

SHADOWS OF LAW

DURING THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES THE NORTHERN FORESTS of Europe were still vast, stretching across the continent like domes of darkness and the indifference of time. Interspersed throughout them were smaller or larger settlements lost in the shadows of antiquity's decline. With respect to the medieval social order that was reorganizing itself on the basis of new feudal and religious institutions, the forests were *foris*, "outside." In them lived the outcasts, the mad, the lovers, brigands, hermits, saints, lepers, the *maquis*, fugitives, misfits, the persecuted, the wild men. Where else could they go? Outside of the law and human society one was in the forest. But the forest's asylum was unspeakable. One could not remain human in the forest; one could only rise above or sink below the human level. *Renaud de Montaubon*, a medieval epic describing the privations suffered by a band of robbers, moved its readers with pity for the forest outcasts, much the way a television documentary about the homeless might move Americans today. The audience felt a certain shame, since the forests did indeed harbor such misery.

The Christian Church that sought to unify Europe under the sign of the cross was essentially hostile toward this impassive frontier of unhumanized nature. Bestiality, fallenness, errancy, perdition—these are the associations that accrued around forests in the Christian mythology. In theological terms forests represented the anarchy of matter itself, with all the deprived darkness that went with this Neoplatonic concept adopted early on by the Church fathers. As the underside of the ordained world, forests represented for the Church the last strongholds of pagan worship. In the tenebrous Celtic forests reigned the

Druid priests; in the forests of Germany stood those sacred groves where unconverted barbarians engaged in heathen rituals; in the nocturnal forests at the edge of town sorcerers, alchemists, and all the tenacious survivors of paganism concocted their mischief.

The Church had good reasons to be suspicious of these havens. Age-old demons, fairies, and nature spirits continued to haunt the conservative woodlands, whose protective shadows allowed popular memory to preserve and perpetuate cultural continuities with the pagan past. If certain elements of pagan culture survived the Christian revolution in covert forms, leaving their legacy in popular legends, fairy tales, and traditional folklore, it was thanks in part to the fact that Christian imperialism did not take it upon itself to burn down the forests in a frenzy of religious fervor, despite the enjoinder of certain ambiguous passages from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy, for example, Moses orders his people to destroy the sacred groves of the gentiles: "But thus shall ye deal with them: ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire" (Deut. 7:5). "And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire. . . ." (12:3). "Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of trees near unto the altar of the Lord thy God. . . ." (16:21). Fortunately for the forests, and for the ancient folklore they fostered and perpetuated, the Christians did not organize crusades on the basis of such passages. All of which serves to remind us that, when forests are destroyed, it is not only an accumulated history of natural growth that vanishes. A preserve of cultural memory also disappears.

It should not surprise us by now that, here too, the paradoxes abound. We have already seen how forests have a way of destabilizing and even reversing the terms that would place them on either side of an imaginary dichotomy. While the Christian attitude toward forests was generally hostile, hagiography tells of many devout souls who took to the wilderness and lived as hermits far from the corruption of human society. There, in the forests' asylum, they lived in the intimate presence of their God. Their holy bewilderment helped them purge the soul of sin and make it saintly. The medieval epic of *Valentine and Orson*, for instance, tells of how Orson, a wild, subhuman man living in the forests, is captured by some hunters and brought back to human society. There he undergoes a complete education, learning the codes of civilization, the eloquence of speech, and the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. His natural prowess turns him into an exceptional

knight, while his moral education directs that prowess toward worthy and virtuous deeds. After an illustrious career of chivalry, Orson chooses finally to reject human society and return to the forest in order to devote himself exclusively to God. He returns to the scene of his origins as a holy hermit. All is transfigured, yet all is the same, as the space of the profane and the sacred become one. The human world that Orson leaves behind lies between two extremes that intersect in the forest.

The story of Orson is merely a prelude to the intriguing patterns that we will see emerging throughout the present chapter, which explores the relation between forests and civilization during the Christian era. We will see how the law of identity and the principle of non-contradiction go astray in the forests, and how certain conventional distinctions collapse when the scene shifts from the ordinary world to the forests outside its domain. The profane suddenly becomes sacred. The outlaw becomes the guardian of higher justice. A virtuous knight turns into a wild man. The straight line becomes a circle. Or the law of gender is confused. Be it religious, political, psychological, or even logical law, the forests, it seems, unsettle its stability. Forests lie “beyond” the law, or better, they figure as places of outlaw.

It would be historically inaccurate to say that forests lay literally beyond the law during this period. An English outlaw who took refuge in the forest, for instance, violated the king’s so-called Forest Law when he entered it (see sections two and three). Nevertheless, as an outlaw who sought the forest’s asylum, he entered, as it were, the *shadow of the law*. The shadow of law—be it social, religious, or otherwise—is not a place of lawlessness; it lies beyond the law like a shadow that dissolves the substance of a body. The shadow of law is not opposed to law but follows it around like its other self, or its guilty conscience.

As Georg Lichtenberg once said about books: “A book is a mirror. When a monkey looks in, no apostle can look out” (Lichtenberg, 64). Likewise when we look into the forests—at what happens in them, at how they get represented, at their allegorical implications—we see a strange reflection of the order to which they remained external. From this external perspective the institutional world reveals its absurdity, or corruption, or contradictions, or arbitrariness, or even its virtues. But one way or another it reveals something essential about itself which often remains invisible or inaccessible to the internal perspective.

In our discussion of antiquity we were led to consider above all the

logic of tragedy which haunted the relation between forests and civilization. In this chapter we will be led to consider the logic of *comedy*, understood in a broad sense of the “happy ending.” The difference is as fundamental as the difference between paganism and Christianity. The sylvan world was no mere shadow of civilization for the ancients; it had for them a substantial reality of its own, at times more substantial than civilization itself. Tragedy, we suggested, was a reminder that every founding law is also a fatal transgression—a transgression of some other law. Such is the essence of polytheism: a plurality of laws laying equal claim to legitimacy, often in strife with each other. In the Judeo-Christian doctrine, however, the law of a single, universal God holds sway over the totality of creation. As a result this law has only its own shadow to fear. The Christian revolution in the West puts an end to tragedy as the highest form of wisdom, for Christianity (like Platonism) promises a happy ending. You have only to choose it, by turning to the light of God. In its insistence that the happy or sorrowful outcome (damnation or salvation) depends upon free will and no longer upon a fatal order of necessity (against which the tragic hero was powerless), Christianity effectively destroys the ideological basis of tragedy. This revolution is reflected everywhere in our theme, however indirectly or latently, even in spheres that do not necessarily have specific connections to Christian doctrine. A new “comedy” pervades the ideology of law in all its instantiations.

Even in secular domains the reigning law does not have another law as its antagonist; it has rather its own shadow of corruption, or bad faith, or imperfection. Nor can one say that divine law and secular law are fundamentally or ideologically opposed to one another during the Christian era; on the contrary, an opposition between them arises only when the latter falls short of its avowed vocation or oversteps its legitimate limits.

Christian theology accounts at least in part for the fact that forests during this period so often become the locus of comic inversions, errors, reversals, etc. If it is true that forests figure as places of the law’s shadow during the Christian era, then it seems natural they should also appear as the locus of comedy, which is essentially ironic, dialectical, and critical. Comedy, in other words, *shadows its subject*. Understood in this broad sense, the comic is not necessarily funny; it can be harsh, bitter, ironic, or even desperate. But unlike tragedy, it serves to remind us that beyond the reigning law there is only the law’s outcast shadow.