

# Terror, Error or Refuge: Forests in Western Literature

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## I

The forest in Western literature and culture has often been perceived as existing in Manichean opposition to civilization, enlightenment or even morality. A history—both psychological and social—of this tradition is offered in Robert Pogue Harrison's compelling book, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992). Forests, according to Jungian psychology, generally symbolize the unconscious (Bishop 1995: 309; Progoff 1992:44); they are often full of frightening uncertainties and real dangers, reminding humans of the distant past of their species, when absence of rational understanding of the natural world left them at the mercy of cruel and mysterious forces. Since both Europe and North America were originally thickly wooded (Holmes 2000:83), forests were the cluttered and darkened spaces that had to be cleared in order to let in enlightenment and build the courtly city. Harrison cites as his earliest literary example the ancient epic of *Gilgamesh*, whose protagonist's first heroic act is to defeat the forest demon Huwawa, an action that represents the cutting down of a sacred cedar forest (Harrison 1992:14-18). According to Harrison, this destructive act has been endlessly repeated in Western history in order to protect civilization, for the forest is the Nietzschean home of Dionysos, the god of frenzy and dismemberment; it is the 'abyss of precivic darkness from which civilization is merely a deviation, and a precarious one at that' (1992:38). If future humans are to set about reversing the damage done by deforestation of the planet, this view of the forest will perhaps need to be revised.

An explorer or colonizer can project this view beyond the West's own margins, onto the space of the distant Other. Thus, in *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad represents Africa in terms of a forest that is malevolent, seemingly impenetrable but requiring to be 'subdued':

The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there.... We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil (Conrad 1971:58-59).

According to Elleke Boehmer, the 'obsessive quality of Conrad's language' representing the forest reflects the author's anxiety at the inability of Western confidence to compass this Other or, in fact, to subdue it. Like many Europeans writing about places distant in space and type from the familiarities of home, Conrad resorts to the language of the sublime—not Longinus's sublime of 'excellence and distinction' but Edmund Burke's sublime of 'delight' in 'danger and pain' (Boehmer 2005:92; Longinus 1965:100; Burke 1844:52). The quoted passage is saturated with the sense of a terrifying unknown that is totally alien and yet familiar to the observer's own brutal and repressed racial memory. Though the African forest seems like an 'unknown planet', it is actually 'prehistoric': in 'taking possession' of it, its colonizers would re-enact an ancient and familiar moment of subjugation.

Chinua Achebe, reacting furiously to Conrad's Manichean portrayal of Africa as "the other world" and the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization' (Achebe 1977:785), showed in *Things Fall Apart* one of the thriving, orderly human societies that existed beyond the trees blocking Conrad's view. Achebe's fictional community in this novel is called 'Umuofia', which significantly means 'People of the Forest'. Contradicting the nightmarish forest symbolism of *Heart of Darkness*, as Evan Mwangi (2004) explains, 'In the forests of Umuofia, there is a system of education, a rich philosophy, and sophisticated art, not to mention a complex religion and medical practice'. Of course the 'African village life and its richness' (Mwangi 2004) sustained in and by

the forest in *Things Fall Apart* is itself defined against a small area of 'evil forest' that focuses the villagers' own supernatural fears and repulsions (Achebe 1996:105). But this area does not really resemble the fearful forests of Western tradition; it is too limited to be called sublime. As Gillian Gane explains in her essay in this issue, since every village has its own evil forest, the taboo area is in a sense a domesticated, manageable evil. The virgin forest by which the villages are surrounded is the great provider for those who are energetic enough to use it properly. Achebe's is indeed a different forest from Conrad's.

Fortunately for future hopes for the environment, Conrad's is not the only type of forest depicted in Western culture or literature, either. Manichean binarism may be a very compelling model for perception and concept definition—probably having acquired extra prestige from modern computing, which is based on binary exclusionism—but it is not the only possibility in either case. I have written elsewhere about colonial texts that use the terms 'civilized', 'savage', 'white' and 'black' in ways that challenge the determinism of postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon and Abdul R JanMahomed, who claim that these terms exist in Manichean oppositions always favouring the colonizing power (Addison 2002:74-76; 1995:691-692; Fanon1986:132-138; JanMahomed 1985:82). Similar arguments may demonstrate that a forest need not be the evil antithesis of the court or the city. The Forest of Arden in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, for example, is shown as an ideal place of human habitation. And, if that text be seen as simply reversing the values while retaining the antithesis, a forest may be just a place where ordinary people work and make their living. Pat Louw demonstrates, in this issue, that some characters in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, like characters in *Things Fall Apart*, are naturalized inhabitants of a forest that supports and holds no terrors for them.

Instead of offering a unitary or binary scheme, this paper will divide its field into three. Although the number is not arbitrarily chosen, it is acknowledged as to some extent provisional. A gem may be cut in a variety of ways, and each style of cut will illuminate the stone differently. Another interpreter might choose four rather than three, for example, since a pastoral ideal could be understood as quite different in kind from an outlaw's refuge. In this discussion, however, the development of the ideal settlement from the sheltering refuge is traced as a seamless progression. European and North American literature will be seen, then, as representing forests in three different ways.

Perhaps the most compelling is the primal view already introduced, named by Harrison 'The Shadow of Civilization', in which the forest is indeed contrasted to the city, court or other built environments, including eventually that place called 'home' by the colonist or explorer. *Sir Gawain and the Grene Gome* and folktales such as 'Little Red Riding Hood' take this view. *Heart of Darkness* is, as mentioned, also in this tradition, though Harrison sees Conrad as a belated contributor, revealing 'an abyss at the heart of the savior civilization' (1992:140).

Secondly, the forest may be, as at the beginning of Dante's *Inferno* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, a place of wandering or error, in which the straight path is lost. Here the forest is as full of danger and magic as in the first view, but it does not exist in direct opposition to a city or court; it is a place of trial in which the trees and their shadows help to confuse the protagonists' moral vision. The right path through or around the labyrinth does exist but it may not be evident—or immediately evident—to the wanderer or quester.

Finally, a forest may be a place of safety to which the outlaw or exile can flee and in which she or he can find solace, or even delight. Forests are represented in this way in the Robin Hood stories, in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in Byron's, Felicia Hemans's, Henry David Thoreau's, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's representations of the North American 'forest primeval' and, to some extent, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

The discussion will conclude with some comments on how these three aspects of forests are interrelated and how they are, in fact, often all three present in forest literature, even in early texts.

## II

Harrison's 'shadow' aspect is probably the most famous. The forest both hides and embodies the 'primitive terror' (Eliot 1944:39) that threatens civilized life, its consciousness and enlightenment. Christianity, whose 'light of the world' metaphor gives strength to its traditional opposition to the older, tree-worshipping religions, from the beginning set itself against the 'heathen groves' of these other beliefs (Schama 1995:227). A forest is dark even in daylight and its trees, which may trammel and confuse the clearest pathway, always offer concealment to what we fear,

in reality or in our imagination. A forest is a place where we are watched by the wild beast, the fugitive and the shapeless monster; it is the breeding ground of terrors and the mirror of the unconscious. William Blake writes of the ‘forests of the night’ as though the night itself possesses them. They function in his lyric as the dreamlike backdrop to the ‘deadly terrors’ of a ‘Tyger’ whose bright ‘burning’ is the result of almost unspeakable violence on the part of a creator of dubious morality:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

.....

And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee? (Blake 1972:214).

Probably the most famous folktale using the forest’s terrors as the main fulcrum of its plot is ‘Little Red Riding Hood’. This story remains a kind of archetype for the Western or Westernized child, even more than those other forest tales—‘Snow White’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty’. For Little Red Riding Hood’s forest contains not only the possibility of getting lost or meeting dangerous strangers, it also includes and fosters that fearful predator from the European past, the wolf. Red Riding Hood is perhaps not sufficiently intimidated by the forest and its denizens. Instead of hurrying mutely past the wood’s dark

perils, she stops to talk to a wolf, thereby bringing disaster to herself and her family. However, the story as we encounter it today usually follows the shape of the Grimm brothers' version (called by them 'Little Red-Cap'), and therefore may be read in the context of their whole collection of tales, in which forests are not always hostile places. In fact, according to Harrison, forests in these tales are places more of restoration than of loss, and they 'represent the ancient unity of nature' towards which the Brothers Grimm, like so many of their Romantic contemporaries, yearned with a poignant nostalgia (Harrison 1992:170). Though the wolf manages to trick Red Riding Hood and devour her and her grandmother, another character who truly understands the forest and its ways—the Huntsman—emerges from among the trees to save them and wreak justice on the wolf, teaching the child a lesson in prudence and obedience at the same time.

Going back further than the Grimm brothers to the fourteenth century, we find in the anonymous narrative poem *Sir Gawain and the Grene Gome* a graphic evocation of the terrors and discomforts of the medieval forest. Gawain, leaving the civility of Arthur's court in fulfilment of his promise to find the Green Knight on New Year's Day, quests northward from Camelot to the 'wilderness of Wirale' (1970:701) where old, tree-revering religions are still practised (Phelps 1993:324) and where many enemies dwell:

Sumwhile with wormes he werres, and with wolves als,  
Sumwhile with wodwos, that woned in the knarres,  
Both with bulles and beres, and bores otherwhile,  
And etaines, that him aneled of the high felle (1970:720-723).

But, for a seasoned warrior, not even the 'wodwos' are as difficult to bear as the elements and the outdoors in bitter winter:

For werre wrathed him not so much, that winter was wors,  
When the cold clere water fro the cloudes shadde,  
And fres ere hit falle might to the fale erthe;  
Nere slain with the sleet he sleped in his ernes  
Mo nightes then innowe in naked rokkes,  
There as claterende fro the crest the cold borne rennes,  
And henges high over his hed in hard iisse-ikkles (1970:726-732).

This vivid realization of the hardships of sleeping outside in metal armour in winter is the background to the description of that ‘castel the comlokest that ever knight aght’ which appears to end Gawain’s quest for the moment. Unlike the confusions of the wilderness, in which all is muddled together:

hore okes ful huge a hundred togeder;  
The hasel and the haghthorne were harled al samen  
With rugh raged moss railed anywhere (1970:742-745)

the castle discriminates itself from its background in such clear outline and detail ‘That pared out of papure purely hit semed’ (1970:802). Everything inside, from the courtesy of the lord and lady to the ‘cheier before the chimney [where] charcoal brenned’ is the antithesis of the forest so triumphantly excluded in the warmth, brightness, richness of colour in garment and furniture and in the ceremoniousness of the lord’s apparently Christian household, fasting luxuriously this Christmas Eve on

fele kin fishes:  
Some baken in brede, sum brad on the gledes,  
Sum sothen, sum in sewe savoured with spices (1970:890-892).

So far *Sir Gawain and the Grene Gome* demonstrates in brilliant imagery the traditional antagonism between civilization and the savage forest, the fact that, in Harrison’s words, ‘the law of civilization define[s] itself from the outset over and against the forests’ (1992:2). However, even so early a poem complicates this dichotomy and blurs its borders with ironies, not least of which is the fact that Gawain’s most difficult trial occurs not among the trees but indoors, enclosed within the warm and apparently hospitable walls of his host’s house. The greatest danger for Gawain as for many other protagonists is to be found not in the perilous journey or the magical encounter in the forest glade but in the complex intrigues of civilized society. The Lady’s temptation of Gawain while he lies in his bed in the tower each morning is not even of a directly sexual nature; she offers him witty conversation and gifts—the most fatal of which is not the kiss but the green girdle which she persuades him to believe is a talisman against physical harm. One of the

unexpected morals of this tale is that the castle is more dangerous than the forest.

### III

The second aspect of the forest, dependent on Christian morality, is as a place of wandering, or error. *Errare* means 'to wander', a concept invested with moral danger within the Bunyanesque allegory of a life journey for which there is only one correct path (*rectus* meaning both 'right' and 'straight'—the opposite of 'erroneous', 'mistaken' or 'astray'). Wandering is almost compulsory, amongst trees. In the famous opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*, the '*selva oscura*' or 'dark wood' is itself the antithesis of '*la diritta via*', the 'direct way' that the poet has irretrievably lost:

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
Che la diritta via era smarrita.  
Ahi quanto a dir qual era e cosa dura  
Esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte  
Che nel pensier rinova la paura!* (1970:1.1-6).

(Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, ragged, harsh; the very thought of it renews the fear!) (Trans Singleton 1970:1.1-6).

Of course, this initial wandering is the first turn that, two cantos later, brings Dante to the gate of hell, where every hope must be abandoned by those entering, all of whom have supposedly strayed from '*la diritta via*' into a dark and savage wood (see Harrison 1992: 81-87).

Like *La Commedia*, Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is an allegorical text, but its type of allegory is generally quite different and more multivalent than Dante's. However, early in the first canto of the first book, two of his characters follow Dante's example and stray into error in a forest. Their process of wandering is much more carefully unfolded than Dante's, whose loss of the 'straight way' is revealed as a



sudden *fait accompli* in the first tercet of his poem. Redcrosse and Una's detour starts quite innocently when they seek shelter from a rainstorm under the branches and then, gradually, as they take increasing pleasure from the beauty and variety of trees, they find that their 'delight' has 'beguile[d]' their sense of direction:

Led with delight, they thus beguile the way,  
Vntill the blustering storme is ouerblowne:  
When weening to returne, whence they did stray,  
They cannot finde that path, which first was showne,  
But wander too and fro in wayes vnknowne,  
Furthest from end then, when they neerest weene,  
That makes them doubt, their wits be not their owne:  
So many pathes, so many turnings seene,  
That which of them to take, in diuerse doubt they been  
(1970:1.1.10).

The forest has led them to a digression from their great quest—to rid Una's parents' kingdom of a 'Dragon horrible and stearne' (1970:1.1.3)—and the fact that innocent delight in nature is the lure does not make their fault any less serious. 'This is the wandering wood, this Errours den' (1970:1.1.13), the more experienced Una tells her young knight as they reach the obscure centre of the 'thickest woods' (1970:1.1.11), and indeed a hideous monster is concealed here, which only the 'litle glooming light' (1970:1.1.14) of Redcrosse's virtue reflected in his armour illuminates at all. His battle with Error is his first trial, in which he is—thanks to Una's intervention—ultimately successful, but it is a rather ignominious victory, since Error is no handsome dragon but a stinking beast that evokes nothing but disgust in knight and reader alike:

Therewith she spewd out of her filthy maw  
A floud of poison horrible and blacke,  
Full of great lumpes of flesh and gobbets raw,  
Which stunck so vildly, that it forst him slacke  
His grasping hold (1970:1.1.20).

The simple moral contained in this allegory suggests that no pleasures are innocent and that all wandering is into sin, but Spenser's

meanings are invariably more complex than this. Redcrosse is in any case a 'knight-errant', and his wandering leads him successfully through his first knightly trial, just as, in the end, Dante's errantry brings him via hell and purgatory to a vision of the nine light-infused spheres of heaven.

#### IV

The third striking aspect of the forest in Western literature is much more positive than the first two. Alexander Porteous, following John Evelyn's seventeenth-century forestry treatise, *Sylva*, suggests that Paradise itself may have been a kind of forest grove (Porteous [1928] 2002:47); and Simon Schama, analyzing the Lithuanian forest in northern European literature, wonders whether it represents Arcadia to disinherited Polish authors (1995:49). However, the good side of the forest is not usually quite as unmixed a blessing as this. More often than it appears as an Edenic ideal, it features as a shelter to which the outlaw or the world-weary sufferer can resort in times of trouble.

The archetypal outlaw is of course Robin Hood who, even in the earliest ballads is always a forest dweller, finding in the woodlands a happier alternative to life in the city, village or other permanent human settlement. For Robin and his merry men, a kind of anachronistic Romantic appreciation of nature is a consequence of their rejection of the unjust society that has disinherited and condemned them. The following quotation comprises the first two stanzas of 'Robyn Hode and the Munke', the earliest Robin Hood ballad found in manuscript. Dating—as a written artefact—from the mid-fifteenth century, it is probably much older than this, since ballads belong to the ephemeral oral tradition:

In somer, when \_e shawes be sheyne  
And leves be large and long,  
Hit is full mery in feyre foreste  
To here \_e foulys song;

To see \_e dere draw to \_e dale  
And leve \_e hilles hee,  
And shadow hem in leves grene

Vunder \_e grene-wode tre (Kinsley 1989:405-406).

In this opening contextualization of the exciting tale to follow, the forest that hides and protects outlaws naturally comes to be appreciated, at least in ‘somer’, for its beauty, its protective shade and pleasant birdsong, and also for the noble sport of hunting, amply and illegally provided there. (As Schama explains at length, in England after the Norman invasion, nearly all the forests were the king’s personal property, their timber and wild animals forbidden to everyone except the monarch [1995:139-174].) What may have begun as an uncomfortable refuge in a time of necessity has already become a haven of beauty and freedom.

But it is Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* that really develops the aesthetic of the forest pastoral, the ‘golden world’ (1973:1.1.112) to which the main characters retreat in the face of the usurping Duke Frederick. In the Forest of Arden they live a simpler, more virtuous life than they had at the court; Schama claims that, in contrast to Dante, who loses himself in his dark wood, these characters are able to ‘[find themselves]’. He goes on to assert that:

Greenwood . . . is the upside-down world of the Renaissance court: a place where the conventions of gender and rank are *temporarily* reversed in the interest of discovering truth, love, freedom, and, above all, justice (1995:141).

However, even in *As You Like It*, the forest is not quite Utopia; it is always only a *temporary* respite from civilization’s strife and complexity. Duke Senior and his followers, with the striking exception of the melancholic Jacques, return to their court as soon as Duke Frederick abdicates. Moreover, the Forest of Arden is not depicted as an unreal Arcadia without weather or seasons. Amiens and Jacques’s song, ‘Under the greenwood tree’ shows a forest purged of its wolves and wodwos but not of other, personified adversaries: ‘Here shall [we] see / No enemy / Save winter and rough weather’ (1973:2.5.1-8). Even here the elements bring their periodic discomfort, though *As You Like It*, unlike many of Shakespeare’s more sombre plays, portrays no cruel tempests. And nature’s discomforts, embodied in the ‘winter wind’ are ‘not so unkind / As man’s ingratitude’, the play’s other famous song

asserts (1973:2.7.175-177). Even in its harsh mood, the forest offers a kinder embrace than malicious humankind.

In both American and European literature, the great North American wilderness mostly figures as a sympathetic refuge. As in Conrad's much less optimistic view of the African forest, the American forest seemed to take its colonizers back in time to their own primordial origins, but envisaged in terms of beauty, strength and innocence rather than, as in *Heart of Darkness*, bestiality and abomination. Romantic writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau regarded forests or woods much as William Wordsworth saw mountains, as places of power and renewal. In 1845, Thoreau actually retreated from 'civilized life' into the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived alone in a rough cabin for over two years (Thoreau 1983:54). His account of this experience is included in *Walden*, his most famous work, which is a critique of modern life. Though Thoreau's narrator, like Duke Senior, returns to civilization at the end of the book, he concludes that the wilderness which he has learned to inhabit is necessary to humanity as a corrective to narrow perspectives and as refreshment for the jaded eye. The sublimity and mystery that he apprehends in the forest represent an essential balance to the aspirations and stresses of communal life:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness .... At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable .... We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigour, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder cloud and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander (1983:365-366).

Thoreau has remained a kind of textbook for conservationists precisely because he manages to articulate nostalgia for the sublime terrors of the old view of the forest whilst retaining a pragmatic sense of nature's usefulness to the well-adjusted human psyche. Not exactly as in Umuofia, a recognition of the forest's mana encourages a respectful

coexistence of humans and the natural world. The forest, like other manifestations of nature, is restorative because it retains its mystery, in which an element of the old fear persists.

This mysterious element is what motivates Robert Frost's most famous lyric, 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', too. The speaker in this poem sees the forest as 'lovely, dark and deep', a detour holding the fearful attractiveness of a dream—but a dream that would distract him from his commitment to the everyday world:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep (1973:130).

The speaker resists with difficulty his desire to remain in the forest's beckoning 'lovel[iness]' that is also ominously 'dark and deep' in this oddly ambivalent little poem.

Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* and other works presents the New England forest even more ambivalently. In Pearl's stories of the 'Black Man', who 'haunts [the] forest' (1970:202), primitive and heathen elements appear to predominate, but the forest is also a reconciler of lovers, protecting the secrecy of their strange meeting and offering its gloom and chiaroscuro as a commentary on the inevitability of human confusion and sorrow:

The road, after the two wayfarers had crossed from the peninsula to the mainland, was no other than a footpath. It straggled onward into the mystery of the primeval forest. This hemmed it in so narrowly, and stood so black and dense on either side, and disclosed such imperfect glimpses of the sky above, that, to Hester's mind, it imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which she had so long been wandering. The day was chill and sombre. Overhead was a gray expanse of cloud, slightly stirred, however, by a breeze; so that a gleam of flickering sunshine might now and then be seen at its solitary play along the path (1970:201).

Hester's allegory of a 'moral wilderness', akin to Dante's '*selva oscura*', is not shared by the narrator, who sees in the forest's numinous depths a more sympathetic presence. Again and again the 'mystery',

‘melancholy’, ‘shadow’ and ‘gloom of this dark forest’ are emphasized, and yet the elusive sunlight pours down in a ‘flood’ on Hester as she temporarily casts the scarlet letter from her and lets her beautiful hair down before Arthur Dimmesdale, her erstwhile lover. Commenting on this scene, in which he claims that Hester ‘achieves her apotheosis’, Keith Sagar in his recent book, *Literature and the Crime Against Nature*, sees the forest as possessing a spirit of freedom and wildness that, while harmonizing with Hester’s spontaneous sexuality, is totally opposed to the Puritan values of her seventeenth-century New England community (2005:210-212). But the wilderness is not always presented in *The Scarlet Letter* in this way. After Hester retrieves her letter ‘A’ and confines her hair again, the forest becomes once more associated with darkness rather than light and with its accustomed sorrow, as does the tenor of the characters’ lives (1970:227-229).

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s famous opening exclamation in ‘Evangeline’, ‘This is the forest primeval’, repeated as a refrain in other parts of the narrative, speaks of an environment whose overwhelming sombreness echoes the sorrowful forest of *The Scarlet Letter*. His forest’s apparent sympathy with human tragedy, too, is evident in the opening description of trees and topography:

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the  
hemlocks,  
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the  
twilight,  
Stand like Druids of old, with voices sad and prophetic,  
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.  
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighbouring ocean  
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.  
This is the forest primeval; but where are the hearts that  
beneath it  
Leaped like the roe, when he hears in the woodland the voice of  
the huntsman?  
Where is the thatch-roofed village, the home of Acadian  
farmers,—  
Men whose lives glided on like rivers that water the woodlands  
(1970:53).

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To Longfellow the Canadian forest holds no primitive or supernatural terrors for these bucolic Acadians whose ‘beautiful village of Grand-Pré’ (1970:53) seems an extension of the natural world. Though their forest setting does not in the end protect them from the injustices of the Old World (the English destroy their village), it is implicated in the freedom and justice of their little world while it lasts:

Alike they were free from  
Fear, that reigns with the tyrant, and envy, the vice of republics.  
Neither locks had they to their doors, nor bars to their windows  
(1970:54).

Even the stranger forests that Evangeline encounters in the American South during her long search for her lover Gabriel repeat the prophetic sorrow:

Lovely the moonlight was as it glanced and gleamed on the  
water,  
Gleamed on the columns of cypress and cedar sustaining the  
arches,  
Down through whose broken vaults it fell as through chinks in a  
ruin.  
Dreamlike, and indistinct, and strange were all things around  
them;  
And o’er their spirits there came a feeling of wonder and  
sadness—,  
Strange forebodings of ill, unseen and that cannot be compassed  
(1970:71).

But the North American forest is not always portrayed as gloomily as this. Daniel Boone has for a long time epitomized the frontiersman for whom the forest is a benevolent and invigorating habitat. (Natty Bumppo of James Fenimore Cooper’s ‘Leatherstocking’ tales is another such figure.) Byron devotes seven unusually non-ironic stanzas of his *Don Juan* to praise of Boone and his home amongst the ‘wilds of deepest maze’ (1928:8.61). Here are four of them:

Crime came not near him—she is not the child  
Of solitude; Health shrank not from him—for

Her home is in the rarely trodden wild,  
Where if men seek her not, and death be more  
Their choice than life, forgive them, as beguiled  
By habit to what their own hearts abhor—  
In cities caged. The present case in point I  
Cite is, that Boon lived hunting up to ninety;

And, what's still stranger, left behind a name  
For which men vainly decimate the throng,  
Not only famous, but of that *good* fame,  
Without which Glory's but a tavern song—  
Simple, serene, the antipodes of shame,  
Which Hate nor Envy e'er could tinge with wrong;  
An active hermit, even in age the child  
Of Nature, or the Man of Ross run wild.

'T is true he shrank from men even of his nation,  
When they built up unto his darling trees,—  
He moved some hundred miles off, for a station  
Where there were fewer houses and more ease;  
The inconvenience of civilisation  
Is, that you neither can be pleased nor please;  
But where he met the individual man,  
He showed himself as kind as mortal can.

He was not all alone: around him grew  
A sylvan tribe of children of the chase,  
Whose young, unawaken'd world was ever new,  
Nor sword nor sorrow yet had left a trace  
On her unwrinkled brow, nor could you view  
A frown on Nature's or on human face;  
The free-born forest found and kept them free,  
And fresh as is a torrent or a tree (1928:8.62-65).

In Byron's version of the Boone family, the forest really does seem to be an Eden, as Porteous suggests it may be ([1928] 2002:47). Certainly the 'unawaken'd' newness and innocence of the children suggests an unfallen state not possible closer to 'civilization's' crowds and corruptions.



Felicia Hemans develops a variant of this Romantic-Edenic woodland in 'The Forest Sanctuary', published in 1825, only a year after the composition of *Don Juan* was brought to an end by Byron's death. The speaker in Hemans's once-popular but now little-read poem is a Spanish Protestant who has fled his own country for the North American wilderness. The new environment does succeed in calming and consoling his heart to some extent, immersing him in 'this hush of woods, reposing' (nd:1.2) and reminding him even of God's 'presence in the quiet and dim, / And whispery woods' (nd:1.7), but he has been too deeply harmed by torture, confinement and the memory of martyred friends for real peace to be possible for him:

Bring me the sounding of the torrent-water,  
With yet a nearer swell—fresh breeze,  
And river, darkening ne'er with hues of slaughter  
Thy wave's pure silvery green,—and shining lake,  
Spread far before my cabin, with thy zone  
Of ancient woods, ye chainless things and lone!  
Send voices through the forest aisles, and make  
Glad music round me, that my soul may dare,  
Cheered by such tones, to look back on a dungeon's air! (nd:2.1)

Throughout the poem, he is almost obsessively compelled to 'look back' to his 'own soft skies', his 'native Spain' his 'lineage' and 'father's land' and his personally mourned 'dead' who 'rest not here' (nd:1.2). He must tell—and retell—his story, 'pour[ing]' it into 'the desert's ear' (nd:1.10), in the absence of a human receiver. Though he claims at the end to learn from the starlit forest 'the might / Of solitude' (nd:2.76), he continually populates this solitude with the troubling presences of his past: the wife who died at sea on the journey out and the friends martyred for their faith back in Spain.

But, like Boone, he is not the only human figure against this backdrop of trees. He has brought his young son with him to the New World and parts of the poem are addressed to the child:

Now sport, for thou art free, the bright birds chasing  
Whose wings waft star-like gleams from tree to tree;  
Or with the fawn, thy swift wood-playmate racing,  
Sport on, my joyous child! For thou art free!

Yes, on that day I took thee to my heart,  
And inly vowed, for thee a better part  
To choose; that so thy sunny bursts of glee  
Should wake no more dim thoughts of far-seen woe,  
But, gladdening fearless eyes, flow on—as now they flow.

Thou hast a rich world round thee:—Mighty shades  
Weaving their gorgeous tracery o'er thy head,  
With the light melting through their high arcades,  
As through a pillared cloister's: but the dead  
Sleep not beneath; nor doth the sunbeam pass  
To marble shrines through rainbow-tinted glass;  
Yet thou, by fount and forest-murmur led  
To worship, thou art blest!—to thee is shown  
Earth in her holy pomp, decked for her God alone (nd:1.92-93).

The child has become a true denizen of these woods, starting anew without history, innocent of sorrow and cruelty. Whereas memory of the martyred 'dead' who do not 'sleep' on this shore is a sacred burden for the father, whose mind turns continually back to Spain, 'wak[ing] ... dim thoughts of far-seen woe', the child is 'free' of all memory except of the 'sport[ive]' and 'gladdening' natural world. Nevertheless, he is brought to a virtuous 'worship' of the speaker's God by a kind of natural religion as surely as the chastened captive ready to die at the stake for his faith. The forest not only protects its true child from the agonies of human oppression and error, but it crowns him with the 'gorgeous tracery' of its beauty and touches him to worship with the numinous prompting of its sublimity.

## V

To claim that these three aspects of the Western literary forest are totally distinct is of course misleading. Though Hemans's forest is purged of both evil and error, it nevertheless depends on the ancient terror of wilderness for the numinous power with which it is invested. It represents as well a digression from the straight lines of crime and punishment, or intolerant tyranny and martyrdom, that pertain back in the Old World. In fact, most versions of the forest as refuge revise the 'primitive terror' (Eliot 1944:39) aspect of the wilderness, while many of them also see

the forest as an earthly paradise into which characters wander by mistake or design while fleeing from the cruel and inexorable laws of the fallen world. Wandering may be ironized; it depends from whose point of view the traveller is observed as to whether his or her woodland digression is morally wrong. According to the great sheep-and-goat calculation of the older Calvinist or Catholic doctrines, an excursion from the one straight path must carry the traveller into sin and judgement, but in a more complex moral universe there are many paths to redemption and even magical passages back to unfallen innocence.

And not only the outlaw and refugee stories are inclusive of all three forest symbols. Little Red Riding Hood's forest is, as already mentioned, not wholly terrifying, for it provides a livelihood and sources of wisdom for the huntsman. And, clearly, her stopping to talk to a wolf is a moral error which leads her into the labyrinth. Gawain suffers from the terrors of the forest, but learns in the end that the wilderness may be a refuge from the temptations and perplexities of society. Though he seems to wander in the forest, it is in the castle that he actually goes astray. In both Dante and Spenser the erroneous paths that lead into the obscure wood bring them to terrifying encounters, though in Spenser the wood is at first perceived as a refuge from the weather. And, in the end, these paths do actually return the protagonists to the right road, after severe tests of their courage and perspicacity.

What the body of these texts shows is that the forest is a symbol of great power in Western literature and thought but that, like all symbols, its meanings are multivalent and can be reconstructed. The forest-civilization antithesis is seductive, but it is not the only way of seeing and perhaps, at a time when the world's forests are endangered, it is an archaic and unproductive construction—at least in its Manichean form. Many texts, from 'Robyn Hode and the Munke' to 'Evangeline', show the possibility of human beings and forests coexisting symbiotically, and this type of relationship may form the basis of a better narrative for the present time.

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