Tree of Life Imagery in the Poetry of Edward Taylor

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EDWARD TAYLOR'S TREE OF LIFE has varied antecedents both in myth and religion; and though it is not necessary here to discuss at length tree worship and anthropomorphic attitudes toward trees, it is significant to point out that in religion the tree is grouped with objects able to bestow eternal life. This idea of life-giving vegetation, which is granted usually as a reward, pervades Near Eastern religion, from which the tree was probably assimilated into Hebrew scripture. The relevant and essential difference, however, between the Hebrew concept of the tree and that of other religions is that in Hebrew scripture the tree loses its magical qualities, its efficacy in insuring life. It is, then, because Adam's Fall was caused only symbolically by his loss of the tree that Edward Taylor is able to use the tree of life metaphorically in his poetry.

Taylor's tree of life image, of course, has its source in the Bible, particularly the books of Genesis and Revelation. From these two books come Taylor's first full statement of the tree figure in *Med.I.29* of the *Preparatory Meditations*.[1] Yet because of Taylor's subsequent extension of the image beyond biblical implication, we must regard him primarily as a poet working to sustain a metaphor, and only secondarily as a peculiarly Puritan poet of the seventeenth century. We are too often tempted to view him as an ingenious Puritan rustic, or to accept his use of the tree image as merely one example of garden imagery so pervasive in seventeenth-century poetry. And although one certainly cannot ignore the influence of Taylor's milieu and training on his poetic technique, they are pertinent here only as they affect his varied use of the tree of life metaphor.

Now it is plausible that tree imagery in Taylor grew from his use of the flower in a poem entitled "Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children." This poem is dated by Donald E. Stanford as 1682-1683, which antedates any of the *Preparatory Meditations* where the tree of life becomes either a major or minor, but *fully stated,* image. In this poem Taylor predicts that the result of his heaven-sanctioned wedlock will be "slips here planted" of "Primrose, Cowslips, Roses, Lilies/ . . . With Violets and Pinkes that voide perfumes." Taylor then goes on to say that

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[1] Citations from Taylor's poetry in the text are from *The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (New Haven, 1960).

> When in this Knot I planted was, my Stock
> Soon knotted, and a manly flower out brake.
> And after it my branch again did knot.

Three stanzas later he repeats that "praying ore my branch, my branch did sprout." Taylor makes his final point in the last stanza where he realizes that, grievous as it is to have his children taken by death, still it is God's will, and therefore he feels

> joy, may I sweet flowers for Glory breed,
> Whether thou getst them green, or lets them seed.

The sentiments expressed by Taylor in "Upon Wedlock" are reminiscent of a stanza from George Herbert's "The Flower" in *The Temple:*

> Who would have thought my shrivell'd heart
> Could have recover'd greenness? It was gone
> Quite underground; as flowers depart
> To see their Mother-root, when they have blown;
> Where they together
> All the hard weather,
> Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

Just as one feels in the Herbert stanza that the "Mother-root" implies a root stronger and deeper than could be evoked by the fragile root of an ornamental, delicate flower, one feels as well that in "Upon Wedlock" Taylor is reaching for an image suggesting an overt strength the flower does not possess, yet one that would retain an organic quality. Thus, we have in Taylor's poem mention of his "Stock," "branch," and "knot," three metaphors that will reappear incorporated in the tree of life when, in 1688, Taylor introduces his first full statement of the tree in the *Preparatory Meditations,* first series.

Nor are the similarities of Taylor's poem to that of Herbert coincidental. As Samuel Eliot Morison notes in his *Intellectual Life* *of Colonial New England,* Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations* "owe their style as well as their conception to George Herbert." Further, in the Foreword to the 1960 Yale edition of *The Poems of Edward Taylor,* Louis Martz discusses at some length Taylor's consistent echoing of Herbert in form and content. Donald Stanford, probing still deeper into the basis for Herbert's influence on Taylor, notes in the 1963 abridged Yale paperbound edition of *The Poems of Edward Taylor* that the typical school curriculum at Leicestershire, England (Taylor's boyhood home), included the study of English poets, particularly Francis Quarles and George Herbert. Stanford also remarks that a copy of *The Temple* was included in the library of Taylor's friend, President Chauncy of Harvard.

If we look again at the "Upon Wedlock" lines we notice immediately Taylor's varied use of the knot metaphor:

A Curious Knot God made in Paradise,
  And drew it out inamled neatly Fresh.
It was the True-Love Knot, more sweet than spice
  And set with all the flowres of Graces dress.
  Its Weddens Knot, that ne're can be unti'de.
  No Alexanders Sword can it divide.

In this stanza alone there are at least four meanings of the word "knot." The knot that God made is a bond with man, a binding condition, but it is also the bud of growth. Wedlock, too, is a knot that cannot be untied, therefore a figurative Gordian knot that even Alexander cannot divide with his sword. It is quite possible that Taylor's use of the knot here was suggested by John Fiske's poem, "O Honie Knott," written upon the "much-to be lamented desease of the Reverend Mr. John Cotton" in 1652, in which Fiske's polyphony of meanings of the word "knot" indicates a point of Puritan literary theory which Taylor exploited:

With Joy erst while, (when knotty doubts arose)
To thee we calld, O Sir, the knott disclose:

. . . .

even hee that in the Church a pillar was
a gurdeon knot of sweetest graces

. . . .

But we as in a honi-comb a knott
Of Hony Sweete, here had such Sweetness Gott

> the knotts and knobbs that on the Trees doe grow
> the bitterest excrescences we know.

In its entirety the poem is much longer, yet even these few lines reveal the conscious torturing and straining to wring from the knot every nuance.

The point in examining the knot image here is not, of course, to assert that Fiske influenced Taylor, but rather to exemplify the Puritan purpose in constructing such a complex of meanings from one image. As Roy Harvey Pearce points out in *The Continuity of American Poetry,* Ramist logic with its stress upon correlating the facts of day-to-day reality with the facts of Revelation was consciously practiced by Puritan writers. This Ramist-Puritan method of discovering, or laying open to view (through meditation), fostered a tightly woven and logically ordered literature, be it sermon or poetry. Further, as Pearce indicates, the Ramist influence caused the Puritan writers' fondness for acrostics and anagrams, for these forms, as well as sermons and scripture, could bring to light latent indications of man's position in God's ordered universe. Tortured as these anagrammatic images were, they nevertheless were an exercise in precision. They imposed the necessity that every shade of meaning be divulged. Pearce calls this technique "invention," which certainly it is. But such a technique in the hands of a skilled poet like Taylor yields in his mature work a mastery of interrelations of his images, that is, of his image clusters. And although it would be absurd to suggest that Taylor's use of image clusters results from his reading and writing of anagrams and acrostics (actually he wrote only one acrostic and no anagrams), it is clear that the Ramist logic that so strongly influenced Puritan literary theory is apparent in Taylor's imagery.

If Ramist logic provides impetus for Taylor's tight, precise poetic vehicle, it is the Bible that initially provides the tenor. As we have noted, reference to the tree of life in Genesis and Revelation is the basis for Taylor's tree imagery in *Med.I.29,* his only poem in which the tree is the completely central image:

> My shattred Phancy stole away from mee,
>   (Wits run a Wooling over Edens Parke)
> And in Gods Garden saw a golden Tree,
>   Whose Heart was All Divine, and gold its barke.

Whose glorious limbs and fruitfull branches strong
With Saints, and Angells bright are richly hung.

In the first sense the poet's tree is "the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Here the tree is a symbol for God the Father "Whose heart was all Divine." But there are two further implications, one of the fallen mortal whose "Phancy" is "shattred" and whose wits "run a Wooling" in Eden, and another of hierarchy, for if the heart of the tree is God, then the branches must be hung with celestial groupings of lesser spirits, the saints and angels.

Yet if God and his saints and angels are a "golden Tree," then how low must man be by Puritan contrast! In his next stanza, where he continues the suggestion of diminishing hierarchy, Taylor says, "I am a Withered Twig, dri'de fit to bee/ A Chat Cast in thy fire, Writh off by Vice." Here is Taylor the Puritan in meaning, but Taylor the poet in effectively sustaining the tree metaphor. If the tree is both God and all that he has created, then man must be the most menial part of that tree, fit only to be cast ignobly into a fire as a bit of kindling. Not until the end of the second stanza does Taylor reveal the only hope for this mean twig "Writh off by [its own] Vice":

Yet if thy Milke white-Gracious Hand will take mee
And grafft mee in this golden stock, thou'lt make mee.

Since in subsequent poems Taylor uses the grafting figure repeatedly, yet with diversity, the figure deserves full examination. Its importance in the Puritan religious ethnic lies in its double implication of the relationship between man and God. Taylor states in the fourth stanza of *Med.I.29:*

I being grafft in thee there up do stand
  In us Relations all that mutuall are.
I am thy Patient, Pupill, Servant, and
  Thy Sister, Mother, Doove, Spouse, Son, and Heire.
Thou art my Priest, Physician, Prophet, King,
Lord, Brother, Bridegroom, Father, Ev'ry thing.

The relationship between twig and tree does not end here, however, for there is hope of an integration of the graft as saint into the all-encompassing tree of God-universe-celestial hierarchy:

I being grafft in thee am graffted here
Into thy family, and kindred Claim
To all in Heaven, God, Saints, and Angells there.
I thy Relations my Relations name.
Thy Father's mine, thy God my God, and I
With Saints, and Angells draw affinity.

Finally, in the last two lines of the poem, we see the poet's plea for union with God and his promise that such a union will be a productive one:

Make mee thy grafft, by thou my Golden Stock.
Thy Glory then I'le make my fruits and Crop.

Aside from the importance of Puritan literary and religious ideals embodied in the poem, one recognizes the splendid quality of the poem for itself. There is unity in its progression, which essentially traces the tree from its meaning in Genesis to that in Revelation, binding the life of man with it. Taylor operates on several levels here, using man as universal and also specific man, using the tree as God, universe, and divine hierarchy. Here also is the metaphysical technique of borrowing a scientific, external fact, grafting, and applying it to man's spiritual life. Taylor's use of what Herbert Blau calls "copious alliteration for phonetic pleasure" is successful because of the poem's assonance and because Taylor's concrete images do not focus attention on themselves, but are used to clarify and amplify.[2]

Because of Taylor's frequent use of the grafting figure in the *Preparatory Meditations,* one might question whether the figure could have been suggested to him by the metaphysical poets, some of whom he surely had read or heard about. Since Donald Stanford has established that Francis Quarles was included in the group of English poets studied by Leicestershire schoolboys of Taylor's period, one can turn to *Sion's Sonets* xii.13 for Quarles's 1624 reference to grafting:

My love is like a Paradise, beset
With rarest grifts, whose fruit (but tender yet)
The world nere tasted, dainties far more faire:
Myrhe, Alloes, Incens, and the Cypresse tree

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[2] Herbert Blau, "Heaven's Sugar Cake: Theology and Imagery in the Poetry of Edward Taylor," *New England Quarterly,* XXVI, 337-360 (Sept., 1953).

Can boast no sweetnesse, but is breath'd from thee
Dainties, for taste; and flowers, for the smell
Spring all from Thee, whose sweets all sweets excell.

Here in Quarles's paraphrase of Canticles the speaker, Christ, addresses his bride, the Church. Quarles's use of the grafting figure in these lines differs considerably, however, from Taylor's implication of the man-God unity through grafting. In Quarles's simile the "grift" expresses only a preciousness, a uniqueness of the sensuous delight exuded by the young bride.

Quarles uses the grafting figure again in *Sion's Sonets* xx.8 where Christ solaces his bride's "troubled soul dejected" by explaining that

I did but walke among my tender Plants,
To smell their Odours, and supplie their wants,
To see my Stockes, so lately grifted, sprout,
Or if my vines begin to burgen out.

The "grifted Stockes" in this passage more nearly approach Taylor's use of the implantation of man into God in order that man may "bear [God's] living Fruits" (*Med.I.33*). Yet it is Taylor, not Quarles, who makes the individual rather than the budding church bear the fruit of the grafted scion. Although Quarles probably introduced to Taylor the grafting figure in poetry, Taylor uses the figure for more complex, more personal, more far-reaching poetic meaning.

If Quarles introduced to Taylor the grafting figure and suggested one implication of it, then plausibly it was Andrew Marvell who had a more direct bearing on Taylor's central use of the image. Marvell's "The Mower Against Gardens" provides in part an antecedent for Taylor's primary function of the graft:

And yet these Rarities might be allow'd
  To man, that sov'raign thing and proud;
Had he not dealt between the Bark and Tree,
  Forbidden mixtures there to see.
No Plant now knew the Stock from which it came;
  He grafts upon the Wild the Tame:
That the uncertain and adult'rate fruit
  Might put the Palate in dispute

Ostensibly, Marvell's only influence here was to present Taylor with a use of the graft differing from that of Quarles. However, these lines, coupled with Section VII from "The Garden," indicate that a deeper influence might be at work:

> Here at the fountains sliding foot,
> Or at some Fruit-trees mossy root,
> Casting the bodies vest aside,
> My soul into the boughs does glide:
> There like a bird it sits, and sings,
> Then whets, and combs its silver wings;

It could well have been for Taylor only a small imaginative step from the bird-as-soul to the twig-as-soul, grafted (thus implying a permanence the figure of the bird in boughs could not evoke) into the tree of life. Here, then, we have Taylor's primary, central use of the grafting image fully developed: man, the "dri'de" twig who needs an implantation into the tree of life for salvation of his soul.

What remains, of course, is to confirm Taylor's familiarity with Marvell's poetry. Unfortunately there is as yet no direct evidence either supporting or denying Taylor's knowledge of Marvell's work, though a tentative conjecture is possible. Although Marvell's *Miscellaneous Poems* was not published until 1681, he is believed to have written most of his best-known poetry between 1650 and 1653 when he tutored Lord Fairfax's daughter in Yorkshire. Since Marvell subsequently tutored Cromwell's ward, William Dutton, and served in Parliament, he was accepted in Commonwealth circles during these mid-century years which Louis Martz calls years of "rich expansion of outlook" in Cromwellian government. And although his only poetry published during his lifetime was occasional poems, one cannot discount the possibility of his lyrics being circulated privately and read by the literati, including Milton. Now Edward Taylor was coming of age in England during these years (he did not depart until 1668, when he was about twenty-six years old) and being educated at a time when, as Martz says, "the temporary victory of the Puritan Commonwealth had released into new areas the powerful energies of English Puritanism, long constricted by the fierce struggle for survival." And although it has not been proved that Taylor attended Cambridge, as some scholars have asserted, his matriculation at Harvard with advanced standing proves that he must have had formal education while in England. Also, despite the dearth of English poetry in his library at Westfield, Massachusetts, Taylor did possess two of Richard Baxter's treatises, works well respected in the Commonwealth. Since, then, Taylor had some intellectual ties with the Commonwealth and was familiar with at least two fairly recent English poets, one cannot dismiss offhand his possible knowledge of Marvell's poetry or its influence on Taylor's own work.

Taylor's use of the implantation image is further developed and explicated by his series of sermons, the *Christographia,* in which he discourses on the qualifications for election. In *Med.II.47* Taylor writes:

A Well of Living Water: Tree of Life
   From whom Life comes to every thing alive:
Some Eate and Drink Eternal Life most rife.

In the sermon complementing this poem Taylor says:

> Let then the awful Consideration that you are in by nature stir you up to endeavour after an implantation into Christ. . . .
>
> Christ himselfe, passeth over all unto all that are implanted into Christ. The upshot of all [life] lieth in the United Essentiall harmony of the Same in the person. . . . O! what then should our endeavours be that we may obtain an Implantation into Christ Jesus that this may be ours? . . . What an heart inravishing Sight is it to See the tree of this life, full reeved with the fruits of Holiness? Nay, it will be the Supreme Glory that a Child of God Can beare to Christ the Stock implanted in. The Sap of this Stock running up into the branches to fill them with the Fruits of Holiness will (*beare them*) to the Highest ascent of Glory unto the Stock that the Sap in the Fruitful boughs can ascend unto or produce them to beare.[3]

Grafting is for Taylor so complete a symbol for the bond between man and God that he uses the tree in conjunction with other images in his poetry. In *Med.I.33,* for example, he equates the Ark of Noah with the tree of life:

Thou art this Golden Ark; this Living Tree
Where life lies treasurde up for all in thee.

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[3] Edward Taylor, *Christographia,* ed. Norman Grabo (New Haven, 1962), pp. 196-198.

Oh! Graft me in this Tree of Life within
 The Paradise of God, that I may live.
Thy Life make live in mee; I'le then begin
 To bear thy Living Fruits, and them forth give.

Since Taylor uses at length the image of man as a withered twig in need of a divine graft for restoration of life, an imaginative extension leads him to the mirror image of Christ as twig. Again one can suggest the influence of George Herbert, who ends his poem "The Bunch of Grapes" from *The Temple* with the lines:

 But much more Him I must adore,
Who of the law's sour juice sweet wine did make,
Even God himself, being pressed for my sake.

It is Taylor, however, who poetically states in *Med.I.30* the function of the pressed wine of Christ's blood:

But yet thou stem of David's stock when dry
 And shriveled held, although most green was lopt
Whose sap a sovereign Sodder is, whereby
 The breach repared is in which its dropt.
 Oh Gracious Twig! thou Cut off? bleed rich juyce
 T'Cement the Breach, and Glories shine reduce?

Earlier in the poem Taylor has said that man, the "statelist Palace Angells e're did view," has become through the Fall "Broke, marred, spoild, undone, Defild." The redemptive Christ, this "stem of David's Stock," holds faithful to God although "dry and shriveled" on the cross, a direct contrast to the "Palace," man, who forsook his God in the moment of trial. It is the "rich juyce," the sap of the twig that is Christ "lopt" while yet green that will redeem the broken palace. Only the "Sodder" of Christ's blood can "Cement the Breach" between man and God since the Fall. The poet implores Christ to "Sill, Plate, Ridge, Rib, and Rafter" him with grace. And it is no mere coincidence that all of these reinforcements denote wood.

We have, then, both man and Christ as twigs severed from the tree of life, although differing fundamentally in the causes for their severance. Man is a menial twig because he violated the Covenant of Works, so a gracious God made his son a man-twig to repair the breach. True to the Puritan ethic, Taylor finds the Covenant of

Grace far more satisfying than the initial Covenant of Works contracted with Adam.

One might well question Taylor's style in this metaphor of Christ as twig, which seems incongruous, even ridiculous, when lifted from context. When Taylor says, "Oh Gracious Twig!" the metaphor appears too menial for the bombastic rhetoric that carries it. The figure is saved in part by the poet's expressed incredulity that God could "Glories shine reduce" by causing Christ to suffer the cross. Yet clearly here is one of the instances where Taylor goes too far, where failure results from an incongruous choice of image.

We earlier examined Taylor's first fully stated figure of God as tree in *Med.I.29*. But since man is created in God's own image, one can expect in Taylor's poetry a statement of man as tree also. In *Med.I.44* Taylor conjoins the major image of the Crown of Righteousness with the lesser one of man as tree bearing ripe fruit. As the poet implores God for purgation of man's sins, he says:

> Oh! make it so: then Righteousness pure, true
> Shall Roost upon my boughs, and in my heart
> And all its fruits that in Obedience grew
> To stud this crown like jems in every part.

Yet, as he implies in these lines, man cannot be a perfect tree until a future time when God graciously sanctions man's perfection. As for the present, man remains defiled. Thus, there is in *Med.II.4* a statement of the fallen mortal's condition and his hope for grace necessary for salvation:

> My gracious Lord, I would thee glory doe:
> But finde my Garden over grown with weeds:
> My Soile is sandy; brambles o'er it grow;
> My Stock is stunted; Branch no good Fruits Breeds.
> My Garden Weed: Fatten my Soile, and prune
> My Stock, and make it with the glory bloome.

Taylor expresses similar feeling in *Med.II.16:*

> Shall I now grafted in thy Olive tree
> The House of Jacob, bramble berries beare?
> This burdens me to thinke of, much more thee.
> Breake off my black brire Claws: mee scrape and pare.

Lord make my Bramble bush thy rosie tree.
And it will beare sweet Roses then for thee.

Still another of Taylor's uses of the man-tree image occurs in the *Christographia* in Sermon VI:

> Strive to derive Life from Christ to Constitute all the branches of your life Spirituall, and Holy, and then Your life will be a Spirituall, and Holy life. This is the best life of all. God calls you to no better life. No better life is, nor can be attained. And Christ Jesus hathe the Principalls, and Seed of Such a life in him to bestow and doth bestow the Same upon all implanted into him. And they are to derive influences from him to mentain Such a life, and to influence every branch of their lives accordingly, that so all may flourish, and abound in Holiness and the Fruits thereof. (*Christographia,* pp. 197-198)

Taylor introduces in this sermon a somewhat different concept of man's means for perfection, that is, a striving for an imitation of Christ rather than imploring God to "break off black brire Claws." Here, too, Taylor returns to the grafting image, yet this time with the implication that although man and God both can be symbolized by the tree, the man-tree can be perfected only through an implantation into the tree that is God. In other words, in Taylor we have Northrop Frye's concept of the apocalyptic metaphor where everything is potentially identifiable with everything else, as though all were inside a single infinite body.

Taylor finds still another shade of meaning in the tree image, although it is not as fully developed as those uses of the image we have thus far examined. In *Med.I.36* the poet states his mean condition as unredeemed man:

I'me surely made a Gazing Stock to all.
  The Holy Angells Wonder: and the Mock
Of Divells (pining that they misse it all)
  To see these beams gild me a Stupid Stock.

It is, however, the form of salvation the poet seeks that is significant, for he asks that God's pardon be a graft implanted into man, a reversal of his usual use of the grafting figure:

Then take a pardon from thy Store, and twist
It in my Soule for help. 'Twill not be mist.

. . . .

Thy argument is good, Lord point it, come
Let't lance my heart, till True Loves Veane doth run.

Once again we turn to Quarles for an antecedent to these lines in *Emblems* V.1:

I charge you tell him, that a flaming dart,
Shot from his eye, hath pierc'd my bleeding heart.

In *Emblems* V.11 Quarles says similarly:

And wanton Cupid, sitting in the tree,
   Hath pierc'd my bosom with a flaming dart;
My soul being spent, for refuge seeks to thee,
   But cannot find where thou my refuge art.

Quarles's texts for those lines are, respectively, Canticles and Psalms, erotic passages which both he and Taylor interpreted in terms of the man-God relationship. Yet while Quarles presents outright statements of the arrows shot by God and Cupid, Taylor more personally supplicates God to "lance" the defiled man's heart with a pardon that will be implanted into man's soul.

We find, finally, that Taylor's tree of life images and their implications he explores have come full circle. God grafts into man, and man is implanted into God. God is a tree, as is man. Yet just as man is the whole tree, so is he the meanest part of the tree, a twig. Likewise, Christ as a man-God on earth becomes a mean twig, although Taylor is unable to achieve poetic balance in his use of the figure. Still, it is significant that he attempts the completely mirrored metaphor. Northrop Frye sees this interchangeability, this complete circle, as a world of total metaphor. Edward Taylor sees it somewhat similarly as the "United Essential Harmony of the Same in the Person." For Frye it is a world of myth, and for Taylor one of sharpest reality, the reason for earthly existence. As Taylor says in the *Christographia,* "This is the best life of all. God calls you to no better life. No better life is, nor can be attained."