

**RMIT University**

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**Understory: writing and building**

Abstract:

Exploiting the traditional association of rhetoric and architecture, this chapter argues that a different kind of writing (the *silva*) might express a different kind of dwelling place. A literary term for miscellany, *silva* also means wood, and the concrete context of the essay is the colonial fate of the Irish whose territorial and cultural subjugation was linked to the destruction of the woods said to define their cultural identity. A recent residency in Galway weighed these mythopoetic identifications against overwhelming evidence of environmental alienation, and asked what discourse or under story, could begin the process of ‘psychic reforestation.’ A first step might involve re-reading key episodes in the emergence of Irish national consciousness: the ambiguous heritage of Lady Gregory, Coole House and W.B. Yeats is discussed. The essay also revisits a past ‘sculpture in woodland’ program and documents a contemporary social artwork made by C.J. Conway. Community interest generated by her act of tree repair created a place where psychic homelessness, the colonial legacy of dispossession, could be addressed therapeutically.

Biographical note:

Paul Carter is a writer and artist in Melbourne. His most recent books are: *Decolonising Governance: archipelagic thinking* (Routledge, 2018) and *Amplifications: poetic migration, auditory memory* (Bloomsbury, 2019). Research for this article was supported by the Moore Institute, IUE Galway through a visiting fellowship (May 2018) and by the School of Architecture and Urban Design, RMIT University through a personal research grant allocation. One of his current public art projects, called ‘Eloquent Forest’ is a collaboration between his design studio, Material Thinking, and Ramus Illuminations, to create an immersive audio and kinetic lighting environment at the new Cato Square, Prahran (Melbourne). Paul is Professor of Design (Urbanism), RMIT University.

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## 1

Writing and building are consistently compared: the art of rhetoric is classically cultivated through an art of memory that exploits architectural associations.<sup>1</sup> The complementarity of story and storey, as we might say, the seeming fit of narrative logic and territorial division and enclosure is a powerful legitimiser of colonisation. Eloquence, picturesque organisation of the view and the hierarchical order of society go together. All of this is well-known and much discussed (Schama 1995; Carter 1987): less frequently entertained is the idea that an alternative writing might produce an alternative architecture and, as a corollary, a society differently related both internally and in relation to its external environment. This thought has repeatedly occurred to me since I became interested in Francis Bacon's lost compilation, the *Sylva sylvarum*, 'a Wood of Experiments and Observations; or a Collection of Materials, ready procured, and laid up for forming particular Histories of Nature and Art, in the Author's inductive manner' (De Bruyn 2001: 354). 'Sylva sylvarum' translates as 'wood of woods,' but there is more to it, as Bacon alludes here to the ancient identification of wood with *hyle* or stuff, the *prima materia* out of which the universe is built (De Bruyn 2001: 354). Planning a new (inductively-based) science, Bacon recognized that he needed to cultivate a new way of writing: the anti-rhetorical *silva* – a miscellaneous compilation of quotations, aphorisms, observations and various fragments, marked by their lack of formal organization (see Rusu & Luthy 2017: 171-202) – whose architectural counterpart might be a builder's yard and its assortment of building material.

Here, though, a problem arose: although Bacon championed an observational method that avoided premature theorizing, he still hoped to construct *something*. Wood, the mere distribution of matter, must, he thought, contain an organizing principle, a meta-wood, if you like, or informing principle, which his 'particular Histories' would progressively clarify – much in the same way as the woodman cuts paths through the forest, progressively reducing the wilderness to surveyable lots and provinces. An architectural nostalgia informed Bacon's literary innovation, one quite consistent with his other career as a theorist of colonization, where, too, trees proved to be useful rhetorically – 'Planting of countries, is like planting of woods' (Bacon 1892: 139). But reunification eluded him, it seems: 'his lordship (who thinketh he serveth to be an architect in this building),' Bacon's editor wrote, complains of being 'forced to be a workman and a labourer, and to dig and burn the brick [as] he knoweth, that except he do it, nothing will be done' (De Bruyn 2001: 354). The metaphors of brick and wood used here are less mixed than they appear: wood in this context is *hyle* and brick-making corresponds to one of Bacon's six principles of transformation. The secret process of thought, induction, might correspond to arefaction, or drying out, a process that, following Bacon's metaphor, involved a double dessication, first, of wood laid up to dry and burnt in the brick kiln, then of clay accordingly baked into brick (Bacon 1857: 339).

Bacon was forced to be a workman, not an architect, because the materials he was collecting did not want to become houses; like the poet's spells or incantations that elude semiotic subjugation and rhetorical regimentation, the timber he planned to gather retained the germ of independent growth; the external transformation Bacon planned for it was thwarted by a certain creative recalcitrance in the grain itself. 'A City is Not a Tree,' architect and theorist Christopher Alexander opined fifty years ago, invoking a 'tree-like thought' said to favour the logic of either-or branching, a Baconian reduction he contrasted with the 'semi-lattice' of the living city, characterised by 'overlap, ambiguity, multiplicity of aspect'; in short, an altogether 'more complex view of structure' (Alexander 1965: 58-62). Of course, there was a double irony here: first, the character of the living city evoked here is the character of the *living* tree; second,

Alexander effectively embraced this idea in his later writing - his notion of design as a web of relationships remarkably anticipates Peter Wohlleben's 'woodwide web', while the inventor of the wiki, Ward Cunningham, cites Alexander's pattern language as influential in his design of the wiki (Wiki). In short, a different conception of *hyle* produces a different architecture of information. Max Jammer argues that 'the notion of *quantitas materiae* as implying a principle of conservation – in spite of its importance in later Scholastic philosophy [and in Baconian thinking] – is foreign to the original Aristotelian conceptual scheme,' one focused on *physis*, 'the phenomena of growth and becoming.' Here, the association of *hyle* with 'wood', 'forest' or 'timber' regains its connection to '*mater* (the source of growth)' (Jammer 1961: 19). In this case, *hyle*, matter, is inevitably connected to emergent form, and both to *eidos*, an idea of the same: there is written into matter, as it were, the reason of its own growth and transformation, its information.<sup>2</sup>

Beneath the over-story, the history of the laborious raising of the edifice of the New Science, is an understory, one of sylvan resistance to subalternship, a history that might be tree-like in the sense of the *silva*, composed like the forest of a web of inter-dependent lives, whose 'foliages', while regionally distinct, meet and interleave over the paths in-between them. A *sylva sylvarum* that respected this idea of information would incorporate its autopoietic efflorescence and complexification into its own structural and thematic diversification, and map, perhaps with special affection, the passages between thickets of contiguous, but apparently unrelated, matter (history). Collection would focus less on the laying up of dead branches, much more on the gathering of the margins, and the evidence collecting there of growth. Such a literary development would be comparable to the true 'meditation' that Jean-Toussaint Delsanti recommends, that takes into account 'the movement of discourse, to mediate what is left out rather than merely exclude it.' The 'multi-layered discourse' he recommends - remarkably like Alexander's 'semi lattice' – 'with layers that are at once horizontally distinct and vertically interconnected' incorporates the self-inscription of the margin:

the margin is never silent, and that it inscribes itself upon itself (marks itself), organising itself into a series of 'writings' ... I call writing anything which, as it is produced, leaves a trace: falling rain; a drifting leaf; an utterance; a natural catastrophe; an assassination; theft by a pickpocket; an encounter; a thunderbolt; a firedamp explosion; the glimpse of a face; a sitting rabbit; an uprising; a phrase; the sound of a voice, etc. (Delsanti 2004: 62)

Among these 'writings' would undoubtedly be the trace left by cutting down the wood.

## 2

In April 2018 I visited Ireland to collect materials for a project about the impact of deforestation on Irish culture. I travelled with artist and partner C.J. Conway, visiting a number of woodlands notable for their cultural associations or remnant biodiversity, including Tomnafinnogue Wood (Co. Wicklow), a 20<sup>th</sup> Century plantation with remnant 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> Century coppices and scrub woods); the mixed indigenous and plantation estate at Devil's Glen (Co. Wicklow) and the Coole-Garryland Nature Reserve, whose silviculture owes much to the Gregory family. Deforestation in Ireland goes hand in hand with plantation. When Bacon compared the establishment of English colonies to the planting of woods, he ignored a material corollary: writing in the context of James I's plans to confiscate and colonise Ulster, his suggestion that 'with the harp of Orpheus' the king would cast out 'desolation and barbarism' glossed over the double displacement involved.<sup>3</sup> The nature of this can be guessed from the following remark: 'There was a proverb in the sixteenth century that the Irish could never be tamed while the leaves were on the trees' (Maxwell 1940: 106). While this expression foreshadowed physical

terror – ‘during the Elizabethan wars large areas of wood were destroyed by the English soldiery because, like mountains and bogs, they harboured Irish rebels’ (Maxwell 1940: 106) – it also implied psychic demoralization: ‘Where now is the sheltering wildwood/ That we in our youth have known?/ Oh gone are the groves of our childhood/And even the birds are flown’ (‘Caoine Cill Chais’ 1927). In other words, the ‘planting of forests’ signified in a colonial context a double clearing away, of both human and non-human Indigenous growth or *hyle*. In reality, the new ‘forests’ of loyal Protestant subjects would not inhabit woodlands but clearings.

The campaign to root out the Irish from their dwelling places was poetic as well as political and military. As a weapon of empire, the harp of Orpheus was deployed against the holders of forest wisdom, the bards. In his lengthy and informative memorandum ‘A View of the Present State of Ireland’ (1596), in which he recommended the repression of the Irish language and prohibition of Bardic composition, Edmund Spenser lamented that poetry savouring of ‘sweete witt and good invencon,’ which the poets have ‘sprinckled with some prettye flowers of their own natural devise’, should be ‘abused, to the gracing of wickedness and vice, which would with good usage serve to bewtifie and adorne virtue’ (Spenser 1997-2019). The subtext, shared with Bacon, is that this is a people who have handed over ‘the harp of David’ to ‘the evil spirit of superstition’ (Spenser 1997-2019). The consequence of identifying dwelling with clearing, and both with speaking and writing in English, was to establish the future struggle for Irish identity and sovereignty equally in the reclamation of a lost architecture – as a spokesperson for the present day Woodland League reflects, ‘We are a forest people without a forest’ (The Woodland League) – and of a censored voice, one whose recovery, incidentally, depended usually on fleeing from the parson-surveilled hearth and hiding once more in the forest (comprehending here all the ‘outside’ not yet enclosed): as Hebridean folksong collector Alexander Carmichael well understood – ‘I induced a man to come to the lee of a knoll to tell me a tale,’ and so on (Carmichael 1900: xxii). So-called ‘home’, by contrast might signify ‘enforced exile to a new place, the English language.’<sup>4</sup>

Another fatal subtlety should be noted, the identification of the ‘clearing’ with a new public sphere exclusively reserved to English and English ways. ‘The new schools, the pro-English clergy, the influence of the landlords and agents, as well as the political leaders, the use of English in the law-courts, at gatherings and public meetings’ combined to drive Irish inwards and outwards, toward a communication that was secret or associated with being beyond the pale (O Danachair 1947: 68). The destruction of the forests, the enclosure of common land and the generalized clearance of the land, particularized in the Scottish ‘Clearances’ swept over the Indigenous countryside, but did not entirely ‘tear their identity from all places’ or ‘cut off the entail of feeling’ (Davis 1843: 89). At the same time, the colonial propaganda associating ‘the mother tongue’ with ‘stupidity and victimhood’ (Neville 2001: 90) presumably produced a certain cultural schizophrenia – which, on our language as woodland dwelling place thesis, would also express itself environmentally. According to Joep Leerssen, ‘*native Ireland had no public space*’ (Leerssen 2002: 31). Prior to the Catholic Emancipation, ‘For social concourse, there were Holy Wells and other worship landscapes like Lough Derg or Croagh Patrick, or certain religious, semi-ruinous vestiges of pilgrimage with Round Towers like Clonmacnoise or Kildare’ (Leerssen 2002: 29). Now, the discourse of these marginal places was not translatable: it existed ‘off the grid’ and belonged to a pre-Ordnance Survey environment which Leerssen identifies with De Valera’s ‘Hidden Ireland’ characterised, amongst other things, by the ‘inaccessibility of print’ (Leerssen 2002: 31).

Shortly after establishing ourselves on the Ragoon Estate, west of Galway City, Conway and I drive to Clonmacnoise. Two crosses on display in the visitor centre are strikingly different. The ‘Celtic’ North Cross is carved with intertwined vegetable and stitchwork motifs, and has a crosslegged figure said to represent Cernunnos; the Christian Cross of the Scriptures is

interpreted as showing the early saints Ciarán and Diarmait jointly holding a cross or, possibly, the foundation post of the church – the design might as easily represent two men clasping a tree. Outside, on the ledge (all that remains of the east wall of the so-called Temple Ciorán), I notice a scatter of broken twigs. More are scattered on the floor where the altar once stood; there is another twig hoard outside the west wall. Are these deposits significant, parts of a healing ritual (like the rags tied to hawthorns at the cloughtie wells hereabouts)? Later in the day we drive to the Coole Estate, past Gort on the other side of Galway. There, it is surprisingly difficult to get information about Mary Sheridan, the Irish-speaking Catholic woman who introduced Lady Gregory to the *seanachái*, the oral tradition of Irish story-telling. The disappearance of Coole House came to me as a shock when I visited the Estate for the first time in 2013: afterwards I wrote a poem about it in which a phrase from *Mrs Dalloway* was embedded: ‘Men must not cut down the trees,’ writes the shell-shocked Septimus (Woolf, 1996, 28). ‘But they did: I mean cut down the trees. All/ Your fostered children hewn. The savagery of/ History’s revenge: ersatz armies of pine,/Ghoulis round the leveled plinth of Coole House,/ the astonishment of the complicit grass’ (Carter 2013).

### 3

Walking about the housing estates of Ragoon where we are billeted, we are struck by the brutal treatment of trees and hedges. The chainsaw attack on street trees, property-bordering hedgerow shrubs, even simple flowering cherry trees offering modest shelter in a schoolyard bears no relationship to conventional economies of tidiness. These suburban tree survivors have, one feels, been deliberately mutilated. The kind of vandalism associated with juvenile delinquency has been domesticated. Along the margins of concrete aprons, front yards feature limbless stumps or ruthlessly dismembered trunks, as if proprietorship is proportional to the violence it might unleash. When I take a photograph of one of these tortured forest ruins, an occupant shouts from the upper story window that I am trespassing. While the statement is not true, it seems symptomatic of an insecurity. When every natural feature has been cleared away, what remains to be confiscated? Discussing Irish life in the eighteenth century, Constantia Maxwell captured the consequences of insecurity of tenure in a memorable observation: ‘the peasantry themselves often destroyed young trees, being afraid that the growth of timber might raise the value of their holdings, which were held on miserably short leases’ (Maxwell 1940: 107). In a curious neo-colonialist move, land title is tied to tree destruction. Ragoon is a sylvan cemetery, illustrating Patrick Sheeran’s remark that the importance of place in Irish culture ‘has little or nothing to do with tending, cultivating, enhancing, or otherwise materially affecting the immediate environment ... the places themselves are allowed to go to wrack and ruin’ (Sheeran 1988: 192-193). A topophilia for certain semi-mythologised ‘residual landscapes’ coexists with an experience of suburbanisation that produces an environmental alienation characterised as topophobia (Sheeran 1988: 198).



Illustration 1

Conway has noticed a tree stump in the Ragoon Road (Illustration 1) (Conway 2018). Formerly one of a row of street trees planted between pavement and retaining front yard wall along the south side of the street. Two feet high, 60 cms in diameter, its former glory can be guessed from the airy, leafy sycamore trees fifteen metres either side. One afternoon, she begins applying copper leaf to the stump's circular table top (Illustration 2).



Illustration 2

The activity quickly attracts behind-the-curtains scrutiny. Conway is performing a 'healing action': as she later explained, 'Copper leaf was affixed to the wound site of the tree forming a bandage. This act formed a healing on several levels. Materially, copper protects the wound site. As it breaks down, it naturally enriches the soil surrounding the tree improving growing conditions for vegetation and trees. Metaphysically, copper is linked to Venus, love, beauty, warmth and harmonious relationships' (Conway 2018). Lacking this esoteric protection, I am keen to disarm any hostility and knock on the nearest door. What, I ask, is known about a removal that has rendered their front yard shelterless, even in this Irish May, uncomfortably hot? The tree has been recently removed, comes the reply, the householder adding, as if it is mere speculation, that it may have been damaging the wall. I inspect the entirely symbolic fortress wall, a roughly plastered two-course breeze block construction, slightly buckled against the tree stump. But biophilic outrage aside, it makes no sense: so long as stump and

root stock remain, no wall repair is possible. The sentence the Galway City Council has executed on the tree is without practical function; it appears to be a pure act of revenge.

In my seminar about the project, I described what I had seen, and speculated that the environmental alienation on display had a cultural explanation. I cited the blind poet Antoine Ó Raifteiri (1779-1835), praising the trees of his home, County Mayo ('There is every sort of timber that it were fit to put down there') (Hyde 1970: 101) and the story Lady Gregory tells in her *Book of Saints and Wonders* about 'Aedh King of the Oakwood', who had so great a love for Doire the plain of the oakwood, 'and the cutting of the oak trees went so greatly against him, that he could not find a place for his church... He thought nothing worse than this desecration': 'Though there is fear on me of death and of hell, I will not hide it that I have more fear of the sound of an axe over in Doire' (Gregory 1906: 21). An English woman in the audience took exception to the drift of my remarks. She was involved in community replanting efforts. Attempts to revive Irish (language) were purely political, only fuelling social division. But the symbolic landscape is surely more complex. The distinction between culture and ideology is often obscure: I thought of Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell's 'monster meetings' in the 1840s where 'Irish people liked to carry boughs, branches and sometimes whole trees as they marched in processions. Newspaper accounts typically described monster meeting parades as presenting the appearance of "moving forests"' (Owens 1994). Or, take a politicised campaign much closer to home: our residency in Ireland coincided with the abortion vote, characterised by a pro-life media campaign that Conway interpreted in terms of patriarchy's fear of the sacred feminine. Misogyny and silviphobia are culturally twinned. The Christian church colonised the Irish tree spirits, the water spirits and the earth. As it could not usurp the powers of the wise woman, it continues to demonise her. This is consistent with studies I have made in Australia. In fact, the most explicit identification of the Irish *cailleach* or Wise Woman with the Wood occurs not in Irish poetry but in the lyrics of Australian poet, John Shaw Neilson. 'The Woman of Ireland' ('Sometimes she would say that the angels did stay at the door/ And sometimes she spoke to the fairies seen long before') (Neilson 2003: 911) is also characterized as 'The Woman of the Forest.'<sup>5</sup> From an eco-feminist perspective, our English immigrant tree planter, unlanguage or not, was well on her way to being more Irish than the anglicized Irish.

Back on the Ragoon Road, another resident from a few doors down pauses to watch the copper application. What, I ask, does she know about the tree's removal? It surprised her, she said; but far more surprising is the fact that, though she regularly visits her neighbours with the (mildly) buckled wall, the topic of the tree's chain-sawing has evidently not been raised. How old do you think these trees are, I ask? 'O, thousands of years,' she hazards. I engage another neighbour a few doors away, who identifies himself as a horticulturalist and offers the professional opinion that the trees date from the early 1960s. As to the felling, he is puzzled and without an explanation. The stump stands perhaps 30 metres from his driveway, but he has not walked along the pavement to look at it. I have the impression that neighbours would interpret this as trespass. Activity in the public domain is subject to private surveillance, while its acts of violence are regarded with tacit approval. A similar cone of silence was encountered elsewhere. Dressing a second site of sacrifice on the Ragoon Estate, Conway reported:

an 8-year-old boy came out and helped me with the oak stump 'because it was more fun than playing his video game' ... other neighbours came out and discussed the tree. A 75-year-old retiree who cares for the garden surrounds even though they are Council property, a Nigerian woman who missed the trees of her country, a 17-year old girl fascinated by the vocation of artist ... and hopeful that 'artist' can actually be an occupation. Everyone remembered the oak and how large it was, how old it must've been. Nobody was consulted about its removal.

Everyone assumed it was because it was ‘interfering with the wall’. (Conway 2018: Illustration 3)

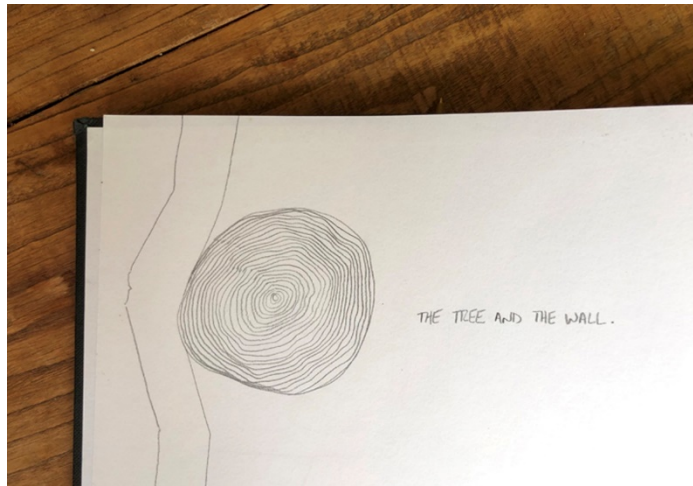


Illustration 3

#### 4

In her library at Coole House, Lady Gregory takes down her copy of John Evelyn’s *Silva*; reflecting on his comment – dating from the mid-seventeenth century – that oak planting is in decline, she writes, ‘Yet the little seedlings come up without human aid, and the old people tell me that the life of such will by dint of toughness and longevity outlast the world’ (Gregory 1970: 20). Coole House where, across thirty years, Lady Gregory reforested the world: best known for her folklore research and her plays, and for her influence on writers as diverse as Synge, Yeats, O’Casey and Joyce, her main avocation was the planting of trees – ‘Books “nearest her mind” and trees “nearest her heart”’ as O’Casey noted (Gregory 1970: 8). In an odd concatenation of cultural and environmental interests, it was the custom for her literary guests – Yeats called them her ‘swallows’ – to carve their initials into the trunk of the Autograph tree, a great copper beech near the House (Gregory 1970: 9). The House will pass away but the dwelling place of the house, the Seven Woods, will outlast her world – as they did, when De Valera’s perfidious troops razed ‘this house of Coole’, leaving in its place an empty stage which, on this visit, I pace long-ways and short-ways, retracing the interior divisions with their once high-piled library shelves: yes, in the woods with their acres of her planting – ‘Many an hour have I spent among them, – for in a nursery of trees, as of children, one may run the whole gamut of joy and anxiety, and of pride and of fear’ (Gregory 1970: 94) - are found the ‘Collection of Collections’, the literal translation, Bacon’s old editor informs us, of *silva silvarum*; and one cannot help recalling the ancient association of learning with trees, indicated in the ancient British Ogham script with its Beith-luis-nin alphabet, whose letter names are interpreted as the names of trees or shrubs.

Mary Sheridan, one of Lady Gregory’s ‘old people’, inhabited an outside dwelling quite as populous as Coole House inside during a dinner party. Regarding the Sidh, Mrs Sheridan said that did not see many at Gort – ‘I don’t see many of them here’ – however, ‘Coole is alive with them, as plenty as grass; I often go awhile and sit inside the gate there. I saw them make up a house one time near the natural bridge, and I saw them coming over the gap twice near the chapel, a lot of little boys, and two men and a woman, and they had old talk and young talk’ (Gregory 1920: 20). Discussing the inversion of things in the fairy world, W.B. Yeats recalled, ‘Mary Battle, my Uncle George Pollexfen’s old servant, was accustomed to say that no dream had a true meaning after the rise of the sap; and Lady Gregory learned somewhere on Sleive



Ochta that if one told one's dreams to the trees fasting the trees would wither' (Yeats in Gregory 1920: 306) – meaning, I guess, that trees asleep in winter, are harmed by such confessions (the reason is unclear). *In the Seven Woods* incorporates this tree lore: '*No boughs have withered because of the wintry wind, / The boughs have withered because I have told them my dreams*' (Yeats 1969: 87, italics in original). Here, surely, is literary appropriation, aestheticisation of a culture that, as Douglas Hyde saw, needed political as well as poetic advocacy (Hyde 1894: 115-161). But these 'Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age' have another, environmental context: 'I made some of these poems walking about among the Seven Woods, before the big wind of nineteen hundred and three blew down so many trees, & troubled the wild creatures, & changed the look of things' (Yeats 1903: 34). After that, Yeats's verse emerged into the clearing of literary Modernism. The culture of the public domain also changed: the havoc the 1903 storms wreaked on the few remaining woodlands scattered around the country led the State to intervene and take the first tentative steps towards restoring Ireland's lost forest resource: Donal Magner writes, 'The aim was to reverse the decline of Irish forests that commenced long before Yeats penned his notes about the storm damage to the woodlands of Coole Park' (Magner 2010: 1).

We meet Donal Magner at Devil's Glen, a forested gorge straddling the Vartry River above Ashford in Co. Wicklow. For me, it was a return visit: Donal and I first met there in 2005, at a symposium convened to discuss the future of the Devil's Glen 'Sculpture in Woodland' program. Various proposals followed. I recommended a double re-education program: Coillte, the wood's manager, needed to think less commercially, more poetically; the general public needed to think less symbolically, more empathetically. Looking back, I see I was already advocating self-awareness of the wood in terms of a *silva silvarum*:

the traditional notion that the wood is a place of discourse, that it is structured like a book, a city or other meeting-place of many voices, observations and histories. I like this conception because it allows us to think of woodlands in general as the other places of the places where we live. Instead of being either over-rationalised products of empirical science and local historical research or the under-rationalised locations of symbol-making, the wood in this formulation is imagined as a place for experiencing other places. (Carter 2007: 26-36)

In short, the wood as a place where we write our histories differently, re-imagining our planetary dwelling place. My enthusiasm was not shared. None of our symposium suggestions prospered, and the following year, as pre-visionsed, the 'Sculpture in Woodland' program closed down. Donal takes us on a three-hour trek to see how the sculptures commissioned in the pre-2005 period are faring. Any history of nature now needs to take account of such publications as *The Secret Life of Trees* and *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Knowing that woods are social networks, complex interconnected living systems linked by the 'woodwide web' of soil fungi, a mycorrhizal network that 'allows the sharing of an enormous amount of information and goods,' the old 'Sculpture in Woodland' program, with its Baconian laying up of (literal) timbers to create symbolic objects in the wood, has dated badly. We agree that a new poetic science is called for.

Talking of symbolic overload at the expense of a deepened reforestation consciousness, one innovation since I was last here is the Seamus Heaney Loop ('marked with yellow arrows'). Quotations inscribed into the backs of park benches along the walk commemorate the poet's period of residence (1971-1976; by weekend residence after 1988 until his death) at nearby Glanmore. 'Glanmore was truly what I called it, a "hedge school" in the literal sense. I gathered blackberries off the briars and ate them, as if I were back on the road to school. I even found a blackbird nest in the hedge of our gable' (Dunne 2017). The rise of the illegal Hedge Schools post-Cromwell owed something to the precedent of the Bardic Schools 'closed down when the people were made landless, homeless and exiles' ('Preface to the Clanrickarde Memoirs,

1722'): in both cases, the flight of writing to the fringes of the forest is associated with a post-exilic search for identity in language. Heaney's take on this risks trivialising it. Donal thought that Heaney rarely walked in the Glen; yet he may have known its *meaning* in other ways. In 1983 Heaney published his translation of the medieval text of *Buile Suibhne*, or the Frenzy of Suibhne. Donal believes that Heaney's choice of subject, and his treatment of it, were influenced by his adjacency to the Glen. Suibhne Geilt (Mad Sweeney), King of Dál Riata in north-east Ireland during the seventh century, went mad during the battle of Mag Rath (c. AD 634) and, 'transformed into a bird by St. Ronan, left the field of battle and wandered through Ireland for seven years, living in the woods before returning home' (Clune, 1996, 48-60). Sweeney was at home in the forest. He is supposed to have written a poem: 'The bushy leafy Oaktree/ Is highest in the wood,/ The forking shooting hazel/ Has nests of hazel-nut.// The alder is my darling,/ All thornless in the gap,/ Some milk of human kindness/ Coursing in its sap' (Heaney 1989: 132). Madness or sanity? Like the shell-shocked Septimus, the lesson Sweeney draws from human slaughter is the salvation of the trees. There was always before him the prospect of a deforested landscape from which even the birds have flown.

## 5

John Evelyn's *Silva* contains much curious information – and speculation. Evelyn attributes to Vitruvius the idea that trees were cognate with what made human beings distinctively human, providing 'the first occasion of that speech, polity and society which made them differ from beasts' (Evelyn 1908: 206). The reason for this was that trees rubbing together under the force of 'an impetuous wind' would catch fire; naturally 'wild people' gathered to enjoy this 'new amenity': but what to do when the flames died down? Those gathered must, of course, cooperate to revive the flames, 'by signs and barbarous tones (which in process of time were form'd into significant words),' encouraging one another to 'supply it with fresh combustibles.' After this, one thing led to another: 'the wild people, who before were afraid of one another, and dwelt asunder, began to find the benefit and sweetness of society, mutual assistance, and conversation, which they afterwards improv'd, by building houses with those trees, and dwelling nearer together' (Evelyn 1908: 206).<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on the fact that London 'was (till the late dreadful conflagration) a wooden city, almost entirely built of wood and timber,' he suggests that the correct etymology of the city's name is *Lon-den*, the wood of Lon or Lud (Evelyn 1908: 143). Apropos of margins, he praises the landscape gardener Moses Cook, who specialized in the design of walks issuing 'in some capacious or pretty figure, be it circle, oval, semi-circle, triangle, or square.' He showed how 'to pierce a walk through the thickest wood either by stakes set up where they may be seen direct, or by candle and lantern, in a calm night' (Evelyn 1908: 175).

Reforestation is not simply replanting, it is the restoration of a lost dwelling place, characterized by a feeling that the trees speak. Coillte's conifer plantations are deforestation in disguise: 'Our hills are covered with exotic conifers that basically acidify the soil, don't provide much of a haven for wildlife, and deny Irish people their cultural heritage' (The Woodland League n.d.). Even well-meaning attempts to diversify the species planted and to secure domains for future growth may stand in the way of what is needed. As in Australia, so in Ireland property-owning colonisers had a schizoid attitude towards trees. Patrick J Duffy makes the amply referenced claim, 'The plentiful supply of oakwoods in seventeenth century Ireland was as much a driving force for British colonisation as other economic and political considerations' (Duffy 2007: 37). But who would want to endure the 'bare and naked condition of the Irish landscape in pre-famine times,' if they could afford not to (Duffy 2007: 41)? For Gregory's forebears at Coole, tree planting 'was a fashionable and notably visible part of eighteenth-

century rural landscape improvement.’ But here, in another, almost inevitable colonialist irony, the picturesque ideology that: ‘Trees stood for order, improvement and superior culture’ had as its corollary the disparagement of the treeless and homeless as less than human (Duffy 2007: 39). This was an old double-bind. Hadn’t Giraldus Cambrensis (c.1188) condemned the Irish as ‘a people of forest-dwellers’ that had failed to conform to the progress of humanity ‘from the forests to the arable fields, and towards village life and civil society...’ (Leerssen 2002: 30)? In effect, ‘the explicitly stated argument of Gerald’s work is that “the Irish *deserved* to be conquered because they had fallen so far from civilized and religious values”’ (Koutla in Hadfield 1997: 26). Trapped culturally and historically in this colonialist fantasy, the Irish were alienated wherever they dwelt. Topophobia, in this circumstance, was not an environmental aversion but a collective sense of haunting, an agoraphobic conviction of having nowhere to stand, no means of relating.

There is a connection between topophobia and marginalisation. Early studies of claustrophobia and agoraphobia often grouped them together. Common to both conditions was a sensation of being engulfed: whether manifested as a feeling of asphyxia or vertigo, sufferers felt they had nowhere of their own, nowhere to stand, no room to move. Cronin associates the environmental schizophrenia Sheeran detects with a contraction of the public realm. Linking the accelerated privatisation of public space with the ascendancy of a neo-liberalist consumer economy, she suggests that a social art practice may fill the void left by perceived political leadership (Cronin 2017: 80-81). But, given the ‘shrinking of the “public Sphere”,’ where will the new ‘creative assemblages’ spring up? It is logical to suppose they will come from the margins occupied by the marginalised. Following Delsanti, it is plausible that the social art of reforestation will not only be written from the margins: it will be the writing of the margins. Psychoanalytically, topophobia is interpreted as a fear of liberation from the self and the love-objects of childhood, as a result of which ‘Every path which takes them out of the magic circle of those persons on whom they are fixated is forbidden’ (Bergler 1969: 684). In this context, an emancipatory landscape designer aims, like Moses Cook, ‘to pierce a walk through the thickest wood’. But only so far: the marginalized subject who is so liberated that they fall into the normative trap of some ‘spacious or pretty figure’ has swapped one alienation for another. What is needed is a haunting that is homely, the kind of shadowing traditionally attributed to the Sidh. When this happens, the margin becomes a track for, as Hannah Nyala explains, ‘As we track, we too are being tracked’ (Nyala 1997: 3). Connections, Nyala writes, ‘exist not simply between tracker and tracked, but at all levels of tracking. In striking ways, the nexus of any given footprint includes unmistakable testimony of its attachments to everything else around it, and each faint mark offers subtle insights into the interrelatedness of all living things’ (Nyala 1997: 150). Reforestation begins in the tracing of the margins.

Two further observations about Conway’s copper leafing. When the first leafing was completed, we walked into town. Later, returning home by the same route, we came upon the house owner for whose little wall the sycamore had been sacrificed: he was obsessively painting the section of wall immediately next to the tree stump, furiously, as it seemed to us, reinstating the symbolic boundary that Conway’s topophilic intervention had apparently breached. Because the first application of the copper leaves had been wind-compromised, and remained somewhat ragged, Conway decided to return to the site and complete the copper bandaging. She found the copper leaf had been scratched. A couple of considered designs, some scribbles and perhaps vestigial initials had been gouged through the copper screen. The newly repainted wall adjacent was unmarked. Conway’s act of healing had created a new table or writing surface where marks of passage were being inscribed. Whether the marking expressed a rage against beauty or affirmation of the disturbance was impossible to say. After the second foliageing of the surface, we paid the site one further visit, dropping in on the tree

stump as we left Galway for the east coast. Ogham-like vertical, horizontal and diagonal strokes had been incised into the copper, tearing it open to reveal the wood underneath. A local tagger had left their mark in the form of a squared-off sickle or perhaps bench clamp: in the morning sun the tree stump was incandescent, a golden bowl on Ragoon Road suggesting some kind of epiphany.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An association influentially discussed in Yates 1966.

<sup>2</sup> The Latin *informare* means ‘to give form to the mind.’

<sup>3</sup> For quotations and contextualisation, see Morgan n.d..

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the literature on the suppression of the Irish language is considerable. Quoted here is Grace Neville, 2001: 81-96, 91. Neville quotes a Galwayman speaking in 1937: ‘my father and mother were Irish speakers, but they never spoke one word of Irish to me, and that’s what has left me without the Irish.’ (91). She also quotes Thomas Davis’s famous call to arms: ‘A nation should guard its language more than its territories ...’ (90). The difficulty in Ireland was that the ‘language’ had, spiritually at least, a distinctive ‘territory’, the ‘forest’, by then largely destroyed.

<sup>5</sup> ‘she will talk to a little bird as a mother to a child’ (Neilson 2003: 913) For the *cailleach* connection, see Carter 2015: 105-129.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn claims that ‘the very first law we find which was ever promulg’d, was concerning trees; and that laws themselves were first written upon them, or tables compos’d of them (Evelyn 1998, vol.2: 138).

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## Illustrations

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