

‘This was the order of human institutions: first the forests, after that the huts, then the villages, next the city and finally the academies.’

*Giambattista Vico, The New Science*

‘Each stage of the order represents a manner of dwelling...as the order of institutions follows its course, or as huts give way to villages and then to cities and finally to cosmopolitan academies, the forests move further and further away from the center of the clearings. At the center one eventually forgets that one is dwelling in a clearing. The center becomes utopic. The wider the circle of the clearing, the more the center is nowhere and the more the logos becomes reflective, abstract, universalistic, in essence ironic. Yet however wide the circle may get through the inertia of civic expansion, it presumably retains an edge of opacity where history meets the earth, where the human abode reaches its limits and where the *logos* preserves its native grounding. This edge is generally called a province. Only the province assures the containment of the center. When one ceases to dwell in a province, or when the province gets overtaken by the center, one finds oneself within the dispersed utopia of cities and academies. The provincial dweller knows that if you pull a rock from out of the ground and turn it upside down, you are likely to find on its underside a covert world of soil, roots, worms and insects. A non provincial dweller either never suspects or else tends to forget such a thing, for the stones that make up his city have already been abstracted from the ground, wiped clean and made to order. A province, in other words, is a place where stones have two sides.

The most one-sided stones of all are perhaps those that make up the walls of the academy. The moment thinking takes refuge within these walls and leaves the provinces of the mind, the nation or the empire, it can no longer remain radical...This gradual loss of an edge of opacity, where the human abode finds its limits on the earth, is part of the global story of civic expansionism. In the West its first and last victim has been the forest...forests mark the provincial edge of Western civilization, in the literal as well as imaginative domains. Although they were brought early on within the jurisdiction of public institutions (royal preserves, forest management, ecology, and so forth) they have nevertheless retained to this day their ancient associations in the cultural imagination. Their antecedence and outsideness with regard to the institutional order has not really changed in our minds. What has changed recently is our anxiety about the loss of an edge of exteriority.

The global problem of deforestation provokes unlikely reactions of concern these days among city dwellers, not only because of the enormity of the scale but also because in the

depths of cultural memory forests remain the correlate of human transcendence. We call it the loss of nature, or loss of wildlife habit, or the loss of biodiversity, but underlying the ecological concern is perhaps a much deeper apprehension about the disappearance of boundaries, without which the human abode loses its grounding. Somewhere we still sense - who know for how much longer? - that we make ourselves at home only in our estrangement, or in the *logos* of the finite. In the cultural memory of the West forests "correspond" to the exteriority of the *logos*. The outlaws, the heroes, the wanderers, the lovers, the saints, the persecuted, the outcasts, the bewildered, the ecstatic - these are among those who have sought out the forest's asylum...

Those who stay at home, who dwell strictly within the cleared space of the institutional order, are left homeless without the containment of the province. More essentially, they are left homeless the moment they are left without a provincial envoy who departs from the homeland and returns from afar with the message of estrangement. Such an envoy is not someone who leaves the province for the capitals of the world, returning with reports about the wonders of the metropolis, but rather the poet who departs in the opposite direction - beyond the bounds of the province and into the forest's underworld. This underworld is the earth in its enigmatic fatality.'

Robert Harrison

from *'Forests - The Shadow Of Civilization'*

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