UNDER THE CANOPY

CONOR CAMPBELL
“A culture is no better than its woods”

W.H. Auden
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Dense islands of arboraceous clumps nestled in an expanse of meadow. I passed over chaparrals and through thickets, each one its own sheltered arcadia in a quiet place beyond civilisation. The forest I was heading towards, would frequently reappear on the horizon once I had climbed over a hill or passed through a copse or a bosk. The flatness of the meadow juxtaposed and complimented by the vertical verdancy I would soon enter. A pillared, mythological temple. The landscape around me fluctuated in one single point in time. The hills rise and fall, each fold of earth I navigated framed its own invitation.

I was very aware of the changing plane that I walked upon as it fluctuated in three dimensions, the hills were rising and falling, above and under the two dimensional plane that was my visual perspective. Each fold of earth I navigated framed its own perspective of the looming body of trees. Each grouping of trees loomed past the other, their distance defined by gradating shades of green.

The meeting point between meadow and tree was not as distinct and exact as I had expected it to be, it was greyness. Shrubs, bushes and small trees met the meadow long before the main body of forest. Eventually I met with a dense and seemingly impassable wall of trees. These trees are the branching components of the woods, the single components that make up a much larger and more complex organism that rests and roots itself in the soil. It lives and breathes as one entity, like the animals that sleep underneath its ceiling.
The bones of the forest are hidden in thicket and shrub. The dense exteriority that I had come across was not represented by a pillared, rhythmic façade of trunks. It did not give away its structural mysteries (its' skeleton) at first glance. It was hidden behind intricate (and hard to differentiate) variations of bush and vegetation. Although the odd tree trunk did spill out of the underbrush, ascending into the celestial canopy, branching out into its constituent beams, reaching out and holding up the verdant, floating green clouds above it. My eyes scanned for a way inside, looking for a break in the thickness. My presence was already noted by the wind, moving around the obstruction that was his corporeal being. If the moving air was light, the vacuum (created at the opposite side of where the wind had pushed against me) was my shadow. Eventually I found a break in the forest wall, an opening. I passed through.

Gradually I found myself enclosed in a fortified shelter, inside the darkest and thickest of noble halls. Motherly branches seemed to wrap around me; the wind could not find me now, but I could hear it searching, whispering to the forest. Looking back I noticed that the line of the horizon blinking through the trunks. A world that I had once been, flickered in between twigs and foliage, the fingers of the trees. I took the time to draw out a quick abstraction of my entrance into this environment. The vertical lines represented large trees, the dashed horizontal and vertical lines represented lower forms of growth that had canopies of their own at a different scale. The circles represented signs of animals life in the form of shelter, whether it was a burrough or nest, or a deliberate clearing and flattening of shrub. The spirals represented signs of death I had observed, which could have been anything from the scattering of feathers from an unlucky bird to a collection of fallen branches resting in between living pillars.
My passage through this world was determined mainly by diagonal obelisks of light spilling through from the canopy. A silent dialogue was at work between my instinctual thoughts and the unwritten (and yet certain) code of the natural world. There were no corners for me to cut here, only avenues of clearing to slip through. Time seemed to operate very differently in this place, I could feel and smell the myths that had been set here, thousands of years ago by an earlier culture of people. There were no paths here. Corridors and passages were defined by clearings and openings in the thickets, compounded and added to by the creatures living nearby.

On the periphery of my vision, a silent and unknown oscillation caught my attention. An ethereal family of deer floating through the spinneys and clumps between the trees. The thought that this forest sheltered animals added another dimension to the landscape for me, some resting under shrub or boscage, some under the roof of a fallen leaf resting on a delicate and complex lattice of fallen twigs and other forms of fallen organic matter, all symbols of death, and yet the compost of life. It reminded me of the importance of death here. The dead wood was acting as a nursery and shelter for tree seedlings, and as a form of shelter for all sizes and forms of life.

At a smaller scale, the dead timber acts as a home to micro-organisms and fungi, the nutrients slowly seep through the timber's resigned fabric, and are released back into the dark soil. The trees sat lightly on the ground, and yet stretched through its rich soil with their roots, like blind, desperate (yet completely at ease) hands reaching through compact, wet, fertile blackness. The canopy above was a landscape of its own, mirroring the rising and falling of the underlying terrain. I pulled my way up the hill, a carpetting of fern and moss underneath softened my cumbersome and awkward climb. They left a record of my transient existence here.
I noticed a light further ahead, glimmering through where the leaves would allow it, I knew it to be a glade, for I knew there was no end to the forest in that particular direction. I followed the light, and eventually found a suitable clearing. Branches framed the forest opening, revealing its light endured green life. I passed through the vista.

I had left a realm of pillars and enclosure to one of openness and vibrancy. The light illuminated the growth, an otherworldly green radiance. The sky was framed by the hole in the ceiling of the canopy. I was in a great green, Hellenic courtyard, encircled by pillars, framing an obscure darkness (that lingered at the edge), holding up a great green roof. Hums and buzzes and chirps of insects and birds, the smell of herbs and flowers, the colours of many different, intermingling species of flora and vegetation. The overwhelming sense of teeming life. The air was lighter, my mind and lungs were released of any tension. I set up my tent and settled just outside of the grove, under a great oak tree. I imagined druids moving through the trees, and entering into their sacred oaken grove, chanting in deep voices. That night I slept in an abode of trees.
The word druid (Latin plural druidae) derives from the root dru, an old Celtic word for "oak". One etymology of the word comes from "dru-wid", which translates as "knower of oak trees".

From as far back as we can trace, trees have held a sacred place in our collective religious and mythical imagination. They have inspired vivid stories that have passed down through countless generations, and held a strong spiritual significance to many cultures. For the Celts, the trees were spiritual channels. The trees that were held as the most sacred were usually those of an unusually large height or particular beauty. Sometimes they were revered for their unique physical characteristics, or because they provided the worshippers with a wide range of materials.

The Oak was considered sacred by almost every culture that encountered it. The druids conducted many of their sacred rituals within oaken groves. Anything that grew from the tree was considered to be sacred. Acorns gathered at night held the greatest fertility powers. Oak, ash and thorn were considered the most sacred of trees, the fruit bearing trees were also held in high regard, apple, hazel followed by alder, elder, holly and willow.
These trees represented doorways to other realms. They believed that the oak tree provided shelter and protection when passing through to these realms. The presence of their ancestors still haunted the very woods they worshipped. The same trees, untouched by the mortality of time that is the shortness of human existence.

At night, they listened to the rustling of leaves and the sounds of the wren for divinatory messages from their tree gods, by burning the leaves of the oak, they were purifying the air. They would make their wands from only yew, oak and apple trees. The ash was also regarded as a highly sacred tree, especially in Ireland. There were several incidences recorded in Irish history where people refused to cut down ash trees, even when timber was a scarcity. The fact that these superstitions have carried down through our culture to this day, is very telling of how prominent these beliefs must have been to the people that once frequented these indigenous woods (most of which we have lost).

Ireland at this time was covered in forestry. Each woodland, however small, would have had its own unique character. This character would have been composed of different memories and stories, colours and smells, flora and fauna. They were left to grow and develop as separate entities for thousands of years, without being cut back or cultivated. They would have been very different to many of the forests that we see in Ireland today, which are usually only recently planted (in the last hundred or so years). Our earliest cultural memories are rooted in our indigenous woods. Many of our beloved fairy tales and mythologies are set against the backdrop of the enchanted forest, which is usually represented as a place of danger or a place of refuge. The protagonist in these stories is usually unfamiliar with the forest when they first enter it.

Civilisation defines itself against the otherness of the forest. The forest represented the barbaric darkness and muck of our collective past which we seemed to successfully pull ourselves out from on to the solidity of a stone paved floor. We did not look back at what we had emerged from, we simply moved forward, and attempted to incorporate it into our lives by means of control and agricultural and commercial production. To control its chaotic nature of the forest by weaving it into the ordered texture of our cities. The forest now defined the edge of our existance, not our encompassing familiarity, which became flat and ordered. The true wildwood was lost long before we began to record our own history, in the Neolithic period. Here, in the infancy of our development, stories and ideas were shared through myths, our description and perception of the world was a little less literal, and perhaps more surreal and magical in its conception. But perhaps that is as much to do with its journey through time at the mercy or its constantly altering mediums, as it is their actual nature as stories. Myths in almost every country look back affectionately to a forested world.

"a sylvan fringe of darkness defined the limits of its cultivation, the margins of its cities, the boundaries of its domain, but also the extravagance of its imagination"

Robert Pogue Harrison
Much like the Germanians and Celts, the people of Classical Greece had venerated groves sacred to Artemis and Apollo, as well as groves dedicated to their cults of fertility, the hunt and the Tree Oracle. These traditions were later transferred to Roman culture. Both cultures imagined a wooded, rocky realm known as “Arcadia”. Arcadia was a romantic and spiritual vision of pastoralism and harmony with nature, home to mythological creatures. The very fig tree Romulus and Remus were said to have suckled under was moved to the Roman forum and quickly became a site of devotion. By the time Rome had reached the height of its power, the forest no longer held any real cultural significance in the psyche of the people. It was common for people to contrast the humble beginnings of a “timbered” Rome to the empire of stone and steel that it had become.

In direct contrast to the Romans, the Germanians lived a life of “timbered virtue”. Rather than working the land, they preferred to hunt and gather and take from the spoils of war. Germania at the time, was covered in dense, impenetrable forestry. An endless landscape of primeval forestry, untouched and uncultivated. Tacitus observed that none of the tribes lived in walled cities. He was appalled that their houses were not contiguous with one another and that they were not joined by streets or terraces.

“They live separated and scattered, according as spring water, emadow or grove appeals to each man... Everyone keeps a clear space around his house”
The Germans believed it to be degrading to confine the worship of gods behind masonry walls. They believed it to be arrogant to represent the gods with human faces and figures. Like the Celts, they believed that their deities resided in the natural world that surrounded them. They honoured their gods in holy groves. To the Roman Legionaries who were stationed beyond the Rhine, the ancient woodland must have been both terrifying and awe inspiring, there were no real forests remaining in Italy at this time in latter years of Rome’s empire.

In 9AD, an alliance of German tribes ambushed and destroyed three Roman legions and their auxiliaries, deep within the heart of the Teutoberg forest. Wave after wave of savage spearmen crashed into the thin and stretched Roman line, while being pelted by an endless supply of javelins from the darkness. Despite several successful raids east of the Rhine made by the Roman army following the battle, the Romans never again attempted to conquer Germanian territory. The battle is considered Rome’s greatest defeat, and one of the most decisive battles in history.
The house I grew up in, sits in the centre of a large field (roughly an acre in area) surrounded by undulating agricultural land used mainly for tillage just outside of Cappamore (which is an anglicisation of the Gaelic name “An Ceapach Mhor” meaning the large garden), a rural village to the east of County Limerick. The land was inherited by my father from his father. It sits to the side of the Dromsallagh road (meaning dirty ridge in Gaelic), an old famine road.

A wall (a metre and a half in height) stands between the front garden and the road out of Cappamore. The wall is supported along its length by a backing rank of leylandii trees, which rise above the wall, providing the front with a good degree of privacy from cars. Beyond the wall lies a flat lawn that once held a dense shrub and tree bed, which has since been flattened for practical reasons (to my objection and disgust as a child). The site as a whole has trees and tall ditches separating it from the surrounding fields on its other flanks, providing privacy and relative shelter from the wind. The flat lawn in the front lies directly in front of the house, just beyond the tarmac driveway. To the sides of the site, two densely vegetated, deciduous (mainly) groves. In the back there is an orchard, a vegetable garden, herb garden, berries, chickens, ponds, shrubberies, timber sheds and scattered trees of various species. Beyond the eastern grove, our site meets our neighbours. This meeting is softened by a densely treed and swamp area, which is ironically enough, the most biodiverse area in our site while being the most underused.

“The Magic Door“, a passageway through a thick leylandii division between the eastern grove to the vegetable/ chicken patch.
As a child, the areas of the garden I had been most drawn to, were the parts that were left to grow wilder than usual, and the parts that I found the least interesting were the areas that were regularly cut back and trimmed into easily defined abstract features in the garden. I have a particular distaste for flat lawns, and straight-line cut hedges. Both can be seen in countless gardens throughout Ireland. The moments that are most interesting for me are when there is a sense of immersion and a freedom given for things to grow beyond the bounds of straight lines and expectations. Do the majority of gardeners today see the wildness of their garden as a negative reflection of themselves, to be seen and judged by their neighbours and by the commuters on the road? Or is it just a compulsion for control over our natural surroundings? A fear of the unpredictability of anything outside of the artificial.

Whenever I have questioned my father on his removal or trimming of the wilder areas of the garden, he usually justifies it with a practical reason. A shrub bed takes time to weed on a regular basis, so either it is kept under control by being trimmed occasionally or it is removed entirely. We have six dogs living within the bounds of our garden. To keep them from straying out on to the road, or into the neighboring fields around our house, we have installed an invisible boundary. An electric fence planted around the edges of our site. When the dogs get too close to the edges, they hear a warning signal from their collars. I have noticed that this prevents them from interacting with the denser and more interesting areas of foliage on our site, which usually hug the edges of the garden.
The vegetation that they do get to interact with, they use as a form of shelter from the rain, and as a place to sleep under at night (preferring to sleep under a canopy of shrubs and modestly sized trees, than in their own timber houses. They create their own infrastructural tunnels of passage under these canopies by their consistent movement through the paths of least resistance. A collection of shrubs and low-lying trees to us, a forest to them.

The dogs also use the shrubberies as places to observe the comings and goings of the family and visitors to the site, framing points of entry onto the site with openings in the foliage. Their point of observation is usually clawed into a dipped area for them to sit in. They use the foliage to remain unseen, while still being able to observe. Instead of flat lawns, tarmac and overly decorative/trimmed shrubberies, I would have it so that my dogs would be able to disappear into their own insular world, while still being able to look out into the exterior with ease. They would come and go as they please. I have also seen badgers, hedgehogs, foxes, cats, shrews, mice and other mammalian species make our site their home, at least temporarily. Although I am sure there are many small mammals living more permanently on the site that I have not been made aware of. There is also a large variety of insect and bird life present, including my fathers bees, which are usually present in most areas of the garden during the summer, as they venture from their hive in the eastern grove.
Herman De Vries's work "The Meadow" is a 4000 metre square patch of land, purchased by De Vries in 1986. It rests on a heavily industrialised agricultural landscape. The patch is made up of rough grasses, light shrub and young trees. De Vries and his wife also collected seeds along embankments and paths and the edge of the forest that had survived the farmer's machines and manure sprays, and planted them in their meadow. This gave dozens of species a chance to establish themselves within the meadow.

After nearly two years, the meadow became quite distinct from the field that surrounded it. The grass had not been fertilised, so had remained short, and grew in large tufts in various places. A multilayer canopied environment had also developed. Moles had burrowed into the earth and a large variety of insects had already made the meadow their home. They were quickly followed by birds and small animals, who found ideal living conditions in the hedges. The patch extends out into acres of gently undulating arable land while a forest sits at its back.
The woodland at its back is but a pale reflection of what it was. A diverse mosaic of meadow and forestry was once a prominent feature of the land around Eschenau. Like in most of Western Europe, the agricultural land was soon industrialised into an efficient and highly productive system. There was no longer room for the diversity of the local environments. Hedgerows, copses and small orchards were reduced dramatically or removed entirely, as well as many of the indigenous species that were once sustained there.

The agricultural land for miles around Eschenau is now inanimate and uniform, it had been turned into an efficient system of highly managed, high yield, cash crop production. De Vries wrote an entry in the Eschenau journal which showed the original field names before they went out of use. He had gotten the information from old maps and from the memories of an old farmer he had met. At the time of De Vrie's purchase of the meadow, the patch was in the same denatured state as the surrounding farmland which had been "fertilised" through treatment with herbicides and pesticides, allowing the farmers to harvest several separate harvests of commercial hay in a year. De Vries was disturbed by the industrial state of agricultural occupation of the landscape and commented on how strange the word "fertilised" was in relation to the use of pesticides and herbicides.

"fertility is something different from what you achieve with artificial or chemical manure."
In the Local Eschenau Journal that De Vries had written in, the only other text in it repeated the word "unity" in different colours, referring to the natural unity and diversity that once thrived in each field and woodland before the change. No field was the same as the other, this was also expressed in De Vrie's mentioning of all of the original field names, as mentioned earlier. The names and identities had been lost, under a single sweeping sheet of monotony and "unity". De Vries stressed that true natural unity can only be achieved through diversity.

The Meadow is a rectangular piece of natural reality cantilevering out into a flat green sea of homogenous agronomy, a living wedge driving into an empty flatness, the forest as its base. De Vries saw it only as a work of nature, and not a work of art. It should therefore be seen as a microcosm of the natural complexity that is inherent in the landscape around us. The potential for naturalisation and reclamation of the environment is always there to be tapped in.

Through the passage of time, de Vries intends for the meadow plot to revert completely back to the natural cycle and become a plethora of bio-diverse interactions. What is now still only a humble beginning, still less than thirty years in development will ultimately climax in a dense, multilayer, canopied forest. Herman's meadow has become, as many of the local farmers are more than aware, a physical representation of a viable alternative to the rigid and conventionalised program of cultivation their endowed agricultural processes subject nature to. The farmers watch the meadow with suspicion, as it vehemently contradicts their practices. But I suspect there is also an understanding and appreciation there. The meadow has become a window into the former, a past method of treating with nature. A window and reflection into the history and possible future of the region. It has become an expression and physical extension of the love that De Vries has for the local forest of Steigerwald.
The Limerick depicted in the following drawings is one that has been heavily reforested over its last century. Oak, ash, alder, birch, yew and many other indigenous species now cover large areas of the city, growing in and out of the original framework of the old buildings.

A rich bio-diversity can be easily seen in the city. Foxes, deer, badgers and many other species are often seen wandering through green roads and into the next covering of canopy. Wild fruit and vegetables populate the forests and old streets.

The majority of the inhabitants of the city live in large steel and timber towers, which are scattered throughout the remains of the city fabric (some growing off of the old buildings, some standing alone). These towers are directly open to the forest at their base, where there is an intimate relationship to the timber and food produced between the trees. On the higher floors, food is grown using hydroponics and aquaponics, these technologies are responsible for a large quantity of the food produced and eaten by the inhabitants. They also sell the food they produce in the building at the base of their towers to visitors. The majority of people live within these towers (usually at the top), however a minority choose to live under the canopy, within the forest. These people are called "nemophilists".
“NEMOPHILIST”

A haunter of the woods

A transient structure built within the reforested landscape. Built from the timber produced around it. One is able to look clearly out at the forest from the comfort of their abode. The structure is built with the idea that it is an impermanent occupation of the forested landscape. When it has served its purpose (whether it be as a form of shelter or as a workshop etc.) it can be abandoned and allowed to decay back into the fabric of its context.
B I B L I O G R A P H Y


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