

“Tree” by Richard Berengarten

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e chi la scure
asterrà pio dalle devote frondi
men si dorrà di consanguinei lutti,
e santamente toccherà l'altare.¹
(Ugo Foscolo, *Carne dei Sepolcri*, 1806/07)

The most recent recension of Richard Berengarten's 'Tree'² appears in *For the Living* (77-88).³ According to the author, the poem bears the influence of a trip he made when staying on the West Coast of the United States: "During my first and only visit to San Francisco and the Bay Area in California in Spring 1978, my friend Robert Hass drove me out to Muir Woods, and this experience led to the writing of 'Tree'."⁴ These are the basic facts. But as with any poem, there are deeper roots at work – the word *roots* being apposite in this context for obvious reasons, though it is hardly possible not to adopt botanical metaphors in approaching and discussing this text and its multiple themes, echoes and sources.⁵ After thirty years, 'Tree' scarcely appears to have aged, dated or lost its vigour. On the contrary, as often happens with poetry of high quality, its main themes continue not only to be relevant but actually to anticipate contemporary concerns. This is very much the case in relation to current ecological and environmental issues, with the emphasis on respect for "the green

¹ "he who forbears / to wield the axe on yielding leaves and branches / the less shall he be called to mourn related / losses and, blessèd, touch the sacred altar." (unpublished translation by Vladimir Scott).

² The poem has been published in *The Companion to Richard Berengarten*, edited by Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick & Catherine E. Byfield. 2nd Edition 2016.

³ *For the Living* is henceforward abbreviated as *FL*. 'Tree' was composed in Cambridge in 1978-79 and first published as a pamphlet in 1980 by the Menard Press, London, with an explanatory note (*FL* 222). It has also been published in Spanish, German, and Serbian. Italian, Russian and Swedish translations have been made, but are still unpublished.

⁴ Personal communication to the author from RB, March 2008. The author is also indebted to RB for making available other unpublished material and comments.

⁵ RB's indications on his very wide range of sources include Carl Gustav Jung, Wilhelm Reich, Norman O. Brown, the Bible, the Kabbalah, and oriental religions and philosophy. For more extensive research into the rich symbolism and seemingly endless associations of the poem, I would also suggest Guenon (1962) and Brosse (1989). For the list of precious and semi-precious stones (ll. 59-67), see Budge (1992, ch. XV).

world” of trees and plants.⁶ Berengarten’s poem itself arises out of the sense of the communion and interdependence of all living beings, both on Earth and even beyond it. ‘Tree’ explores correspondences not only between microcosm and macrocosm, but among all creatures. It calls up the image of a chain of beings, all closely connected.

Typographically, the poem resembles a long cascade of very short lines, consisting mainly of two or three short words, though the number varies from one to five. The theme unravels through a phantasmagoria of details. Sounds echo one another, at times assonant or onomatopoeic, but always evocative. Images spring from one another, sometimes in dreamlike fashion. And intentionally ambiguous and polysemic meanings and concepts are arranged and re-combined, based on free associations that trigger and recall one another, shaped and organised more according to an analogical pattern than on any logical sequential principle.

As regards the precisely calculated number of lines, three-hundred-and-sixty-five, the author stresses that “*Tree* has the same number of lines as a year has days,” adding: “This makes it three lines longer than the height in feet of the tallest tree in the world, the coast Redwood Howard Libbey Tree in Humboldt State Park, California.” (FL 222).⁷ Being intimately bound up with the cycle of seasons and the life of nature, the poem also has a chant-like quality and lends itself to recitation.⁸ As far as this quality is concerned, Berengarten acknowledges the influence of the American poet Anne Waldman’s ‘chant poem’, *Fast Speaking Woman* (1978):

In 1979, I did my first reading tour of America. In the years between, I was specially impressed by the voice of one American poet. This was Anne Waldman, in her extraordinary celebratory chant-poem ‘Fast Speaking Woman’ This poem had an extraordinary effect on me. To me, it was faultless: moving, dramatic, gripping, profound and exciting. And it was also flamboyant, funny and intelligent, in that it even deliberately parodied its own procedures. As Anne Waldman had celebrated femaleness in Fast Talking [sic] Woman, in my own chant-poem Tree, I set out to celebrate both female and male principles, in a direct response to her work. (JLI)

Reading between the lines of this statement, one intuitively feels that, in ‘Tree’, Berengarten shares with Waldman the attempt to recuperate the ancestral and original dimensions of shamanic chant, rhapsodic monody, sacred celebration, healing magic and spell. Although the style appears to be simple and plain, it is in fact highly elaborate and calibrated, thanks to the extensive recurrent use of assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia. In this respect, although the poem’s musicality is not always melodic, it is certainly effective:

⁶ A reference to Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* (Canto LXXXI): “Learn of the green world what can be thy place / In scaled invention or true artistry...” (81/535).

⁷ The note adds: “The Californian tree should have caught up by now” (FL 222).

⁸ The author of this essay was one of five speakers, including the poet, who took part in a syncopated, polyphonic, multilingual reading of extracts of this poem, at the British Institute in Florence (January 2008). The languages were English, German, Italian, Serbian and Spanish.

blood and sweat
sighing shivering
shuddering tree (*FL* 128)

clawed through crust
of cliff and crag (*FL* 122)

blood bathed
breath blown
bone fibred
body tree (*FL* 119)

moss and lichen
mould gathering
mushroom tree
mother of orchids
and mistletoe (*FL* 129)

In each of these passages, insistent repetitions and re-combinations of bilabial, dental and velar plosives /b/, /d/ and /k/, of the unvoiced sibilants /s/ and /ʃ/, and of the nasal /m/ and lateral /l/, all imbue the images with unique musicality. Clearly, Berengarten has learned such patternings from Anglo-Saxon and medieval English alliterative poems. At times, alliteration provides the opportunity for exuberant punning, which can also bring out thematic motifs – as in the first of the following examples, which economically yokes together elements of two mythologies: the tree nymphs of the Greeks and the oak-worship of the Celts:

tree of Dryads
tree of Druids (*FL* 129)

depthless tree
deathless tree (*FL* 130)

In patterning and flow, ‘Tree’ has an apparently seamless continuity. Yet the poem also seems to be open to almost endless variations, permutations and rearrangements, especially in an oral reading. It almost seems that it could be read backwards, as if it were a palindromic text. It can be split into various cuttings, the only difficulty being where the semantic breaks should occur. And it can be re-grafted into a different patterning. Even so, its essential meaning will not be substantially altered. Try, for example, the simple experiment of reversing its opening and closing lines. Within the poem’s overall scheme, neither the musicality nor the meaning seem to change substantially; and this observation itself reflects the cyclic quality of the poem’s theme.

Tree planted
in my core
spreading growing
tree of songs (*FL* 119)

tree of justice
human rainbow
blossoming (*FL* 130)

Similarly, the poem’s syntax may appear to be simple, but on closer examination one realises that the total absence of both punctuation and of any main clause with a finite verb indicates in itself the endlessly flowing spatial and temporal rhythm possessed by both any natural tree and this poem. Through the entire text, verbal movement occurs mainly by means of the present and past participles: the former stressing the tree’s ceaseless ‘becoming’, its inexhaustible motion, as *process*; and the latter its rooted stillness, its ‘perfectedness’ and its resilient passive endurance. Furthermore, the regular deployment of enjambment itself iconically and synaesthetically emblematises continuity – or, rather, embodies it – simply by abolishing any hiatus,

whether formal or semantic, throughout the flow of discourse. Sometimes, the tree's active and passive aspects appear in immediate contrastive proximity:

creaking tree	insect gnawed
enduring thunder	rot infected
wind eroded	lightning blasted (<i>FL</i> 126)
snow bound (<i>FL</i> 119)	

In these passages, sweepingly powerful atmospheric elements and microscopic enemies and parasites, both continuously menacing a tree's survival, are juxtaposed. However, other lines consist of pairings of either present or past participles, as if separately to stress the tree's active and passive attributes:

revolving burning...	crowded stunted...
ringing singing...	raped mutilated...
sighing shivering... (<i>FL</i> 123, 124, 128)	uprooted felled... (<i>FL</i> 126, 127)

As might be expected, juxtaposition of dialectically opposed themes, images and characteristics is also a marked feature:

tree of creation	quiet tree
tree of destruction (<i>FL</i> 123)	of yes of no
	of this of that
nailing hell	of black of white
to paradise (<i>FL</i> 127)	confluence
	of pasts and futures (<i>FL</i> 128)

These patternings are all the more apt, since the tree, both naturally and symbolically, is connected with both soil and air. This simultaneity of upward and downward directions in itself suggests the blending of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) and of the elemental and mythical motifs of Underworld and Heaven. Since a tree grows continuously upwards towards the sky and downwards into the earth at once, in terms of 'vertical' alignments, the poem embodies a 'mirroring' element.

In connection with this theme of the blending of opposites, the poet has commented on the influence of the Romantic painter Samuel Palmer: "I think I may also have been subliminally influenced by Samuel Palmer's visionary painting, *The Magic Apple Tree*, in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge."⁹ Palmer's painting is

⁹ Personal communication from RB to the author, March 2008. Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), painter, etcher and printmaker, was an example of markedly visionary Romantic landscape painting. He was influenced by William Blake, and together with other friends (E. Calvert, F. O. Finch, G. Richmond and F. Tatham) formed a group of artists called the 'Ancients'. *The Magic Apple Tree* can, in a sense, be considered as an emblem of his visionary and dreamlike sensibility.

undoubtedly fascinating, conveying as it does the fecund, maternal and protective aspects of the tree, that are entirely consonant with the author's comments on Waldman's *Fast Speaking Woman*. Personally, I would wish to add another more modern representation of a tree, of which I was reminded when reading the poem: Charles Rennie Mackintosh's, *The Tree of Personal Effort* (1890s, Glasgow School of Art).¹⁰ This watercolour, in my opinion, suggests the hard/complex work Berengarten carried out in the arrangement of his long poem and offsets a more 'masculine' perspective against Palmer's quasi-magical interpretation.

* * *

As should already be apparent, form and content are so inextricably intertwined and harmonised in 'Tree' that their unity is inseparable. The richness of the resulting composition, however, almost exceeds expectation. Berengarten's poem is virtually a compendium of the most significant symbolic, mythical, religious and esoteric motifs that have been attributed to trees since ancient times. Foremost among these is the tree as symbol of a fixed world axis around which everything turns:

pivot fulcrum
axial roof tree
probing pharos
ever turning (*FL 122*)

Lines like these almost suggest that here Berengarten has found a point where 'things *do not* fall apart', where 'the centre *can* hold'.¹¹ Yet, a tree is also constantly exposed to the atmosphere and all its vagaries; and, higher still, it seems to connect the earth to the celestial bodies:

of high skies
cirrus strewn
milky ways
and birds returning
(*FL 119-120*)

sun cradle
moon basket
cloud blanketed
cask of stars
rocking meteors
shaking planets
ploughing galaxies
(*FL 121-122*)

¹⁰ Charles Rennie MacKintosh (1868-1928), Scottish architect, painter and designer, is a representative of the so-called 'Glasgow Movement'. *The Tree of Personal Effort*, both in its straight and sinuous lines and its quasi-evanescent chromatic nuances, represents, in my opinion, another visual counterpart to RB's poem.

¹¹ W. B. Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' (1920) opens with the image: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold". The poem continues with images of turmoil, violence and destruction (1989: 187). On the contrary RB's 'Tree', Yggdrasil-like, stands undaunted and unshaken by adversities.

Moreover, the way that a tree spans and bridges *space* encompasses not only the highest and hugest regions of the skies but also the smallest and humblest aspects of nature on the earth's surface, with its unceasing and minute life of small plants, fungi, insects and animals:

nurturing
 moss and lichen
mould gathering
 mushroom tree
mother of orchids
 and mistletoe
[...]
where the spider weaves
 and the rooks nest
and the bat flutters
 and the kestrel waits
tree of lives (*FL* 129)

And with regard to *time*, Berengarten implies that not only past geological eras are registered and recorded by the tree's immemorial presence, secretly engraved in its growth rings, but also deeper origins, going back to particles ("baryons") that are thought to have existed only in the wake of the Big Bang itself:

baryons
kindling speech
 of origins
to sing darkness's
 molten core
of ice
 moss and coal
fossil fern
 and dinosaur
time tree (*FL* 122-123)

Intertwined with these motifs from the natural world, multiple references and allusions link 'Tree' to human culture and history. These range from classical myths, for example the golden apples of the Hesperides (*FL* 125), to ancient religion, esoteric lore, Hermetic doctrines and alchemy. Biblical associations from both Old and New Testaments abound: for example, the serpent from *Genesis* (*FL* 120, 128), Israel's flight from Egypt ("pillar of wisdom / of smoke of cloud / desert beacon", *FL* 120), and allusions to the crucifixion:

tree of madness	blood spattered
tree of passion	royal trunk
set with thorns	nailing hell
sweating blood	to paradise
pain tree	gallows tree
evergreen (<i>FL</i> 126)	rising again (<i>FL</i> 127)

In another passage, Kabbalistic and Biblical references combine; but not only Judaism and Christianity are covered by this tree: it also spans Buddhism, Hinduism, and Oriental philosophy:

rod of aeons
of Adam Kadmon
Jesse David
and Sataniel
and Moses
on the high mountain
Buddha tree
Tilopa tree
zen tree
tantric tree
Kali's tree
dancing on skulls (*FL* 129)

Matriarchal and mystery cults of the Middle East are also present, along with Hermetic symbolism:

volcanic tree of Ashtaroth Lilith Ishtar and Astarte (<i>FL</i> 129)	tuned wand alembic caduceus twined branching vessel ...mercurial sap (<i>FL</i> 125)
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Furthermore, Heraclitus' inimitable paradox is encapsulated in the double oxymoron: "I descend up / and ascend down" (*FL* 128).¹² And apropos of Hermeticism and Occultism, the alchemical imagery of precious stones and of their "virtues" is present, as is the tree's essential connection with the four elements:

from evening
gathering emerald
carnelian
and diamond dew
and in the studded
bowl of dawn
with pearl and opal
dissolving them
[...]
tree of earth
water fire
of air of airs (*FL* 121)

Other patterns of imagery establish parallels and proximity between the vegetable life of the tree and the physical and bodily life of man, in procreation and sexuality, and in his mortal remains after dissolution:

¹² Also quoted by T. S. Eliot as an epigraph to *Four Quartets* (1942/43).

flesh tree	tree of creation
rimmed in muscle	tree of destruction
blood and sweat	temple planted
sighing shivering	in an upturned skull
shuddering tree	worming woody
generous	fibres through
sperm tree	eye socket
life pump	and mandible (<i>FL</i> 123-124)
everbrimming (<i>FL</i> 128)	

Berengarten's sturdy and dauntless tree is also connected with human culture and artefacts: it becomes a ship, sailing and moored (*FL* 121); a quill, illuminating a manuscript (*FL* 122); and a tabernacle and a cathedral (*FL* 124). It is endowed with energy (*FL* 123); it has its own voice and music (*FL* 124), and it mirrors and emblematises the growth of human language (*FL* 129-130). It is also useful even after its death, performing a kind of self-sacrifice on behalf of mankind (*FL* 127); and it is the 'arbre de la Liberté' of the French Revolution, whose apotheosis is celebrated in the fully human triad of "freedom", "love" and "justice" (*FL* 130), before it finally arches upwards and outwards into the concluding metaphor of the "rainbow / blossoming" (*FL* 130).

Specific literary echoes also sound through the poem. The lines "threaded with voices / and children's laughter" (*FL* 120) recall the "[c]hildren's voices in the orchard" in T. S. Eliot's 'New Hampshire', the first of his five *Landscapes* (1985: 138). In both these passages the echoes of muffled whispers, laughter and voices hidden among the branches and the leaves of a tree convey an atmosphere of childlike innocence and, mythically, an echo of the Golden Age.

At the other end of the arch of human life, in the image of "blind man's staff" (*FL* 127), an attentive reader can perceive a remote echo (even though it is impossible to quote exact verbal correspondences) of literary characters of Old Men wandering and staggering, such as Shakespeare's King Lear or Sophocles' Oedipus.

So in its frame of reference, just as in its linguistic and formal techniques, 'Tree' embraces and blends opposites.

* * *

It is a challenging task to describe this long poem. Here I have offered only a sketch of a much broader and richer tapestry of words, sounds, images, meanings and echoes. In conclusion, it is perhaps best to call on metaphor again – as the poet himself does – if one is to do even minimal justice to the poem. 'Tree' is a psalmody, a ritual sound-rhapsody, an incantatory healing mantra, a spell-spiral turning in an ascensional vortex, a column of wafting incense, a mountain waterfall tumbling into a narrow stream, a spring jetting out incandescent rainbow sprays, an illuminated scroll unravelling miniatures, a gothic stained glass, a glance upwards through foliage to its crown, and a glimpse of the sky beyond. This tree's branches and roots mirror each

other in a Heraclitean dialectic. This poem is a unique and original 'tree encyclopaedia', not in the scientific-botanical, but rather symbolic, mythological and archetypal sense. Above all, it is an affirmation and celebration of a miraculous living being.

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