempter with a face like Eve's, showing Lucifer's effect on heightening personal subjectivity and appealing to vanity. The distraught primal pair are evicted (fall) from etheric consciousness as a result of ignorant and willful indulgence in the procreative act.

Expulsion from Paradise

associated with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The fruit of the latter tree designated the power of procreation which early humanity arrogated to itself, bringing about the fall from etheric to physical consciousness.

The reason for prohibiting eating of the fruit of the Tree of Life is explained by Max Heindel in the following passage:

When we learn that we have a vital body made of ether, and that it is the tree of life to every one of us; and furnishes us the vitality whereby we are enabled to make the movements of the body, we may understand why the power to recreate and regenerate ourselves was taken away from us, lest we learn how to vitalize the imperfect dense body." (*Teachings of an Initiate*, p. 195)

Easy access to the spinal spirit fire in the tree of the spine has been interdicted for man's welfare. Cherubim first guarded the gate to Eden with a flaming sword. Now, as depicted on the door to the mystic temple of initiation, the Cherubim hold a flower to indicate how the etheric paradise may be regained—by the conservation and transmutation of the life force. In the New Jerusalem the Tree of Life, symbolizing the power to regenerate ourselves, will enable us to “regain that health and beauty that we at present lack” (TI, p. 196).

Psalm 1 speaks of him who is blessed because, among other things, he delights in and meditates day and night on the law of the Lord: “And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither.” His leaf, his vesture, will be like that of the evergreen, perduring, intact, for it will be the purified etheric or life body. In his March, 1915 Letter to Students, Max Heindel urges students to memorize and concentrate on the first three verses of this first Psalm.

The prospect promised in Psalms 1 is elaborated in the the last chapter (22) of Revelation, where the dweller in the New City of Peace will again have access to “the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits and yielded her fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of nations.” What bridges the gulf between Eden's Tree of Life and the Tree of Life in New Jerusalem? The tree on Golgotha, the Cross of Christ. Due to increasing selfishness, resulting from the inoculation of the Lucifer spirit into his nature, man became increasingly captive to the physical world. The regenerating impulse Christ brought and brings to Earth evolution is wonderfully condensed in the figure of the cross that becomes a living tree. Its mineral substance is imbued with life, as in eucharistic transubstantiation.

Robert Fludd writes in *Summum Bonum*:

We may not worship the outer, satanic, worldly part of the cross, nor are we to surround it with diverse testimonies and veneration. For it is the cross of death, not of life...we must venerate only that true, genuine, living cross of Christ, that is, the mystical Wisdom which is called by the Holy



Oil on canvas, 1610, Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1616), Private Collection

Christ on the Tree of Life

While Christ hangs on the living cross, an apple tree, He is also, as Jesus, the fruit in Mary's lap. The textual source is the Song of Songs: “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” Christ's sacrifice regenerates man and nature.

Scriptures the wood of the Tree of Life, the fountain or root of which is the enlightened Word...No man can be a true disciple of Christ who does not...find and recognize within himself that secret cross...carrying Christ Jesus within himself consciously...all true Christians must be engaged with greatest effort to discover and recognize that mystical cross, and to be it within themselves...It has the color of blood and is similar to the reddest red of the rose, surrounded by lilies.

The mineral wood of the cross represents the dense physical body, the body of death. Whether a rose vine entwines it, or a serpent, or it branches into life by virtue of bearing the Life Principle, Christ, in each instance the contrast represents the

withering of the lower self and the blossoming of the regenerative principle, the resurrection of the spirit.

Trees as emblems for the vital body have many scriptural and mythological referents. To cite but one biblical instance, when Christ Jesus first applied a salve to the blind man's eyes and asked him what he saw, he said, "I see men as trees, walking." (Mark 8:24) That is, upon the restoration of sight, etheric vision causatively precedes physical perception, even as it did in the involutory phase of human development. "Trees" here mean the vital body, and in particular the life ether, possession of which distinguishes the plant from the mineral.

Depictions of the original temptation scene in Eden, commonly representing Lucifer as a human-headed serpent entwined in the Tree of Knowledge, derive from a Desire World image, one that appeared to Eve as a translation of the sympathetic (lunar) nervous system as it sinuously climbs the axis of the tree-spine, which carries the self-consciousness-bearing central (mercurial) nervous system.

Luciferan spirits live in the nerve branches which end in the sense organs. They have poured the capacity for higher enthusiasm into the blood and desire body of man. Human physical consciousness is the gift of Lucifer. His activity comes

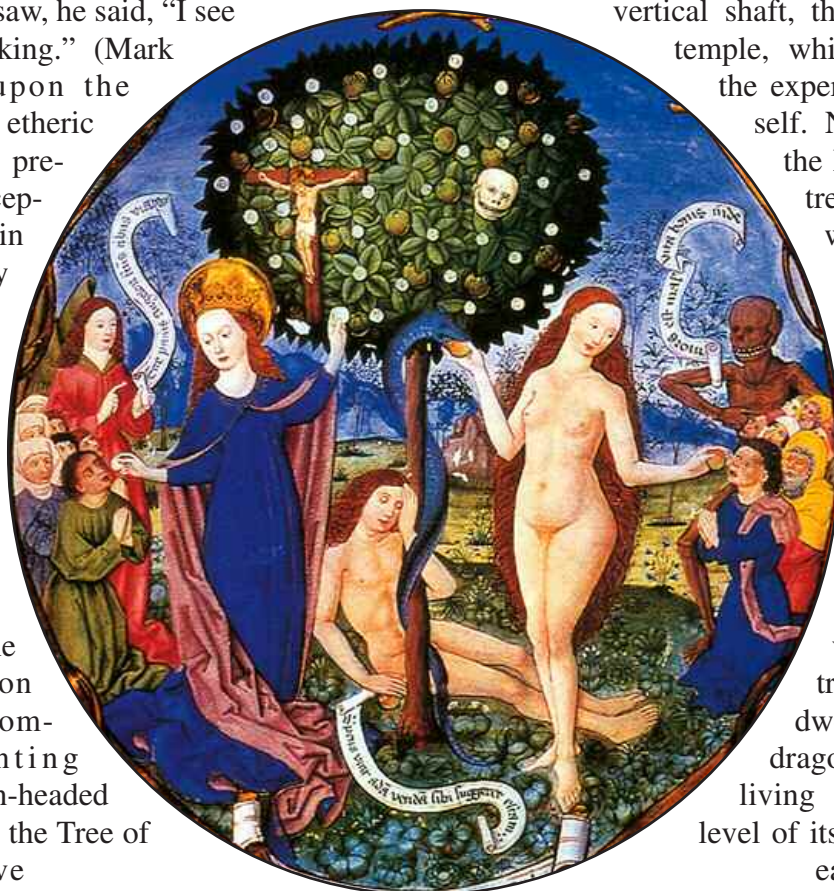
to expression at the point where the nerves give rise to feeling and perception. That is why the serpent in Genesis says, "Your eyes shall be opened." Actually, all the senses shall be opened. The individualization of consciousness is due to the leafing of the tree of sensory perception.

It is the central nervous system's straight vertical shaft, this ark in the body temple, which makes possible the experience of individual self. Not surprisingly, in the Nordic *Voluspa*, the tree which spans nine worlds is called *Yggdrasill*, which roughly translates as "the I-carrier." Earliest cosmologies, whose echo yet survives in shamanistic tribes in Siberia, picture the universe as a Cosmic tree at whose roots dwells the primordial dragon, and all beings living at one or another level of its branches, with the eagle perched imperially on its crown.

Some Renaissance painters used the tree to chronicle the ages of man, episodes in the life of Christ Jesus, or the descent of mankind from the primal pair. A popular theme was the Tree of Jesse, the father of David and direct forbear of Jesus. In some depictions of the World Tree, the lower branches show the ages of man while the upper limbs picture the hierarchy of heavenly hosts crowned by the Godhead.

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From the Missal of Berthold Furtmeyr, c. 1440-45, Cod. lat. 15710, Bd. 3, messe 1, fol. 4r, Staatsbibliothek, Munich

Tree of Life and Death

As a pictorial allegory of the fall and redemption of man, "the fruit/ of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste/ Brought death into the world" (Milton), is distributed by Eve to her descendents until the new Eve, Mary, from the fruit of her womb conceived the world's savior, the New Adam, who brought propitiation for sin and victory over its effect—death. Mary plucks the consecrated host, the bread of Life, fruit of Christ Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, from the Tree of Life.

From the seed of life comes a dual impulse—one seeks to root in the substance of earthly affairs, the other aspires towards the ethereal heavens. The tree also illustrates a monistic or holistic vision of creation in any cross section of its vertical axis, revealing concentric circles that resemble the planetary orbits of our cosmos surrounded by the spheres of the stars. In this view, the heartwood or center of the tree is the place of the sun.

In the Tree of the Sepiroth, the Kabalistic figure showing the ten names of God as emanations from the uncaused First Cause (En Soph), and twenty-two secondary attributes (representing the Hebrew alphabet), the accent is on the involutory phase of Creation, where the “roots” of being are from above and the tree grows downward from the heavenly to the increasingly dense worlds.

That part of the tree known as lignin, the essential woody part which is deposited in the cell wall and gives the tree its strength and rigidity, degrades to lignite, a soft brownish-black coal in which the texture of the original wood can still be seen. In time man shall acquire the life-saving, regenerating function now possessed by trees (and all aerobic plants). At present, carbon dioxide, an unusable biproduct of respiration, must be expelled from the body and replaced by fresh oxygen. In the future this gas shall be separated into its component elements of carbon and oxygen, thereby generating his own air.

The Holy Spirit, the breath of Life, Who breathed into the Adam (“red earth”) body, causing it to become a living soul, shall inspire the initiate, who will breathe into his own person self-generated oxygen. Life shall be wrest from death with each breath. Resurrection will be one’s normal biology.

The Philosopher’s Stone is the tree of life. It can



Illustration from *Speculum humanae salvationis*, c. 1340-50, Region of Lake Constance, Monastery Library, Kremsmünster

Tree of Jesse and Tree of the Cross

The Lamb of God connects the genealogical Tree of Jesse with the tree-Cross in the form of the arbor vitae. The exalted Christ, appearing in the tree’s crown with Peter and Paul, holds the keys of heaven and death in one hand and the Gospel, as four books, in the other. The seven doves (at top), symbolizing the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, are flanked by Matthew (right) and John the Evangelist (left). At the foot of the Cross stand (left) Ecclesia and Melchizadec with chalices and (right) Mary, John, Moses with the brazen serpent, and Synagogue (old dispensation). The stylized leaves of the tree of Jesse, known as roundels, contain Old Testament figures.

dissociate carbonic acid to its constituent parts. In one sense aerobic plants are higher than humans because they can build their bodies from mineral carbon, as well as dissociating carbon from oxygen, which pure gas they then liberate for human use. In this regard they are the salvation of our physical bodies, the breath of our life. At present,

carbon must be in organic form to be assimilable by humans. In time, from their own poisonous gases and waste materials, humans will process carbon and from it will build that white stone, the diamond body. The human body is at once the crucible or retort, the raw materials, and the transformed product, which Revelation describes as the pure river of water of life, clear as crystal. The nineteenth century Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins has intuited this transmutation in lines from *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire*:

*Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire,
leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was
what I am, and
This jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch,
matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.*

When man's body and soul have been purified by living the Christ life, he shall be reintroduced to the Tree of Life, the *arbor vitae*. It starts with the hard discipline of the inanimate cross, it ends in the prodigal life of the undying tree. So the poet Yeats divined, that lover of the "great-rooted blossomer":

*Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear.*

Max Heindel assures us that in the Aquarian age there will be no night and "the Tree of Life' shall bloom unceasingly by the transparent etheric 'sea of glass' which permeates all things" (*Teachings of an Initiate*, p. 60). Each person will be in possession of this *elixir vitae*, this tree of life, in the form of his individual vital body, and it will last for millenniums as a vehicle for the spirit. □

—C.W.

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