

## The great pathos of trees<sup>1</sup>

IN THE SWEDISH province of Scania where I live, there is a sharp divide between north and south; in the north the forests of Göinge begin, the forests of freedom, the forests of the former partisans who fought the Swedes. These woods cross the borders with the province of Småland, where they continue.

The tree has an important mythological and concrete role in my life, as for instance the two tall birch-trees outside the window of my study. Without those trees the blue sky would only have been an empty scene without any connection with my imagination. But with the sunlight playing between the branches of the birches, the blue background becomes an inhabited world, a world of interacting elements.

Reading *Trees*<sup>2</sup>, Béla Hamvas' beautiful little collection of essays translated into English, I am struck by the same unusual feeling as when I read John Berger, an insight that the relation to the individual tree in nature could be personified, as if that tree with its characteristics had a soul, and therefore a direct and personal relation to the viewer.

John Berger wrote that a tree looked back at him, when he watched it. That kind of stillness, that kind of presence, is very unusual seen from an urban room nowadays. Because of that I return to this text by the Hungarian writer.

*Trees* is very different from another of his important books, *A Philosophy of wine*. It does not at all have the religious tone of the wine book, it is very close to its subject:

The great pathos of trees is their great ecstasy. This is the undulating swell of their brimfullness, their subconscious pulsation, their suffering of the swell, their warm, black velvet snake embrace. They do what life, this fever, does with them; but more: this is no mere fever, it is not an increase in something that is already there; it is a decrease. Something cooler, more deliquescent, more quiet, more simple, less demanding, more satisfying and more enduring.

What will I emphasize, reading these lines that contain both warmth and cold, pathos and endurance? What strikes me first is that Hamvas' language always



<sup>1</sup> Article published in *Kristianstadsbladet*, 6 July 2007. Photos courtesy Astrid Nydahl.

<sup>2</sup> Béla Hamvas, *Trees*, translated by Peter Sherwood, Editio M, Hungary, 2006. The essay *Trees* from *Baberligetkonyv* (*The Book of the Laurel-Grove*) dates from the 1930s or early 1940s. The English translation was published in the mid 1990s. For a brief general discussion on Hamvas, see *la lettre powysienne* n°14.

contains its own dialectics. The poetic beauty is embedded in the affirmation of contradictions, of opposite poles, because these could be both objectively and subjectively human. On the one hand Hamvas says that there is ecstasy in trees, and on the other that they are 'less demanding'. The pendulum goes back and forth and the language includes both the subconscious pulse and the acceptance of what life itself does to them, the trees. Do I forget that he is talking about trees? Then I go to the 'black velvet snake embrace'. Is it the Garden of Eden we are visiting? Since there is no answer to such a question I am content with the fact that the totality of trees, their families and species, is a paradise reflection of something forgotten, something in a long-distant past that we have to re-create, not least as memory and image. Because that is the way Hamvas looks at trees:

It is in unceasing contact with its nutriment. Its growth is unceasing. It is nourished by the earth. The tree ingests the earth, reaching even more deeply into its soil. Yet the tree is no parasite.

The tree stands where it stands. It is impossible for it to stand somewhere else. It grows where it was planted. In that sense the tree is the opposite of mankind, and also our guilty conscience. Modern man does everything possible to cut off his relation to the earth. Place is no longer his foundation, he has chosen breaking up, departure, travelling. His restless wandering puts him in instant contradiction to the tree, whose non-parasiting system of roots is one with earth, offers it

the chance to make a gift of itself. The binding tie is mutual: the roots drill deep into the soil for gain, while the earth draws the roots into itself, so that it may give.

At the same time Hamvas makes the images of the tree and man clear. Because of being rootless and restless, mankind is very much a parasite. Man's exploitation of the earth is in strong contradiction with the related on-the-spot-existence of the tree. In his rootless life man is burning all the fossil fuel underneath it, in the belief that earth will never see what it means. But like floods and hurricanes, the past is confronting mankind. The tree, which has been living in a mutual system with earth, is swept away at the same time as mankind's restless life is revealed. Or, as Anne-Marie Berglund<sup>3</sup> wrote:

Of course the forests remain. We are the ones who are undone.

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<sup>3</sup> Berglund, Anne-Marie, b. 1952, a Finnish-Swedish author. received in 2002 the Swedish Academy Doblougska prize, and is considered the Marguerite Duras of Swedish literature.

