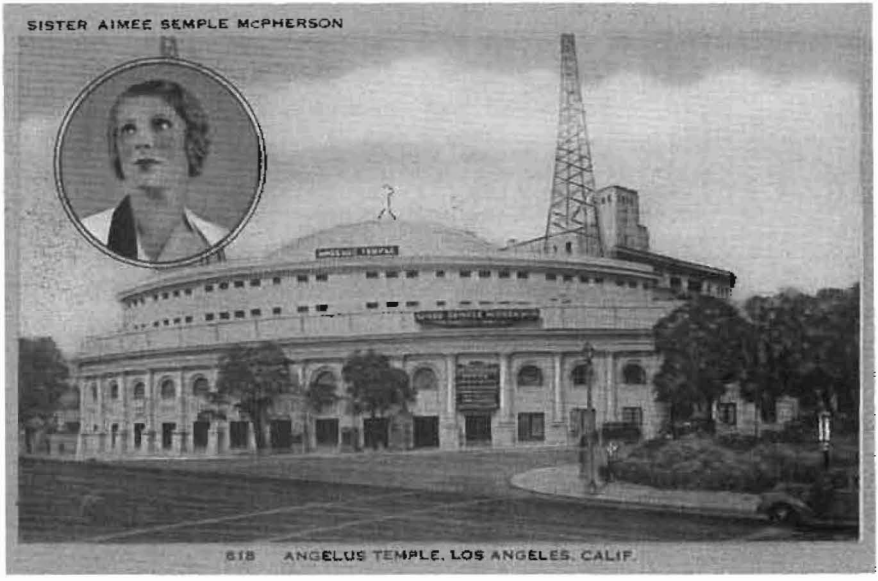
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THE YEARS THAT WERE EATEN: THE TREE AS SACRED SYMBOL IN THE WORKS OF McPHERSON, MANFRED AND NEIHARDT

by
Patricia Marie Murphy

> Now that at last this ritual was performed,
> His duty to the goddess done, they came
> To places of delight, to green park land,
> Where souls take ease amid the Blessed Groves.
>
> --Virgil, The Aeneid

After lionizing himself in *Biographia Literaria* with the revelation that not only his "sentiments" but also "in some instances [his] very language" had been adopted "in several of the Massachusetts state-papers," Samuel Taylor Coleridge muses on the immortal value of any writer's works: "Would that the criterion of a scholar's utility were the number and moral value of the truths, which he has been the means of throwing into the general circulation; or the number and value of the minds, whom by his conversation or letters he has excited into activity, and applied with the germs of their after-growth"[1]

Responsibility to represent "Truth"--with a capital "T"--which the Lake District Romantics bequeathed to aspiring authors, may yet anchor the latter group to pursue their art despite the lure of *Jurassic Park*. This best seller, and others of the same genre, have devoted readers among the present "literate" fifty pereent of the population who may prefer, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot's explication of Poe's popularity, to be "entertained" by ideas rather than to be asked to believe in them.[2] Dinosaurs with the shrewd intelleet of Sherlock Holmes have their rewards. But immortality will probably not be one of them. No matter how many raptors Crichton can elone, his eharaeters do not weep on any universal bones, dinosaur or otherwise.

T. S. Eliot asserts that the authors who will have the most influence on the

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development of a national literature will combine "a strong local flavor... with unconscious universality."[3] And the symbolism in this literature is "all the more powerful for being uncalculated and unconscious."[4] Such writers create worlds that will not pass away. They speak to Faulkner's old "verities." They do not write "in vain." Their words, like Coleridge's, will remain.

This study examines three such visionary authors from the viewpoint of a universal symbol, common, but sacred to all–the tree and its association with a Christ figure. All three authors, an evangelistic minister, a Native American shaman, and a novelist, meet Eliot's requirements of knowing well their individual universes. The minister, the holy man, and one of the novelist's characters will be looked at as wounded healers, like Christ, who was resurrected, "reborn into eternal life," according to Christian myth. In the stories of all three, the tree, once leaf laden, suffers years of plague before its life and blossoming and welcome shade are restored.

Aimee Semple McPherson, that controversial pentecostal Canadian who enehanted an America wedged uncomfortably between two world wars, may seem an unlikely candidate for a literary study; but she was a poet of the first order, a mystic visionary who produeed no less than six books, two operas, and a newspaper in addition to an average of twenty sermons a week during her ministry. The extent of her abilities with word and metaphor is reflected in her formal writings. In the following passage, Aimee reealls a profound spiritual experience on the eve of her eonversion to charismatic Christianity:

> The entire atmosphere seemed stretched taut in the clear, cold air, like the strings of an overstrained violin. The very stars were singing in a high-pitched tremolo. Upon the gem-arched Milky Way the radiant moon was gliding lazily. Venus winked at Saturn. The Big Dipper ladled out stardust in the bowl of its smaller sister.[5]

Aimee attributed all her words to direct heavenly inspiration. Shortly after the delineated epiphany, Aimee, sequestered inside a pentecostal community waiting out a blizzard, was praying alone when she received the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a violent automatism: "All at once my hands and arms began to shake, gently at first, then violently, until my whole body was shaking under the power of the Holy Spirit."[6] Her conversion was followed by marriage to the love of her life, Robert Semple. Headed for a mission in China, the blissful couple stopped in London where Aimee, a helpmate consort to her husband, agreed to give a sermon before thousands of the faithful. This first public sermon was to prefigure her own career

and life's mission:

> The gallery, the balcony, the pit and the rostrum were all filled; and to add to my confusion, just then the footlights flashed into brilliancy all around me, and there I stood, a slip of a girl, with my Bible in my trembling hands. I had prepared no sermon, trusting God to speak through me at the moment.... Just then something happened–The power of God went surging through my body, waves of glory and praise swept through my soul .... I was in the Spirit ... the Lord took control of my tongue ... The Spirit spoke in prophesy, and as He spoke, I did not know what the next word was to be ... As I spoke thus for one hour and a quarter, there did not seem to be a stir in all that vast audience, and as I spoke I saw a vision of a greater circle, composed of ten smaller circles, as shown in the preceding picture [in the text of *This is That*]. This big circle seemed so big that its top reached the sky; it was the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, from its opening on the day of Peutecost to its closing at the coming of the Lord Jesus. Before starting to speak, I [had] opened my Bible with closed eyes, trusting God for my text, and my finger was guided to a eertain verse the Lord had given me: ... "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, and the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you."[7]

Aimee had had a vision and a spiritual ordination. But the locusts began to descend. Destitute, almost despairing, inconsolable after sufferiug the loss of her husband and the birth of a fragile child in China, she returned to the States and tried her had at heing what early 1900 America expected–matron. She tried to ignore a nagging call from God to preach. Not until a series of operations brought her near death did she promise to answer the now audible voiee of God. She recovered miraeulously to beeome a healer herself and to spread the Gospel. An angel of mercy in a white nurse's uniform, who in her early more vibrant pentecostal days, daneed in automatisms and was gifted with glossolalia, Aimee felt that angels and even the resurreeted Christ were present at her tent meetings. Her message preceded her healings. And it was ever the same–non-judgmental, non aecusatory, hut eaptivating: "Where will you spend eternity?"

Where Aimee was to spend her life was on the road and eventually in West

Los Angeles, bordering on the tinsel town, Hollywood. Besieged by an army of wailing suffering thousands, Aimee performed miraculous healings which she attributed to Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. These healings were authenticated repeatedly by doctors and investigative journalists. Even the respected H. L. Menken and *The New Republic* validated her sincerity and talent.[8] But her pentecostal outpourings became more and more staged in true Hollywood tradition and her personal life, controversial. As most visionaries, she needed someone who truly cared, to plant her firmly in reality and to keep the media locusts and the palmerworms off her back. Aimee was lost without the guiding hand of her mother, Minnie Kennedy, whom Aimee forced out once the Foursquare Angelus Temple was established. The further the evangelist/author strayed into the wilderness of America's world of performance and profit, the more alienated she became from her spiritual sustenance. The Seer confronted the dictum of her followers to institutionalize her vision but without the caring financial genius of Minnie Kennedy, the blossoming tree of Aimee's life withered. The tree she had seen was "not of this world."

Visionary Aimee died lonely, except for her son and the following of the faithful. But miraculously, the church that this wounded healer left behind has a membership today of 1,700,000 in 74 countries.[9] She would have attributed it all to God. In 1922, she had had a vision based on her preaching of Ezekiel's vision of Man, Lion, Ox, and Eagle, which she interpreted as: Regeneration, Baptism in the Spirit, Divine Healing, and the Second Coming, the four cornerstones of her Foursquare Gospel. She herself had passed through the stages of birth and rebirth several times over in her life. Seeing herself as one of the restorers, along with Wesley and other evangelists, she would have taken delight in seeing the tree blossom because of her devotion to the "King's glad service."

Frederick Manfred's Elof Lofbloom is a hitchhiker, thrown out of a truck, a young man who comes home, seeking a vision, to the four square crossroads of Chokeeherry Corner,

> where the King's Trail Highway crossed the east-west AYP. There were three filling stations on it, one to a corner, and a bog, and, a little ways to the west, a depot and an elevator beside the Cannonball railroad. Since Hello, two miles east, siphoned off most of the trade in the area, only one general store flanked the tracks and the highway.[10]

Manfred puts his everyman character, the type of disfranchised Great Depression human McPherson appealed to, in a setting that is at a distance from

world of profit, the world of Kingsfood. Manfred's King and McPherson's are clearly not the same, but their concern for the salvation of the individual and the group are similar.[11] The young Aimee had been concerned by her individual calling but had not been aware of its far reaching effects. The younger Elof is like the chokecherry tree–stubby, overshadowed by the cottonwoods, or the giants of other men, in whose shadow he works out his salvation. But Manfred points out that the town is named for people like Elof and not for the giant and wise cottonwoods.[12] Elof respects these trees: "Elof throws an admiring glance at the cottonwoods, the biggest tree growing in Siouxland. He remembered the Sioux Indian legend that a cottonwood's shade possessed an intelligence which, if properly prayed to, gave one guidance in the coming year's wanderings."[13]

Elof does become a kind of savior to his community--he hits a home run and settles down with a home town girl. Manfred's creates what Eliot calls "local flavor combined with unconscious universality" through "writing about what [he] knows thoroughly"[14]: "Siouxland." Overseeing each chapter is an omniscient narrator, perhaps the author himself, a kind of god who forecasts what will befall Elof. Early in his life Elof is wounded psychically when he survives a picnic landslide which slays all the children except Elof and one other. Manfred writes: "Once the blessing hands were laid on you, you were a chosen one, and up you had to rise, driving up out of obscurity and mediocrity, your simple mind popping and crackling with the dream of becoming great. . . ."[15]

Elof never does make himself into a worldly success. He refuses, as did McPherson, to take advantage of the poor and weak. When he returns home the second time, he sees himself as a type of Christ figure:

> I've been wandering through the land for many years now, ever since that picnic accident. I–or rather, Elof Lofblom died, and I, Christ Jesus, a spirit . . . took over the body of little Elof, the little Elof who had been a bit shortchanged on everything, the reason I took him over was to see if the strong were treating the humble and the meek with human love . . . for verily I say unto you, unless ye have not love and compassion in your heart for the least of these, then ye are wanting in the larger also.[16]

Elof had been sent to St. Comus Seminary to fulfill the dreams of "two old visionaries," his mother and old Domeny Hillich; he fails at the seminary and the university. He seems to be fulfilling the words of Job 18:16 his mother read the day he had left for the abbey: "His roots shall be dried up beneath, and above shall his branch be cut off."[17]

But Elof's branch is not cut off; he eventually comes home having overcome the world and his own fleshly desires. He returns concerned not only about himself, but also about his fellow man. He comes home to marry and begin his own branch of the family tree with his marriage to Gert. He name, Elof (blooming leaf) is apropos. And he joins a long line of males in his family tree, who procreate, the ancestors he envisioned when he returns home at the first of the book. Sitting at his father's table, while his father says grace, Elof contemplates: "With his eyes closed, still in the grip of the thought that he had just heard his eldfathers, all the way back to Adam chanting at the table."[18]

Elof, the tree who has not been overcome by what McPherson calls locusts of the world, devil and the flesh, represents the survival of the decent individnal in a family tree of other honorable individuals. The "flowering leaf," Elof manages to heal himself from the awful psychic wound of having survived the childhood accident while others perished. And he brings a dignity and a sanctity to his life by accepting his fate as a small town boy who is a "Siouxland" hero, not jnst because he once hit a home run, but because he is a noble human being.

In the close of the novel, the reader sees him leaning not on the cottonwoods for support, but on the chokecherry tree: "At the end of his turns he happened to bump into one of the outthrust black-knobbed limbs of the little tree, almost stnmbling. To steady himself, he pnt ont a freckled hand to it."[19]

Neihardt's biography of Black Elk reveals that the Oglala Sioux Holy Man conversed early in life with his "eldfathers," the grandfathers of his first vision. Like McPherson, Blaek Elk–frequently burdened with visions throughout his life, visions given him to help heal his people–emphasizes in words (similar to McPherson's) that he is only the conduit for the healing power: "Of course it was not I who cured. It was the power from the outer world, and the visions and ceremonies had only made me like a hole through which the power could come to the two-leggeds."[20] Black Elk nses the herb he saw in his early vision to heal.

Black Elk's first vision is preceded by an audible sacred calling. And like McPherson, who sought her vision and was overcome by a physical automatism, and the fietional Elof, who was thrown into seeking someone else's vision, Blaek Elk is also overeome by a physieal manifestation:

> While I was eating, a voice came and said: "It is time; now they are ealling you." The voice was so loud and elear that I believed it, and I thought I would just go where it wanted me to go. So I got right up and started. As I came out of the teepee, both my thighs began to hurt me, and suddenly it was like waking from a dream. . . .[21]

In that first vision he saw what he comes to call the Holy Tree:

> And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in one center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all, the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.[22]

The cankerworms of the white man's pursuit of Manifest Destiny, the great palmerworms army of the Calvary and land-hungry pioneers, begin to destroy his people. Black Elk who spent three years in his early twenties performing cures bewails his own impotence in bringing the vision to pass: "When I thought of my great vision, which was to save the nation's hoop and make the holy tree to bloom in the center of it, I felt like crying, for the sacred hoop was broken and scattered."[23] In an attempt to discover some secret that will heal the broken hoop, he joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Black Elk is a success in the white man's world of promotion and profit, much as McPherson was, but like Aimee, he begins to lose his way: "Afterwhile I got used to being there, but I was like a man who had never had a vision. I felt dead and my people seemed lost and I thought I might never find them again."[24] In his early vision he had seen two roads–the black road of struggle and hardship that runs west to east, and the good red road of happiness that runs north-south. At the crossing of these roads grew the tree of life, larger than Manfred's chokecherry tree, but like that tree a symbol of life.

Whereas Aimee relied heavily on staged evangelistic acting, Black Elk abandons it. When he returns to his people, he finds that the Ghost Dance religion has seized the countryside. In an attempt to reconnect himself with his mission of bringing the holy tree into flower, he joins in the dancing, which leads to involuntary movements and trance states, not unlike the automatisms of the pentecostals. Black Elk falls down into a trance. And though he does not speak in tongues, he sees the spotted eagle, analogous to Aimee's and Ezekiel's bird. In this Ghost Dance vision, Black Elk sees what might be described as a vision of a Christ figure–Wanekia. In his vision twelve men (Elof's chokecherry tree was surrounded by thirteen cottonwoods, and Aimee's circle held smaller circles with trees enclosed) are coming toward him. They lead him to the center of the circle where he sees the holy tree blooming:

> But that was not all I saw. Against the tree there was a man standing with arms held wide in front of him. I looked hard at him, and I could not tell what people he came from. He was not a Wasichu and he was not an Indian. His hair was long and hanging loose, and on the left side of his head he wore an eagle feather. His body was strong and good to see . . . and around him there was light. He spoke like singing: "My life is such that all earthly beings and growing things belong to me. Your father, the Great Spirit, has said this. You too must say this."[25]

The illustration of Wanekia by Standing Bear in the original version of *Black Elk Speaks* shows a man, arms outstretched, with the tree behind him; it appears as if the tree grows from him. Christ, who died on a tree in Christian beliefs, is associated here with the holy tree; Aimee saw a series of holy trees in her vision. Elof steadied himself not on the strong, wise cottonwoods of Sioux legend, but on the scrawny chokecherry tree. Christ on the tree is a symbol of the ancient mandala, man in the center of a four part consciousness, analogous to the four squares of Aimee's religion.

Later Black Elk relates that he should have depended solely on his first vision to complete his work and make the tree to flower again, but he says, "It is hard to follow one great vision in this world of darkness and of many changing shadows. Among those shadows men get lost." For a long while Elof wandered and Aimee eventually found her spiritual path disappearing in the tinseled wilderness of Los Angeles, but Black Elk works toward fulfilling his vision when he claims as a confederate John Neihardt. Neihardt records Black Elk's tree vision for the Sioux and for all who read his words. Neihardt's first title for the book was *The Tree That Never Bloomed*, but his publisher objected, and *Black Elk Speaks* gained its title from Neihardt's wife, Mona.[26] No one today would say that the Sioux tree is not beginning to flower. Recognized by Carl Jung for its disclosure of man at the mercy of archetypes, Black Elk's and Neihardt's book, published in 1932, gained first a cult following and then a wide literary audience. It has been reprinted many times, and the Sioux as well as many other Native American tribes have enjoyed a revival in tribal pride. The Lakota and their language have even been featured in an Academy-Award-winning motion picture, *Dances With Wolves*.

Have we come full circle from Crichton's dinosaurs to Kevin Costner's wolves? Might the reader expect a case to be built for John Dunbar as a Christ figure who begs forgiveness from God when he rides sacrificially, arms outstretched, across the big screen before what looks like hundreds of Rebels, their bullets unable to touch him? Does Hollywood, in the later spectacular but

spiritually withering style of a once flowering Aimee, intend that Dunbar is wearing one of Black Elk's ghost dance shirts? We could further explore the archetypal meeting between Dunbar and Stands with a Fist beneath what at first appears to be the only tree between St. Joseph, Missouri and the Badlands of South Dakota. Perhaps dinosaurs and wolves do not belong in the same circle.

Aimee saw a series of circled trees, each of them in a stage of death and rebirth. She called her vision and the sermon from the vision, "Lost and Restored."[27] Aimee, Black Elk and Elof all lost years to the locusts; yet the years were "restored." Their trees flowered once again. They have left behind their truths, their words, and though the writers come from different cultures, their symbol of the tree as sacred and meaningful in the sense of eternal life resonates in the reader at some unfathomable level. These authors leave a progeny of millions–from biographers to college professors to movie producers–fellow sojourners touched by their universal symbols, travelers who have been "excited into activity and applied with the germ of after-growth," and who may rest from time to time in the "Blessed Groves" the visionaries have created.

NOTES

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. I (Oxford, 1965), 149.

2. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critics and Other Writings* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 35.

3. Ibid., 54.

4. Ibid.

5. Daniel Mark Epstien, *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1993), 38.

6. Aimee Semple McPherson, *This Is That* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985), 49.

7. Ibid., 381-382. Joel 2:25. The circular picture encloses ten smaller circles, each encasing a tree. These trees represent one tree in stages of first losing its fruit and leaves to palmerworms, then locusts, cankerworms, and caterpillars, in that order in a clockwise direction. The tree then regains its full bloom in various stages until the tree is back again to stage one, the fully healthy tree, which Aimee called, "The Perfect Church" (picture page, no number, appears between pages 380 and 381).

8. Epstien, *Sister Aimee*, 322.

9. Ibid., 440.

10. Frederiek Manfred, *The Chokecherry Tree* (Albuquerque. University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 18.

11. Frederick Manfred was present in October 1993 when I read this paper at the Western Literatnre Association's Annual Conference at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas. After the presentation he said that he had seen Aimee McPherson lead a meeting at her Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, that he had been impressed by her attraetiveness. stature, and the impact of her dramatic personal presence. He was also impressed by the fact that he saw what he said was a healing. In December 1993 he wrote me: "Actually when I saw Aimee I was a little disgusted with her. A good-looking woman wasting her time with spirit-raising. And, she had brains. Too many rough moles around for her to be herself."

12. Ibid., 17.

13. Ibid., 25.

14. Eliot, *To Criticize*, 55.

15. Manfred, *The Chokecherry Tree*, 31.

16. Ibid., 226.

17. Ibid., 20.

18. Ibid., 19.

19. Ibid., 266.

20. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglalo Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 209.

21. Ibid., 21.

22. Ibid., 43.

23. Ibid., 218.

24. Ibid., 221.

25. Ibid., 249.

26. John G. Neihardt, "Introduction to the New Edition" in *When the Tree Flowered* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 3.

27. McPherson, *This Is That*, 380.