

Dante's Nest: An Allegory

Craig San Roque

I. THE ORCHARD

There is a place known as Dante's nest. It is there, every evening, no matter the weather, that a small and delicate bird folds its wings. In the folding, the bird draws into itself certain things.

Dante is a small man, very tough and now very old but his lithe grace was a legend of the valleys and coastal cliffs of the region where he lived in a younger day. He is known as Dante Dioniso Dileusis.

Every evening Dante's roving imagination takes the shape of a bird arriving in a quiet place. There it settles itself, ruffling, preening, breathing and cooing, gathering memories of fruit, observations of almond, glints of fig, lemon, stone walls, ancient trees overhung. And feathers. Gathering every sight and sense discovered during the day's flights, the delicate bird collects for Dante's human being the subtle sights and subtle scents of the day's subtle hunt.

The imagination of Dante Dioniso Dileusis is not particularly human, it is not bound by human perception, human constriction. In its unbounded mode it wheels through many worlds; it collects flocks of birds, currents of insects, flying thoughts, emerging shapes, delicious colour, fish leaping, spectrum pattern, untouched skin, musical notes, animal calls; chatter. With all this gathering, lest all be lost, there is a place known as Dante's nest.

It is here every evening, regardless of the weather, the small and delicate bird folds its wings. And there in the nest the bird sits and broods. Somewhere thus, in the pulsating subtle body of Dioniso Dante, the gathered day becomes, in the warm body of the bird, a fine collection of eggs, speckled blue and black.

Incubating, these fruitful fertile eggs, words gather. They shimmer through the brain, they nestle in the throat, they draw up breath from the deep well of the lungs, they roll along the tongue, they spit glowing...

It is from Dante's nest that the sung poetry of the human world has emerged since the very beginning of human time.

The nest of Dioniso Dileusis is hidden in a very obscure place; it is, however, a place upon which the salvation of the intelligent world depends. It is here that a small fire is saved every day for the continuing purpose of humanity. One day, perhaps, you too will find Dante's nest.

The end of the real world will be on the day when Dante's nest is crushed suddenly in the hands of a brutal boy, a boy too naïve to comprehend the age and destiny of the world. The age and destiny, yes; and the delicate thing which allows all things to gather in the voice of being. Without imagination we cannot thrive.

The wise and clever say that the future of the world depends upon wise and clever things, which only they can carry out according to the will of the people, or against the will of the people. This might be true – but I say this: the destiny of the world depends upon Dante's nest and the small bird who, folding her wings every evening, begins the brooding.

II. THE TREE

Dioniso Dileusis comes, on his mother's side, from an old family tree whose origin can be traced to the settlement of Eleusis.¹ You will know of Eleusis, a smallish town set above a curved bay, a day's walk from Athens. Eleusis is a very, very old place.

Nowadays there is nothing much of substance left. The town is covered in grey cement dust. This happens to the beauteous sites, those old places which held the fluttering heart of fledgling humanity. The places of renewal. The tree was obliterated, cut for firewood long ago. Nowadays there is not even a hole in the ground. Nevertheless the family bloodline knows exactly the method, style and intention of the Mysteries which once were sweated upon that rocky sea-blown ecstatic site.

Ahh, now you will have a question. The question is this: if the site goes out, do the Mysteries of that site go out? If a site drew thousands of people and a thousand sung beauties over a thousand years, well, when the site is dynamited and levelled are the songs levelled and dynamited? When the touch of the song upon the sinuous body of the heart is gone; when the cadence of the songs of being are rent as nothing, when the secrets of Eleusis are no longer whispered, tongue to tongue, then is the truth gone which the song held gone all gone?

Well, that has happened often enough. The next question is this: is there any chance that some of the secrets wriggle back, the mysteries or bits of the mysteries wriggle back? You know, of their own accord, determined to be heard.

Is it the bitter truth that once the rock site is gone the story is gone and the secret humane purpose of the sacred rock is lost? An emptied-out piece of granite covered in cement dust or tar beside a road somewhere, crying quietly.

III. THE SPINE

The cousins of Dante Dioniso Dileusis, most especially the women, one after the other, have come upon the truths of Eleusis hidden as inheritance in the very cells of their bodies. They needed no instruction, no one had to betray secrets, although patient moments of encouragement and reminder have helped to true their affinity with tree, cave, pit and purpose of that Mystery buried deep in the being of Demeter and her free-ranging organic daughter.

For the cousins of Dileusis the finding of the secret wrapped in the innermost structures has occurred naturally enough, and at the right time. That is a story I might tell you one day, how each of the cousins came upon the innermost poetic structure of being and how, whether on the brink of death or upon the edge of a new life, it happened for each of them according to their own way, their own calling. Some secrets may, it is true, be better lost, forgotten, but some secrets are better found. It is a wondrous thing to come upon the secrets of the generation of life. The direction of life. Indestructible life. The cause of the coming into being.

You should know this; that after the fall of the town of Eleusis many of the family were dispersed by migration. And yet even today, no matter where in the web of the world a Dileusis cousin happens to be, the Mystery can and does find its gracious, infiltrating, subversive way. There is some hope in that, wouldn't you say?

¹ On Eleusis, see C. Kerényi (1991), *Eleusis: Archetypal image of mother and daughter*, Princeton University Press, Princeton; and C. Kerényi (1976), *Dionysus: Archetypal image of indestructible life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Now there is another problem. The old Mysteries of Eleusis, as you probably know, had to be kept secret on pain of death. Thousands of pilgrims would turn up for the events in the town every year. This event went on recurring over maybe one, some say two, thousand years. Imagine that, thousands of people travelling down from Athens all day, walking, crossing the little bridge and up to the site, the well of the maiden, the flat of the dancing ground, the darkened stone room. The lights. The fire, the revelation, the touch of the sinuous song. And yet. No one seems to have leaked out what it was all about. Clever books are written and the archaeology is analysed but no one has a clear bit of old Greek text which says “that’s what it’s all about”. The Mystery is exactly that, something whispered and shown while your eyes are lowered or your lids are closed. Well maybe, maybe not.

Dioniso Dante was present at the awakening of Eleusis in each of the cousins. How it was managed that he was present thus is another intricate story; but Dante is a kind of mentor to each of them, his nieces, his nephews, perhaps grandchildren – but I call them “cousins” so as not to get too tied up in family history. Sometimes a mother would say, sideways perhaps, after an incident which the mother took as a clue, “Girl, it’s time you went to see Uncle Dante, he will teach you the language.”

Uncle Dante had seen the stunned look or the slowly dawning smile in the eyes of Eleusis girls, many times over. All those years and Uncle Dante always marvelled at the intimate ways in which each awakening came about, always delicately specific.

Dante, especially in his conversations with his friend Dr Asclepio, disagreed with those priests who set up the strange promise that there is a final moment of cleanliness and glory somewhere golden in the azure mouth of God. “There is no great and final cupola moment; thus,” said Dante Dioniso, “everything is coming along nicely all at once, all the lovely time,” said Dioniso, “just like Mary in her song says – *fish swim, birds fly, daddies yell, mummies cry, old men sit and think, I drink.*”²

Asclepio, leaning confidentially over the domino board, would agree saying, “Observe the way the world is put together, every tiny link in a simple way. How do I cure, Dante? I do it by moving two tiny things just a little like this on the board, a connection is made or loosened and thus I win the game...”

And the two old men, lifting small glasses of arak, would sweep the board in satisfaction.

Uncle Dante has a word for this symmetry of detail which he uses to invigorate the inner life of the cousins of Eleusis. He calls it “the python’s skeleton” (*osso pythia*). Observe closely the white bleached bones of a snake and you might catch his drift. All connected, all simultaneously linked. Fish swim, birds fly, lovers leave by and by, old men sit and think. Observe the link. The skill, he said, is to feel it sliding through your hands and thus to sing. It slides through everything.

Now we are coming to something. Why sing the little hum? Well, when those words are gathered from the eggs in Dante’s nest and the particular words are sung, sung in nice rows that is, well, something in the brain lights up. Something like a small fire starts up.

When the mothers said, “Ask uncle to teach you the language,” what they meant was this. Vowel by vowel, syllable by syllable, learning the sung symmetry of creation’s inner structure.

² These song lyrics are from “I Drink” by Mary Gauthier, on *Mercy Now*. Album details available at www.marygauthier.com.

IV. THE TABLE

In the evening of this particular summer, after a meal of fish and red and black roasted capsicum, Uncle Dioniso's niece, Erato Musa Dileusis, confided in him that, for her, the illumination of the tree of Eleusis had been consuming her nights, restlessly throwing her, as though she were caught in the breaking waves of a beach in tumult. "The tree. I keep seeing the tree. Each time I fall, I rise, water pouring over and I keep seeing the tree."

She had been talking to her uncle about her husband. Her agitated marriage, the normal things of a life lived in a usual anguished way in the village now become a city's alleyway. She tried at first to find words for the agitation, she dressed it in her husband's clothes and thought he was the cause; but the dress stripped off and she was naked again with the pure feeling of the agitation; an intensity that has no cover established itself in the pit of her stomach. Her smile gleamed, restrained. The old glass on the table shimmered. She did not throw herself around like an hysteric. She had discipline. She felt the waves inside her skin. She kept to a gravity, seated thus at the table. Her hands beside the plate, the red capsicum, the olive. Ordinary things about to speak. The brooding intensity about to reveal its original shape, not covered by others. Dante had been waiting for just this evening in her. Or perhaps she too had been waiting for him; waiting until the eggs were there. Waiting until it was still and quiet enough to speak. The little bird settling in the nest, within the musical body of Erato Musa Dileusis, on the brink of her becoming.

She was gazing at Dante, in the steady manner she had learned, and she saw his face and body melt, converting into birds, fish, and a flurry of furred creatures and finally the beauteous serpentine form which throbbed along the line of Dante's Dionisos spine.

That was probably the moment Erato Dileusis recognised that, all along, the abundant fish had been gathering momentum in her, that her conversation was not about her agitation with a husband but about the agitated tumultuous anticipation of the next consummation of the Mystery emerging now from out the dark waters. A fountainous tree of lights.

It is strange moment when a human being realises that her soul is more than a thousand years old and that she has thrived all this time on the heat of a genetic history giving direction to her every thrust, every desire, every opening iota of learning.

V. BECOMING A MYSTERY

Early in her life Dante had told Erato that she would become a mystery. "Erato," he had said, when she was only nine years old, "Erato, you will be a mystery to people."

"Will I, uncle? What is a mystery?"

At that time she did not understand him and she did not know exactly the meaning which her uncle Dileusis intended in the word *Musterion*, that old Greek word which he had used at that time, savouring it like crushed rock salt turning and softened in his mouth.

As the life of Musa unfolded, the particular necessary events and elements for the making of her *Musterion* self occurred. The events occurred in seemingly natural ways for they had to take a natural course, now that the old site itself and the formal initiations had been disbanded. The stitches of her natural initiation were taken, inserted, woven as warp and weft of fibre, skin, intestine, nerve, bone and voice. Most particularly, her voice. These events became herself, made herself "Musa Erato

Dileusis” in her exquisitely gracious embodiment of the particular Mystery which she was destined to become.

Life is not random. We are offered the chance to become a Mystery and some of us take the chance. The act of becoming a Mystery is the only decently independent action worth taking.

VI. SUNG BEAUTY

It is a beautiful thing to see a man or a woman become the Mystery for which she was intended. It fills her, widens her eyes, opens her to an ever-continuous flowing vitality. Imperishable and recurring life is established.

The most felicitous moment is when the location of the woman’s being shifts from the single point of lonely self-reverence to the fluent multiple point when she allows herself to become the fluency of all beings. From fixity to flux. Lyrical. At this moment she becomes a voice of all those creatures who are becoming, she can figure the poetic structures of nature and add up all the numbers and notes and scales and see what they come to. It is such a nice feeling that the original bird inscribed on the rocks walls of Persephone’s deep well can come alive and sing freely in her throat now and the snakes inscribed in the rocks find their place in her fingers. It’s a tingly kind of thing. Girls love it.

These things certain philosophers speak about, but all that concerns us now is the moment at the table between Musa Erato and Dante Dioniso when, in each others’ eyes, the ancient tree shuddered and Erato became, or rather should I say, recognised herself in her true place in the great chain of being.

VII. DEATH AND THE ORCHARD

I should tell you this lest, when we get to the next bit, you become a little muddled by what is going on and who is who.

In Dante’s orchard there are nine trees. Fig, lemon, apricot, almond, pomegranate, quince (the earliest form of apple), olive, pear and a secret fruit. In every generation these trees are allocated to the Dileusis cousins. They bear for them, they care for them. Mostly Dante does the hard work. The cousins have names. They have pet names, but the girls have serious names also. The Dileusis girls in each generation are named after the nine Muses. I don’t know why. Some old grandma’s whim probably. Erato is one of the muses. If you do not know exactly what the Muses do, you must ask your mother. They have nice names and they look after important things like music and dancing, poetry, history, comedy, tragedy and the geometry of the stars.³ Their mother’s name is Memory – *Mnemosyne* – Memmy for short. Nice name. Maybe I will tell you more after I tell you about the orchard. There are nine trees in the orchard. I told you that. These are the oldest trees in the world. Dante Dioniso grew them a long time ago from the first seeds. “In the first days. In the first days. In the very first days...” He carried them from Inanna’s garden in Sumeria.

Sometimes, at family dinners, especially during autumn harvest, the whole pack of Dileusis girls quarrel over who is to get which tree for the next season. They

³ The Muses are attributed with the custodianship of specific functions in ancient Greek arts and sciences: for example, Calliope – epic poetry; Clio – history; Erato – lyric or love poetry, divine songs; Euterpe – breath instruments, flutes; Melpomene – tragedy; Polyhymnia – acting, music, dance; Terpsichore – lyric poetry, dance; Thalia – comedy; Urania – astronomy.

can swap around you see. You don't have custody of the same tree all your life. Some say that they are tired of shelling almonds or they say that they fancy apricots this year. Terpsichore is fond of making quince upside down cakes. She has trouble giving up the quince to the other girls. Euterpe is content with the fig and usually tries to arrange a swap if the fig goes to someone else. No one minds that because everyone loves Utie's fig jam. You should try her fig jam. Erato is very fond of the almonds. Really that *is* her tree, she loves the blossoms fluttering on the hillside in season; she loves shelling and collecting kernels in hessian bags, spreading, stripping, peeling and cracking. Most of all she loves the bite of strong white teeth on the kernel of the nut. The almond is good to soak. Seven in a cup of water is good medicine.

In any case after a blazing row at the big table in Dante's orchard, the fruit trees are reallocated for another year or so. There is a good reason for this change around.

I was telling you about death. Or, if I wasn't before, it's time I did. In the orchard there is a deep well, it goes down a very long way into the limestone of Dioniso Dileusis' country. The well is cut square with narrow steps down. There is water enough for the trees and vines, deep down in what they call the Maiden's Well. As everyone knows, some way down there is a natural incision, an aperture in the limestone wall and through this their aunt, Persephone, on occasion, appears. Now remember this – Aunt Persephone ascending the hewn stone steps, by a secret way in a dark night, her shoulder brushing inscriptions, carved figures: ring dove, vulturic bird, rampant snakes; she comes to the orchard, reaching for a fruit. Each time she takes a fruit in her hand, sinking her teeth and tongue in juice, kernel or glistening red jewelled fruit pomegranate, a Dileusis dies, or so it would seem. The girl who takes care of that fruit that year is the one most likely to suffer. She may not die forever, usually she fades away and comes back to life again when spring returns. That is to say, when Aunt Persephone gets over her moods. Everyone knows what fruits Persephone likes best. They want to lessen their chance of getting bitten. They put all the seeds in a big pot and one by one draw them out. The luck of the draw. Dr Asclepio says that Aunt Persephone suffers from epileptic fits. He means you can never be sure what she'll grab as she is blacking out.

The choice of Mystery includes a choice of death. For Erato Musa her deaths came upon her through unpleasant ways. Poisoning of her nerves, black spider bites, betrayal, insidious envy. Who knows; but somehow by the means of these deaths the specific Mystery occurred and the slow becoming of love was durably established in her being, as it had to be because at an early age a god came to her, probably veiled in a dream, for propriety's sake, and thus he announced his intent with a dark turn of wings. His intent became her intent and with a dedicated persistence she accomplished the entwined mysteries of love and death. Dr Asclepio said this was nonsense, Erato was hallucinating the wings, she was poisoned by eating too many almonds (*Prunus amygdalus*), the toxins built up in her own amygdala, she lost control of her emotions. Asclepio is probably right, but so is Persephone. Anyhow, so as not to spoil the story, I would like you to remember that Musa Erato, on this particular evening, is still sitting at Dante Dioniso's table. She ate the fish, she drank a little wine, she licked on a lemon, she called on her ancestral mothers, Melete, with the fine attention to practice, Mnemosyne with the strong memory, and Aoede, who knows all songs and musical scales of the seething natural world. And soon Erato became a singer of the most beautiful bittersweet poetry and she learned to cure people whose hearts were broken.

So too, by one way or another all the nine Dileusis girls became their Mystery. It matured within them, changing colour along the spectrum of age, event by event, colour by colour, just as original Dionisos himself became, by dismemberment, his own green mystery and Orphee, by music and loss, his silvery his. Boys can do it and so too can Dileusis girls.

The secret of a life lived is this. That we become the Mystery into which we are born.

VIII. INTERLUDE: A DARK TURN OF EROS WING

All this that I tell you is only glimpsed in a mirror in a house with no lights. It is impossible to know what happened on that night between the woman and the unseen being, on the night when he caught the glance of her eye and she the glancing blow of his pythonic face when she should not have seen, should not have known who, in fact, this lover was.

She saw umber shadow, brilliant arrangement. And he saw, in the turn of her Cro Magnon face, the carved rock wall, the ochre slash, the figures, bird, snake, vulture, horns, the descent of Eleusis, intestines, the cord let down, the music, the fall, the fruit arranged on the winnowing fan, the smoothly carved bone, the seed from the beginning of time burning in the pit of her body, her hair deranged, stained with dark water, her eyes like two leopards. She cried suddenly and quietly, "The pain, the pain it is to be seen, to become visible."

Having seen these events, or rather having seen all that this glimpse leads to, and about that I cannot speak, she in herself knew Eleusis and she became it exactly. What he saw in her on that night, she became. What she found in herself that night, she became.

What your eye sees at certain moments, you become that. What your eye finds at certain times, you create that. Always the question. That? Did I find that or did I create it? God knows; nothing on earth would have happened if Eros had remained asleep and unseen, all would still be obscure if she had never seen the eyes of the one who binds the molecules of the world together.

It is, I admit, something of a puzzle. The important thing is not to forget it. The important thing is to consolidate. If you do not do that, then it becomes a hallucination; and old Asclepio turns out to have won again.

IX. EGGS OF THE DOVE

Dante, in his nest in the rock of enduring time, hatched words for these things, the slipping shedding of all skins and the arrival of his cousin upon the factual solidity of her mystery.

It began, he said, in a simple manner, a feeling likened to the handling of a dark fig in the hollow of her heart, succulent liquid flowing between her breasts, her throat on fire and the fig fruiting, a purple fragrance on her lips and tongue forming the language of the poetics of being.

Now it is time for dinner. After all, a Mystery is simply this: to give delicious form to the movement of love, sustainment to the becoming of love, the gravid powers of enduring love, despite the spider bite, the poison and pestilence in the city above. A girl who once had her tongue torn out and became silenced is now music and a truth speaking. Erato Musa Dileusis added to herself graceful ingredients and the keen faculties of a contemporary woman. She holds a distinct presence in the

alleyway where she lives. She holds the unbroken line which comes down from the beginning of all things. She will carry it always, until Persephone comes again to the orchard. And gives her rest.

Dante lives in another time and keeps his nest. It is the safest place in the world. A little place, diminutive, hidden in the cleft of a wall beneath an old lemon tree, a place where imagination rests and hatches again day after day.