

# [ P R E F A C E ]

WHEN THE ARCTIC FREEZE BEGAN TO SPREAD SOUTHWARD during the onslaught of the last ice age, the forests that had once covered much of the northern hemisphere disappeared under the advancing sheets of ice like algae under the roll of a long and luminous ocean wave. As global warming trends caused the glaciers to retreat many millennia later, the forests cropped up again as if they had merely weathered the season in hibernation: a spontaneous generation of arboreal, floral, and cryptogamal life.

Ice ages have come and gone, come again and gone again; and each time the glaciers pulled back—most recently, some ten to fifteen thousand years ago—the forests returned to recolonize the land. In short, most of the places of human habitation in the West were at some time in the past more or less densely forested. However broadly or narrowly one wishes to define it, Western civilization literally cleared its space in the midst of forests. A sylvan fringe of darkness defined the limits of its cultivation, the margins of its cities, the boundaries of its institutional domain; but also the extravagance of its imagination. For reasons this book explores, the governing institutions of the West—religion, law, family, city—originally established themselves in opposition to the forests, which in this respect have been, from the beginning, the first and last victims of civic expansion. The following study, however, does not recount a merely empirical history about how civilization has encroached upon the forests, exploited them, cultivated them, managed them, or simply devastated them. It tells the more elusive story of the role forests have played in the cultural imagination of the West.

The story is full of enigmas and paradoxes. If forests appear in our religions as places of profanity, they also appear as sacred. If they have typically been considered places of lawlessness, they have also provided havens for those who took up the cause of justice and fought the law's corruption. If they evoke associations of danger and abandon in our minds, they also evoke scenes of enchantment. In other words, in the religions, mythologies, and literatures of the West, the forest appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray. Or where our subjective categories are confounded. Or where perceptions become promiscuous with one another, disclosing latent dimensions of time and consciousness. In the forest the inanimate may suddenly become animate, the god turns into a beast, the outlaw stands for justice, Rosalind appears as a boy, the virtuous knight degenerates into a wild man, the straight line forms a circle, the ordinary gives way to the fabulous. In what follows I not only trace these paths of error in the Western imagination but also account for them in terms of specific historical frameworks.

I had originally noticed the consistency of such patterns in medieval and Renaissance literature, but I soon discovered that, just as forests were once everywhere in the geographical sense, so too they were everywhere in the fossil record of cultural memory. Given that no one, as far as I can tell, has ever treated the subject as a whole, I decided to undertake the labor of writing a comprehensive, though selective, history of forests in the Western imagination. By comprehensive I mean that the book begins with antiquity and ends in our own time, following the conventional epochal divisions of cultural history (there are, however, significant deviations from the line of chronology). By selective I mean that I was obliged to limit radically the forest scenes I chose to discuss. I wanted to avoid at all costs a mere encyclopedic catalog of the forest theme and to offer the reader a more intriguing, thought-provoking essay. Hence there are many forests I was forced to leave out of the book, and I have no doubts that there are many more of which I am simply unaware. I have written *a* history, not *the* history, of the topic. I feel reassured by the fact that countless other versions, quite different from my own, are possible here. If I have learned anything during the course of my work it is that the forest is uncircumscribable. To traverse it means also to shun vast areas of it.

I do not presume to defend my principle of selection on strictly objective grounds. It is neither wholly objective nor wholly subjective, but both. I have relied on intuition, to be sure, but also on the

demands of narrative viability in the midst of a rather unviable matter. My hope is that the book will help disclose a hitherto unthematized dimension of cultural and literary history and that it will encourage others to pursue the forest theme in areas untouched by my investigation.

It is hard to believe that just six years ago, when the idea for such a book first came to me, there was very little talk about forests in the news. Since then the fate of the remaining forests on earth has become a major worldwide issue. In what follows I do not rehearse the well-known problems associated with planetary deforestation—the loss of wildlife habitat, of biodiversity, of climate regulation, and so forth; rather, I take them for granted. What I hope to show is how many untold memories, ancient fears and dreams, popular traditions, and more recent myths and symbols are going up in the fires of deforestation which we hear so much about today and which trouble us for reasons we often do not fully understand rationally but which we respond to on some other level of cultural memory. In the history of Western civilization forests represent an outlying realm of opacity which has allowed that civilization to estrange itself, enchant itself, terrify itself, ironize itself, in short to project into the forest's shadows its secret and innermost anxieties. In this respect the loss of forests entails more than merely the loss of ecosystems. (The fifth and final chapter of the book summarizes my vision of what is at stake for Western *culture*, if not nature, in current ecological debates about forests.)

Since I began working on this topic I have been asked on several occasions how the idea for it came to me. In fact I cannot remember exactly when or where the idea originated. What I do remember, however, is a trip to the provinces of the Veneto, in Italy, to visit the great Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto. In particular I remember an excursion to the Montello mountain, where Zanzotto walked us through remnants of the vast *selva antica*, or ancient forest, which had stood there for millennia but which has all but disappeared now. There and then I perhaps realized that the forest, in its enduring antiquity, was the correlate of the poet's memory, and that once its remnants were gone, the poet would fall into oblivion.

Robert Pogue Harrison  
*Stanford, 1991*