

FORESTS OF THE NIGHT: TOPOGRAPHIES OF THE SACRED IN EUROPEAN ROMANTICISIM

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PROLOGUE: THE ADA TREE

Earlier this year I walked for the first time in a myrtle beech forest, not far from Powelltown in Victoria, once the site of Australia's largest timber-processing plant. It was quite late in the afternoon when we arrived there. Lambent late summer sunlight shimmered in the delicate emerald green foliage above our heads and slanted downward through a tangle of branches and ferns to cast a golden glow on the path where our feet fell softly on fallen leaves. Overwhelmed by the beauty of this remnant old-growth rainforest, we felt simply to be here was a blessing and a joy. However, we had not yet reached the goal of our walk, the end to which all paths here converge: the Ada tree. If there was a presiding spirit of this place, then surely this magnificent mountain ash was she. Over three hundred years old, with a circumference of 15 metres and a height of 76, she towers above the deciduous trees whose tips waver beneath her lower branches. She is the grand matriarch of the forest, sole survivor of the other giants who once grew here. For the Koories who once dwelt in this region, she may well have been a Dreaming tree, the deep clefts in her swelling trunk proclaiming her as female; clearing the vaginal folds of such trees so that their life-giving energies could continue to flow out to the surrounding country was customarily women's business. For these people, all but decimated even before most of the mountain ash were felled, spirit of place was certainly the source of the sacred. To those who for generations untold had honoured and tended trees such as these – while nonetheless gradually changing the balance of deciduous and eucalypt cover through their use of fire – the wild white men who hailed them only with axes, sometimes even risking their own lives in the process, as if provoked by the very might and

majesty of the largest trees to a display of manly defiance, would have seemed mad, quite mad. I do not know whether these men and their masters had any cultural memory of the reverence once bestowed by their own distant forbears on certain trees, above all oaks, in pre-Christian Europe. If so, it appears that such reverence was not readily transferable to the alien flora of this strange south land. In the decision to spare this tree and to personalise her with a name, it might nonetheless be possible to see a dawning respect; and yet, this very naming, no doubt after some more-or-less powerful white man's wife, was in itself also a kind of appropriation. Even in the most beautiful and to some perhaps still sacred places in Australia, we cannot long forget that we walk in wounded space:¹ space, that is, that is scarred by ecological violence, as well as pitted with sites where human life too has been violently disrupted and destroyed in the process of colonisation.

"UNTER ALLEN WIPFELN IST RUH..."

Ironically, perhaps, the British colonisation of Australia, resulting in the profanation of its land as mere resource as well as the devastation of the life and culture of its indigenous population, was launched at the very moment when in Europe artists, writers, philosophers and even some scientists were recovering and reinterpreting their own native traditions of earth honouring. This Romantic remembering is itself presently being recalled as a tradition that might be drawn upon as we endeavour to rearticulate a non-instrumental view of nature more in keeping with the ecological concerns of the present and more respectful of the interests of indigenous peoples. This recollection, moreover, is not merely academic.

A few years ago, for instance, the magazine published by Germany's largest environmental organisation ran an article entitled, "Unter allen Wipfeln ist Ruh" ("Under all tree-tops is still"). This is an allusion to one of Goethe's most famous poems, originally inscribed as a piece of graffiti on the wooden wall of a hunting hut on a forested hill-top (the Knickelhahn near

Ilmenau) in the Duchy of Weimar on the 6th September 1780, but not published until 1815 under the title "Wandrer's Nachtlid" ("Wanderer's Night-song").² Read in situ (which we can no longer do, as the hut burnt down in 1870!), this inscription conveys to the weary wayfarer a promise of peace and rest, which it is implied will come to him or her in and through the surrounding landscape, falling like a benediction from above the motionless mountain peaks, down through the tree-tops, where barely a breath of wind can be sensed, where even the birds are, for the moment, quiet. The progression of lines traces this descent from the seemingly absolute stillness of the inorganic realm of rock, down through the relative and temporary quiet of the plant and animal kingdoms, to the level of the human reader who is enfolded imaginatively, if not literally, by the vespertine forest, but who is posited as not yet partaking of the peace of this beneficent place. We are called upon to wait, then we too will soon "be at rest". For the reader of Goethe's graffiti, this promise might have been realised in the physical rest associated with reaching the hut after an arduous climb. On another level, however, the exhortation to "wait" could be read as a call to attention, inviting us to enter into the wordless, yet meaningful, serenity of the sylvan landscape conjured up by Goethe's text, forgetting for the moment the chatter and striving of the workaday human world. Or are we by implication called to seek such serenity beyond the printed page by finding our own locus of forested meditation? Or is the promised peace ultimately that of our last "resting place", connoting death perhaps as dissolution back into the more-than-human life of the land?

While the "Ruh" of Goethe's poem is multivalent, the stillness now said to be obtaining beneath the tree-tops of Germany's forests is simply ominous, for it has been brought about by lethal "acid rain" generated by the destructive technologies of today's workaday human world. Now that the life-world of nature has in Europe and elsewhere been so thoroughly colonised by the imperatives of production, it seems unlikely that the beneficent spirit of the forest sung up by Goethe could continue to provide any release from chatter and striving; although the evidence of its

wounding certainly causes pause for thought. In alluding to Goethe's poem, this article implies that as the ecosystem of the forest comes under threat we stand to lose more than a source of oxygen and a sink for carbon dioxide, more than a bit of attractive scenery for tourists and hikers. The death of the forest is a cause for mourning because, as Goethe suggests, human well-being, both physical and spiritual, is intimately bound up with the life of the land. Sustained and enraptured by the flourishing of its more than human forms, whether or not these have also been shaped by human hands, we know ourselves part of something greater than ourselves. Indeed, as Goethe wrote in 1785 in connection with his studies of Spinoza, it is above all in nature that we are called upon to seek the divine.³

One would never guess from Goethe's poem that it was nonetheless written at a time when population growth, the exporting of wood for ship-building and the expansion of small-scale, wood-fuelled manufacturing had caused a major ecological crisis in German forests. The so-called "Wood Emergency" ("Holznot") led initially to a flood of treatises and pamphlets calling for an end to the over-exploitation of the forests and subsequently to the foundation of a new academic discipline, forestry (Forstwirtschaft), which developed modern forest management strategies based on the principle of sustainability.⁴ Goethe, a Privy Councillor in the Weimar court with wide-ranging responsibilities in the areas of mining and road-building as well as finances and even the military, was himself party to discussions about the rational use of forests.⁵ However, while the emergent discourse of sustainable forestry treated them merely as a natural resource to be carefully "husbanded" in the interests of long-term economic gain, the literary and philosophical discourses of the Romantic period – of which Goethe's poem stands as an early example – sought to return to the forests an aura of the sacred. In order to counter the prevalence of a merely instrumental form of rationality, the Romantics went back before the Enlightenment in search of intellectual, artistic and spiritual resources with which to reenchant the world – back to alchemy and Neo-Platonism, back to ancient myths and the oral traditions of the countryside. What they came up with was nonetheless

generally quite new, such as E. T. A. Hoffmann's literary explorations, nearly a century before Freud, of the "inner nature" of the unconscious, or Schelling's surprisingly contemporary philosophy of nature as dynamic, self-organising, unified in its diversity and, in a sense, ensouled – a philosophy of nature which inspired a whole generation of Romantic scientists to seek to overcome Newtonian mechanistic reductionism in ways that inspire new interest in the postmodern present. Needless to say, however, to "romanticise the world", as Novalis put it, was potentially also to enter into dangerous territory.

SPECTRES IN THE FOREST

Joseph von Eichendorff, for example, writing at the other end of the spectrum of German Romanticism from Goethe, both generationally and philosophically, viewed nature with profound ambivalence. The task of literature, Eichendorff wrote, was to "mediate the eternal with the earthly" ("die Vermittlung des Ewigen und des Irdischen").⁶ In his own nature poetry he sought to achieve this by disclosing the spiritual meaning encrypted in the material physiognomy of particular landscapes. He referred to poetry as a "divining rod" ("Wuenschelrute"), allowing the poet to tap into and mediate the heavenly song slumbering in all earthly things. Following Herder, he saw folksong as the most authentic voicing of nature and drew widely on its forms and imagery in his writing. However, he came to reject the pantheistic tendencies of some of the earlier Romantics in favour of a fairly orthodox version of the Roman Catholic faith in which he was raised. The "book of nature" became legible, in his view, only when read in the clear light of Christian revelation as referring us back to its transcendent Author: the source of the sacred thus lay not so much in any indwelling spirit of place as in an immaterial Beyond. Nature itself, unredeemed by Christian revelation, was potentially more malign than divine, its ceaseless whisperings speaking siren-like to our own archaic

inner nature, awakening longings – and fears – that continually threatened to draw us away from the safe terrain of righteous living.

This ambivalence of nature emerges most clearly in Eichendorff's re-mythologisations of the forest. Eichendorff – whose name, incidentally, declares that he is "of the village of oaks" – is Germany's preeminent poet of sylvan places; but his forests are Janus-faced. In "Abschied" ("Departure"), for example, originally written as a poem of leave-taking from the wooded landscape of his childhood in East Silesia (deep in present day southern Poland), the text of the forest, read at dawn, is said to convey a "calm and earnest word of right action and love", which will stay with the lyrical subject when he finds himself alone, a "stranger in strange places", on busy city streets. Here, the spirit of the forest mediates an ethos, which for Eichendorff carried Christian connotations, figuring as a source of moral guidance, even for those who have left it behind for more urban places. In "An die Meisten" ("To the Majority"), also written in 1810 during the German "wars of liberation" ("Freiheitskriege") against Napoleon, in which Eichendorff, together with many other German Romantics took part as a volunteer, this morally uplifting aspect of the forest is given a patriotic spin. Now, the forest, its very stems interwoven in fraternal solidarity, is posited as the dwelling place of the "old law" – presumably Germanic customary law as opposed to the "code Napoleon" – calling the people to arms and fortifying a "new breed" to undertake "German deeds". Whereas in England the political ethos of the forest tended towards the radical egalitarianism of Robin Hood's legendary "greenwood", in Germany the emphasis was more on national unity than on liberty, except in the sense of freedom from foreign domination. As Simon Schama (1995) has argued, the importance of the forest as a symbol of German national identity owes much to Tacitus' description of oak-worshipping quasi-noble Germanic savages in *Germania* (98) and his account in the *Annals* (115-7) of the spectacular annihilation of three entire Roman legions by the Cherusci, led by their Roman-trained chief Arminius, in the dark depths of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE. The elevation of Arminius, or Hermann, to the status of paramount hero of an

as yet imaginary German nation began in the 18th century, and his shade was much invoked during the Napoleonic Wars when Latinate Romans could readily stand in for Latinate French – and vice versa. For contemporary viewers of Caspar David Friedrich's *Chasseur in the Forest*, for example, the spirit haunting the sylvan darkness menacingly encircling this lone French soldier would have been readily recognisable as Hermann's. Eichendorff was among several German writers who embarked upon a Hermann-drama during this time, but he wisely abandoned it and subsequently became highly critical of the patriotic and quasi-pagan Teutomania that took off during the 1820s. In view of the fascistic redeployment of this Romantic celebration of the forest as bathed in the blood of the national enemy, I believe that it is vital that we too think critically about the historical background and political implications of certain cultural concretisations of spirit of place that could reemerge in the present. (In Germany, the Hermann monument in the Teutoburg Forest is once more a site of pilgrimage for neo-Nazi nationalists).

A rather different kind of spectre is invoked in the last Eichendorff poem I would like to discuss here briefly. "Waldgespräch" ("Forest Conversation") exemplifies the demonic aspect of Eichendorff's spiritual topography, embodied here in the form of a sylvan siren – a Lorelei, oddly uprooted from her rocky Rhineland home and grafted onto the figure of the man-hunting forest woman of Bohemian folklore (a figure, that is, who was considerably closer to home for Eichendorff).

"It's already late, it already grows cold,
Why ride you lonesome through the woods?
The forest is long, you are alone
You, beautiful bride! I'll take you home!" –

"Great is the deceit and cunning of men,
By pain my heart is rent,
The forest-horn strays here and there,
O flee! You know not who I am." –

"So richly arrayed is woman and stead,
So wondrous fair her youthful form,
Now I know you – God stand by me!
You are the witch, the Lorelei!" –

"You know me truly – from the high rock
 My castle silent looks deep into the Rhein.
 It's already late, it already grows cold,
 You will leave this forest never more!"⁷

It would be possible to read Eichendorff's text as a typically masculine fantasy of feminine evil, grounded in the repression of desires which have been projected outwards on to the Other – Nature objectified as Woman. Such a reading could no doubt find support in an analysis of the social psychology of Eichendorff's era. It would in my view nonetheless be overly reductive of some of the nuances of this text and its context. For a start it should be noted that, unlike the thoroughly amoral Bohemian forest woman, who steals men away from their brides simply because that is her archaic nature, Eichendorff's sylvan Lorelei has been given an all-too-human prehistory – she is, she implies, a victim of male "cunning and deceit",⁸ and far from luring men to their doom intentionally, she actually warns her interlocutor to flee. This uncanny forest spirit is then herself the product of male abuse of women, avenging precisely the kind of attitudes and actions that are implicit in her victim's opening words, in which, with scant regard for her intentions, he addresses her as his "beautiful bride" and declares that he will "take her home" (whether to her place or his, is unclear). Assuming that she is not in her proper place, being alone in the forest at nightfall, he discovers that he has himself stumbled into her domain, where he is out of his depth and far from welcome. There are shades of Diana and Actaeon here, for here too the hunter becomes the hunted. Entering the forest as a terrain in which to display his mastery of both women and nature, he is himself claimed by the forest, from which, we read, he will never more emerge. At a time when women were being subjected to a new (bourgeois) regime of patriarchal domination, inserted into a highly sentimentalised, yet still heirarchical domestic economy, Eichendorff seems to suggest that their mistreatment by men could send them wild. And at a time when the forests were being rendered calculable, geometricised and mathematicised, to a hitherto unknown degree,⁹

(Harrison, 1992:120-23), this text could be seen to reaffirm the unpredictable otherness of nature and the possibility of its ultimate resistance to human control. More generally, "Waldgespräch" reminds us that in a context of exploitation and abuse – both inter-human and ecological – we cannot be sure that the spirits of place we might conjure up will be benign.

CONCLUSION

In relation to our own explorations of spirit of place as source of the sacred, the historical perspective afforded by Romanticism is I believe helpful in alerting us to a number of unresolved issues and open questions. Are we to understand the sacred as coterminous with the material-spiritual unity of place as the land in which we dwell, and if so what ethical implications might this have for our treatment of the land? Alternatively, if we follow Eichendorff in taking the sacred significance of the land to have its origin in a divine Creator who precedes and transcends all created space, what might that mean for our ability to experience ourselves as truly at home in any particular earthly place? (For Eichendorff, not unlike Augustine, "home" was always elsewhere, with God, but not on earth.) To what extent are or should our notions of the sacred be shaped by local topography, and, conversely, to what extent is our apprehension of spirit of place mediated by cultural or psychological projections? What negotiations might be necessary to accommodate differing cultural constructions of spirit of place, and how can we guard against those which would categorise some people as enemy aliens with no place in our land? And finally, and perhaps most problematically, what happens to spirit of place in wounded space? How can we face up to rupture without engendering out of the shadow of our own guilt, shame, fear, anger or bitterness a purely vengeful version of the spirit now haunting our blood-stained and lacerated land? If the space we inhabit is wounded, from whence can we summon up the spirit of healing and reconciliation that we so badly need in the present? And what of the Ada tree? In what spirit might we – who are of many faiths and cultures – renew

the reverence of such trees today, noble survivors, as they are, but also silent witnesses of the carnage of colonisation?

REFERENCES

¹ The concept of "wounded" or "ruptured" space was developed by Emil Fackenheim (1982) with respect to the experience of the Holocaust, and is used by Deborah Bird Rose (1996) to image the Australian colonial context.

² "Over the hilltops all/Is still/Hardly a breath/Seems to ruffle/Any tree crest;/In the wood not one small bird's song./Only wait, before long/You too will rest." Trans. Michael Hamburger.

³ "Hier bin ich auf und unter Bergen, suche das Goettliche in herbis et lapidibus." (Letter to Jacobi, 9.6.1785); "Here I am up and under mountains, seeking the divine in *herbis et lapidibus*." Cit. in Conrady, Karl Otto, 1982, *Goethe. Leben und Werk*, vol. 1, Königstein, Ts.: Athenäum, 419.

⁴ Siemann, Wolfram, 1995, *Vom Staatenbund zum Nationalstaat. Deutschland 1806-1871*, Munich: Beck, 132-34; Radkau, Joachim, 1997, "The Wordy Worship of Nature and the Tacit Feeling for Nature in the History of German Forestry", in M. Teich et al. (eds), *Nature and Society in Historical Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., pp. 228-38.

⁵ Conrady, 416.

⁶ Goodbody, Axel, 1984, *Natursprache. Ein dichtungstheoretisches Konzept der Romantik und seine Wiederaufnahme in der modernen Naturlyrik*, Neumunster: Karl Wachholtz, 147.

⁷ With apologies to Eichendorff for my clumsy translation!

⁸ This prehistory is in keeping with Brentano's Lorelei ballad, Eichendorff's main source for the Lorelei legend.

⁹ Harrison, Robert Pogue, 1992, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 120-23.