

Being Homo Radix

Tiziano Fratus



On a cloudy day in April 2010, I stepped out of the car and conveyed myself into the embrace of the shadows of my first thousand-year-old sequoia, in the state park in Big Sur dedicated to John Pfeiffer (son of one of the first families to immigrate to this area). Something clicked inside of me. I have never quite understood whether ideas and words that had been thought and planted in me long before had matured, or if they materialized there beneath, in that waltz of shadows and half-light; I don't know what weight the literary and mythological heritage of writers like Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac carried, writers who lived and wrote novels and poetry here in Big Sur. I certainly welcomed with great satisfaction the surprise of seeing some of my poems translated into English for the journal *Ping Pong*, which is published once a year by the local Henry Miller Memorial Library, a library and cultural center built under the fronds of the sequoias by friends and fans of Miller after he departed for other, parallel worlds. Or whatever it is.

My curiosity for the large trees developed in the following months. As soon as I returned to Italy, I began to search for books on the subject of "long-standing, monumental trees and old-growth forests." There were not many. A few books, and often not in the catalogue. The lists from the State Forestry Corps go back to the 1980s, when the large trees were counted for the first time, region by region.

Some related phenomena. This was not yet a subject that interested the major publishers. Over a span of five years, the situation was turned on its head: a new law was dedicated to their protection; major publishers printed books dedicated to the trees, their beauty, and their history; many pictures began to make them immortal; youth associations valued them and brought them tourists and other curious people. Among the books sold we find, for example, *Abbracciare gli alberi* [*Embrace the Trees*], by the arboriculturist from Palermo, Giuseppe Barbera for Mondadori; *Tra la terra e il cielo* [*Between Earth and Sky*], by the scholar and American tree-hugger Nalini M. Nadkarni for Elliot; *Verde brillante* [*Brilliant Green*], by university researchers Viola Alessandra and Stefano Mancuso for Giunti; *Nel cuore delle foresta* [*In the Heart of the Forest*] by the Englishman Roger Deakin for EDT; *Grandi alberi del mondo* [*Great Trees of the World*] by the Irishman Thomas Pakenham (De Agostini); and my *Manuale del perfetto cercatore d'alberi* [*Manual of the Perfect Tree Seeker*] for Feltrinelli, *L'Italia è un bosco* [*Italy is a Forest*] and *Il libro delle foreste scolpite* [*The Book of Sculpted Forests*] for Laterza, *Il sussurro degli alberi* [*The Whisper of the Trees*] for Ediciclo. In addition, there are many excellent books written by novelists of our days, and I think of Mauro Corona, Erri De Luca, a long-seller *Il canto degli alberi* [*The Song of the Trees*] by Hermann Hesse, the poetry by Jacques Prevert, *Arboreto salvatico* [*Wild Woodland*] by Mario Rigoni Stern,

L'uomo che piantava gli alberi [The Man Who Planted Trees] by Jean Giono, *Il segreto del bosco vecchio* [The Secret of the Old Trees] by Dino Buzzati, *Il barone rampante* [The Baron in the Trees] by Italo Calvino.

Returning from the trip to California, I understood the concept of *Homo Radix*, root man, which I synthesized in the following words: *"I am a root man. I am a man that awoke as a tree, with leaves planted in the breath of the winds, a tree that collects stories transported and carried by other creatures. I am a root man that finds joy and peace in his new land. I am a man that found roots while traveling the world. A man that always searches for roots. I am a root man that circulates and attempts to build connections, and knowledge, with the environment. I am a man who becomes ever more tree in a landscape of trees that become ever more men. I am a man who has learned to listen to the trees and not be ashamed of it at all. On the other hand, every poet is destined to become a tree. I am a root man and these notes are my acorns, my branches, my songbirds, my veins."* This prayer accompanies the release of my first book in prose, *Homo Radix. Appunti di un cercatore d'alberi* [Homo Radix: Notes of a Tree Seeker], released by a small publisher in Turin, which received unexpected attention from newspapers, radio, and television. Two years later I began to write a column in the newspaper "La Stampa," and the following year to publish with some of leading publishers in the Italian market. It all began at the foot of some redwoods, from my astonishment, from my sense of being thunderstruck, and from my loss of measure: my family history had imploded. As I crisscrossed various countries promoting translations of my poems in English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and other languages, the dispersion of what had been my natural family became evident, in all its unstable hubbub. I found myself far from a "home," with my territorial and linguistic roots broken, in a world where photographs were torn. All this rising tide of freedom, this liquidity à la Zygmunt Bauman, overwhelmed me and sent me spinning. I felt an urgent need to weave, plot, ink new roots. And these roots sprouted with the concept of *Homo Radix*, which I was becoming.

Humanity has never been at the center of my interests. As a child I was more interested in the microscopic world of nature around me in the Po Valley; as a boy I obviously was attracted and distracted by other matters more common for a teenager. As an adult I started to return to the path of natural history: I gradually abandoned the city and returned to the countryside, choosing the woods, parks and historic homes, botanical gardens and so on. I started arborgraphing the land, documenting the presence of hundred-year-old and monumental trees, updating the measurements provided by the Forest Service and the regional commissions that have dealt with protecting large, centuries-old trees for the last twenty years, before a new law came out a few months ago. My time has always been shared between paper (the continent I most consistently inhabit, both as a lone traveler and as a sculptor, engraver) and nature. I crossed the country, I trekked the mountaintops, moving across Alpine valleys and the rich regions of southern Italy, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia; I rediscovered each city tree to tree (Milan, Turin, Genoa, Mantua, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Palermo, and Cagliari). I went to France; I crossed the sea and studied the arboreal heritage of the small island of Jersey, in the Channel; I landed in England, and I departed for the great parks of California,

where I finally lost myself in the singing silence of the sequoia groves. I even traveled to an altitude of 3900 meters to visit the *Pinus longeava* (the oldest trees on the planet, at least 5065 years old, according to scientific verification) in the White Mountains, Inyo National Forest.

I lived, I admired, I continually questioned myself about the possibility of eternal life on this little planet in a solar system on the outskirts of the Milky Way, dispersed in an ever-expanding universe. Scientists think the universe may be heading for the Big Crunch, when the explosive energy of the Big Bang will exhaust itself and matter will begin to aggregate once again, revitalizing the impulse of creation that we have entrusted to the mind of a God.

“The botanic knowledge is not a form of scientific knowledge, notional, it is mainly artistic knowledge: it means to come closer to God’s plan or that of the spirit of Mother Earth, depending on the faith one safeguards and cultivates; being able to recognize a species, give it a precise name, distinguish the shapes and colors of the leaves, the geometries of the seeds and flowers, the architectures of the trunks and the grotesque displays of big ancient trees. It is not mere science: it is art, poetry, it is literature!” I wrote this in [*L’Italia è un bosco*] *Italy is a Forest*. I still believe it. That we travel the world to understand what the “things” around us are made of, the things we walk on, on which we build our homes and our cities; understand the differences, the times of creation and development, in order to no longer deceive ourselves that we can practice this unlimited consumption, if we are to renew our world. The American economy bounced back thanks to fracking, that drilling of the depths that dropped energy costs. However, it nourished new contaminations and the environmental consequences are still unknown. Not to mention the enviable privilege of having flammable tap water; which seems to be useful in the recipes of *Nouvelle Cuisine*. Ground water gets polluted, and the risks of earthquakes increase. In Europe there is fierce resistance, even though the ministers of the previous government have expressed their interest in fracking the Italian subsoil. In one of the most seismic countries in the world! We really must ask where these people are living, the best minds of their respective generations, paraphrasing Allen Ginsberg. Research has demonstrated that one of the most dangerous earthquakes to hit central Italy in recent years was co-generated by fracking surveys. But let us put the politics aside -- in despair -- and the attempts to speculate by abusing the planet’s resources. To live on Earth is an opportunity to observe, to admire the magnificent beauties that nature offers us. Today, we can travel and move ourselves from one world to another, one continent to another as never before in the brief history of our species. We are even able to see our own planet from space. I find this to be a great achievement, even though we are accustomed to it. However, we are unable to listen to ourselves, unable to listen to the thousands of sounds, the thousands of voices of our bodies, voices that accompany the physical exercises that our stunning machine creates, expands, nourishes, and regenerates continuously. Nor do we listen to the sounds of nature. Who among us is able to distinguish the chant of a humpback whale from a sperm whale? Or even perceive, while

stroking it with our eyes closed, if tree bark is from a pine, from a fir tree, from a Lebanon cedar or from a fig?

"We are told that we live in an era where everything has already been discovered, or almost everything. I do not think this is true. Every human being has the possibility to discover, to inhabit the time we are given as if it we are the first climber to find our way to the top of the K2, the first navigator to arrive in the West Indies, or the first astronaut to set foot on the lunar surface. Each time a man or a woman encounters a great old tree, or passes through a carved forest, it is as if he or she invented a continent that was not there before. It is as if to open wide the map and sketch the boundaries of a New World, making it his New World." This, instead, I wrote while migrating from one high altitude forest to another, taking notes for my new book coming out in April: *Il libro delle foreste scolpite* [*The Book of Carved Forests*]. My latest joyful effort. I like accompanying other people on visits to parks, to the woods, and all those places where we can become used to that most wild nature that we have around us. Of course in Europe, and in Italy, there is no more wild nature, only haggard and tiny portions in the Alps and in certain remote woods of the Sardinian hinterland. The rest has not been a primary growth forest for centuries. Man has walked and contaminated, compromised and changed every part of the land, even the nature that our senses instinctively distinguish as authentic and masterful. And this is true in the larch woods in our mountains, cultivated many centuries ago by the people of the times past. But it is even more true in the botanical gardens, which are children of man's mind. Here, leaf to leaf, we find plant species in cohabitation that might come from the same continent, and that we are perhaps used to seeing side by side, even though they never met in their land of origin.

When I reach a monumental *Resinosa* that resists, clinging to the rock in some far-flung valley, I like to sit down next to it. Wait for the light to change. Listen. Caress it in silence. Let myself be crossed. Compare my time, counted second by second, breath by breath, step by step, with the centuries carved in the bark, with the outward reaching roots, hard as stone. "Generations of human beings, fathers and sons, grandchildren and children, pass under their foliage and drink in the shadows, refreshing their souls and voiding all thought. They sit, touch the wood, let their gazes be invaded by the movement animated by the wind, caress the leaves and the fruits, the seeds and the branches. Another tree grows inside of them and they are ready to listen to it, to listen to themselves. There, the center of the world vibrates," as I wrote in *Il sussurro degli alberi. Piccolo miracolario per uomini radice* [*The Whisper of the Trees. Small Miracle Book for Root Men.*] When we are close to them, they are born again within us. Our thinking opens wide, and is as if lost, beyond gravity, beyond the distances, vanishing in the dense silence of the universe.

Translated from the original in Italian by Stefanie della Porta, Dominic Nanni, and Redon Ipeku with Elena Past