

A Note on the Cover Image: A Tree of Leaves and Flames

By Nigel Jackson

A tree there is that from its topmost bough
Is half all glittering flame and half all green
Abounding foliage moistened with the dew;
And half is half and yet is all the scene;
And half and half consume what they renew...

From Vacillation by William Butler Yeats

The following is the strange vision beheld by the youthful hero Peredur engaged in his initiatic quest in the mediaeval Welsh Celtic myth-cycle of *The Mabinogion*:

‘And he could see a tall tree on the river bank, and one half of it was burning from its roots to its tip, and the other half with green leaves on it.’¹

Peredur (Perlesvaus, Perceval in the later French courtly romance of Chretien de Troyes, Parzival in the German Grail-narrative of Wolfram von Eschenbach), knight-errant upon the path of the spiritual *chevalerie* of the Sanc-Grail, is the prototypal ‘Pure Fool’. Amid divers prodigious wonders, ritual combats, tests and mystic ordeals which he experiences and undergoes as he fares through the meads and forests, he reaches a flowing river where he is confronted by a mysterious hierophanic ‘Intersign’ (to employ the term of Henry Corbin). It is a marker of the Interworld, liminal locus of alchemical ‘translation’ between states: black sheep on the meadow upon one side of the river cross over and become white, and white sheep crossing from the other bank become black.

¹ ‘Peredur Son of Evrawg’, *The Mabinogion*, (London 1974), trans. G. Jones & T. Jones.

On the exalted metaphysical plane of symbolism, one is reminded of the complementarity of the Divine attributes of *Jalal* (Majesty) and *Jamal* (Beauty). Also called to mind is the ever-verdant Burning Bush before which the Prophet Moses knelt on Mount Horeb, where the Uncreated Energies of God manifest as light and from whose depth the holy voice spoke the Divine Name *Ebeieb Esber Ebeieb* (I am That I am). As well, the fiery but cool and perfumed Rose-Garden in which the prophet Abraham found himself blissfully immersed when Nimrod sought to burn him for breaking the idols.

The symbolism of the Tree embodies also the principles of the *Jiva* and *Atman*, traditionally associated with an arboreal symbolism and emblemized by the two birds perched in the boughs of a tree, one tasting the fruit, the other silently observing. René Guénon states that the image of the World Tree 'may be considered as synthesizing in itself unity and duality'² and he cites the Biblical account of the Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge. In the context of the Celtic World-Tree of Leaves and Flames the vertical axis, resolution of the antinomies, may be identified with the central pillar of the Sefirotic Tree according to the Judaic Kabbalah, the *Linea Vitae* of the 'Tree of Light'.

But if the supernatural Celtic Tree of Leaves and Flames resumes a related esoteric symbolism, it is nonetheless transposed onto the secondary plane of heroic initiation (*Vira-Marga*) and the 'Parva Mysteria', the domain proper to the mysteries of spiritual knighthood and pertaining to the function of Regnum, the Way of Action and Power (*Ksbatram*) typified in the *Ars Regia* of Hermetic Chivalry. The tree of leaves and flames, bisected along its vertical axis, presents a symbol of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, of an alchemical reciprocity and resolution of antinomies, water and fire, night and day, moon and sun.

W.B. Yeats understood this Celtic symbol as an arcane emblem of the co-inherence of the supernatural and natural spheres, the realms of Spirit and matter, both in man the microcosm as in the macrocosm. The arboreal imagery of the Tree of Life with its two sides, Left Emanation and Right Emanation, symbolize the archetypal aspects of Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy, represented by the red flames and the leafy verdure, respectively, also denoting what William Blake called the marriage of

² René Guénon, *Symbols of Sacred Science*, edited by Samuel D. Fohr, (Sophia Perennis, 2004) - Ch. 51, note 3.

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