

Emil Adolf Roßmäbller, *The Woodlands* (1863/81)

Abstract

Emil Adolf Roßmäbller (1806-1867) was a biologist, co-founder of the journal *Die Natur*, the writer of popular books on the care of fish and plants, and one of the founding fathers of the forest preservation movement. He agreed with Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl that the natural order of forests bore similarities to human society. Roßmäbller associated a back-to-nature ideal with aesthetics, harmony, and permanence, on the one hand, and an effort to normalize the idea of class divisions, on the other. If readers detect the sound of political activism in Roßmäbller's verdict, they would be right, for he was a left-wing parliamentarian in the revolutionary year 1848 and helped found the Leipzig Workers' Association in the Kingdom of Saxony in the early 1860s (he was employed there as a zoologist). Roßmäbller's treatise of 1863, excerpted here, was understood as a statement on society, and it was popular enough to be republished in a second (1870) and a third (1881) edition.

Source

1. Forest and Woodland^[1]

"Once in a while we gaze in wonder at gargantuan oaks and firs that have grown without being tended at all, while we are thoroughly convinced that no amount of craft or tending would suffice for us to raise such trees in these places." –Heinrich Cotta (1816)

Like people, plants have affinities for and aversions to each other, sometimes complying with the proverb that "like attracts like," sometimes seeking the company of vastly different things far from those. This has provided the basis for the concept of "sociable plants" since ancient times. Yes, if in Humboldt's manner one considers the quiet folk of the plants as a population parallel to the animal population around the world, a concept of the geographic distribution of the plants emerges in which sociability plays a role. It is not mere chance or the whims of the wind and water—carrying the seeds hither one day and yon the next—that determine plants' locations. There are—just like in human society—strong currents or a gentle inner tendency that the plants, like us, unconsciously follow, and nevertheless they carry, again like us, certain decisive laws within themselves which connect with the laws of the outer world.

It might seem that, in Germany and those regions which resemble it in their geography by adhering to the golden path of moderation, nature follows along in this current of sociability in more than one way; at least this is evident in the plant world just as in human society. At no point during there year are there here such extreme conditions that we find ourselves in a struggle at the expense of all other intentions to exert a great deal of effort to make the small space that our body inhabits hospitable or bearable. Winter and summer, which near the poles and along the equator are the enemies of sociability, foster it instead in our regions. The comparison to the world of plants suggests itself, unbidden, in a very peculiarly firm decisiveness. Not only does it share this sociability in many respects, but it also reveals this to us German people in the expression of the truly German idiom I already cited above— "like attracts like"—except that in this case, unlike when applied to us, it is not meant as an accusation. For truly, it would be astonishingly interesting to see the mutually exclusive German social associations depicted alongside those of the German plant world. I will leave it up to the readers to draw the appropriate correlations between the casinos and reunions of human society [on the one hand] and those self-sufficient, cheerful beech woodlands, the aristocratic oak groves that shield the lower classes, or the plebeian willow thicket along the river bank [on the other].

Woodlands and meadows are two social manifestations of the plant world which are more pronounced in Germany than in warmer climates. It is not only that the proud trees withdraw from the society of the lower plant species and congregate in crowds together in the woods, but among them a system of exclusion is evident, as well. The evergreen woodland is separate from the deciduous woodlands; indeed, it is even so that the firs segregate themselves from the pines, and the beeches from the oaks. This is at least the case for woods that develop their authority in the low mountain ranges. In the fertile low-lying areas, this cold striving for exclusivity often disappears and instead of the pure pine or forest groves we get the beautiful mixed deciduous woodlands of our fluvial areas.

The meadow presents us with an image of an amiable contradiction: the loyal solidarity of similar brothers, the grasses, and the cordial patronage of the same towards strangers, the so-called meadow herbs, which we do not encounter anywhere else other than in the bosom of the meadow grasses, and of which my botanically well-educated readers can no doubt name many varieties.

Often our own interests intervene in the free association of the plants and we employ all manner of methods of advanced tillage to keep certain plants out of our grain fields which by their very nature seem to have a need to seek out the company, or even the protection, of those grain crops. The three blossoms praised by the poet then become hated weeds, as well—the “blue Cyane” [cornflower] along with the corncockle and the field poppy, whose native rights are recognized in the end when the reaper woman weaves precisely these three flowers together with the yellow ears of grain into the the harvest wreath adorning her rake as she walks before the heavily laden[2] wagon.[3]

That which one can observe in the meadow is seen all the more intensely in the woodlands, and to many different degrees. Here I can call upon the perceptions of all the friends of the woodlands—and who does love the woods? We all know the varying degrees of hospitality offered by the woodlands. Densely crowded fir groves permit only the diminutive folk of mosses to set up camp around the base of their trunks, while the oaks with their arching branches leave room for an entire army of bushes and wild herbs. The beech woods, on the other hand, not to be outdone in self-sufficiency by the evergreens, hardly tolerates woodland herbs at all, for they cover the forest floor ankle deep in the practically imputrescible corpses of their leaves.

Although the term “woods” is rather clear and widely accepted, it does not exclude a certain diversity of manifestation. This diversity is, in fact, so great that these manifestations affect our psyche in the most varied of ways; and this is not only so much due to the diversity of trees in the woodlands, but almost more to the character of the ground cover. With this name, taken from the forester, we refer to the character of the covering of the forest floor between the trees, which happens quickly due to the fallen needles or leaves of the trees, or by the lower plants which grow sometimes more densely, sometimes less. We notice immediately how varied a woodland plucks at the strings of our emotions, we notice immediately when we enter a sun-dappled pine woodland that smells of pitch and then proceed into a beech grove. We will find time later to become more conscious of these effects of the woodlands and their reasons. At the moment our purpose is solely to examine the woodlands as an example of the sociability instinct among flora and now to determine the distinction between woodlands and forests.[4]

Every forest [*Forst*] is a woodland [*Wald*], but not every woodland, regardless of its size, is a forest. Management and cultivation make a woodland into a forest. For this reason there can be “virgin woodland” but not “virgin forest”;^[5] similarly, we speak of “forest management” but not “woodland management.” The ancient German word displays the more restrictive meaning in the derived word “forester” [*Förster*], for no such parallel term has been derived from [the more general term] woodlands.

Using woodlands does not in and of itself make them into forests, which is why, unfortunately, many of our communal woodlands are not communal forests. It is the task of the present era, at least in civilized nations, to make forests of all woodlands. We are involved in this task, and our grandchildren all the

more so.

One might observe that those who live in populous cities far from the great wooded expanses have only a superficial understanding of the significance of forestry for woodlands, if at all. They see the forest as a naturally flowing stream, which appears all the more inexhaustible the less they understand of trees' lives and the more unfamiliar they are with the numbers of the statistics of a science that they assume has nothing to do with them.

How little they recognize that the forester's task resembles that of the gardener or the farmer, namely to sow and tend plants, except that the forester's efforts and the adversities faced are all the greater and—not to be forgotten—the seeds of the forester seldom—in fact, rarely—come to full fruition within his lifetime. Many, unfortunately, view the forester more or less as a wood producer [*Holzverwalter*] rather than as one who tends to the woodlands [*Walderzieher*].

Those of my readers who count themselves among the friends rather than caretakers of the woodlands need not fear at this point that some aspect of their poetic affection for the woodlands could be lost should their friend be exposed as a forest to the cold light of science. Do we love a friend less when we learn that he stands out not solely due to his sincerity and depth of character, not solely for the sparkling of his beautiful eyes and his charming conversation, but that he silently pursues a serious, noble profession? So it is with woodlands.

When an oak tree has been felled and lies there next to the stump, when the saw and the ax divvy it up—it is not in this moment that the tree begins to be of use to us. The greater part of its usefulness ends with its life. The importance of the uses to which we put its wood do not begin to compare to how it contributed to our well-being as a living tree among many. As one who tends to the woodlands, not one who fells trees, the forester provides an essential service for the life of the nation, no less so than the farmer who tends the fields. Admittedly, even some foresters are perhaps inadequately aware of this side of the woodlands' riches, that part which ends when the trees are cut. The warm affection of the foresters for their green domain, however, mitigates the danger inherent in this lack of awareness, for it seldom occurs that a forester is nothing more than a calculated financier, who measures the woodlands only in terms of cords, who strives only to be reputed for the high taxes levied against him.

It is perhaps only for the benefit of a few of my readers that I need to explicitly state that I refer here to the significance of the woodlands for the climate and for the fertility of the soil. The discipline of forest management has only recently come to view it as the utmost task to honor this significance of woodlands, and it has thus ascended from the lowly position as a procurer of wood to new heights alongside scientific disciplines which were previously considered far above it.

On the other hand, the science of forest management as practiced, forest economics, does not pay especial attention to the loftiest aspects of the significance of woodlands in its measures and tasks, for its ultimate and immediate goal was always to produce as large a yield of wood as possible while being adequately cautious to ensure that the same would be assured for the foreseeable future. This led, however, itself to the utmost attainable degree of the sort of usefulness of the woodlands discussed here, for the woodlands that were tended to be as lively as possible on account of the wood harvest were simultaneously well suited for this other task.

How could I still have any doubt that any friend of the woodlands would shrink from the idea of the forest after this brief outline, that anyone would see forest management as an intervention in his poetic property?

An ancient, still widespread misconception comes here to the fore and must be corrected. Many believe that Germany's great wooded expanses have been inherited from the bygone Teutons and grew up

without our influence. There are hardly any such heirlooms, genuinely primal woodlands, in Germany. Even ancient, extensive wooded tracts can be, in part through documentary evidence, in part through certain characteristics, identified as the creation of forestry's intervention, the traces of which have been lost entirely for the unknowing observer, which is entirely fine with the friend of the woodlands. This misconception is related to another, which is expressed in an adage that is luckily not known everywhere: "Where nothing grows, wood grows." The fundamentally false cliché derides forest management and, in a manner of speaking, declares woodlands as nothing more than a filler between cultivated fields. We will find an opportunity here to convince ourselves that "where nothing grows," i.e., in very infertile areas, it is actually often easier to coax a paltry field than turn the area into a productive woodland. Given the general lack of familiarity with the forester's business, it will certainly astonish some to hear that even soil which hardly appears barren can sometimes present insurmountable challenges to the cultivation of wood, and that the forester here has a disadvantage when compared to the farmer, for, due to the sheer scope of the area cultivated, he cannot possibly apply manure or till the land to improve it. To this extent, there is a bit of truth at least in that adage that woodlands grow up on their own accord.

What the forester can add to this "own accord" to foster and accelerate the growth and flourishing of his crops is miles away from the possibilities in the farmer's hand, and many of my readers will be surprised when we return later to this topic. For the time being, let us only recall that the forester is always dealing with the long term, which means there is a lot of leeway in enacting his measures, and successes are often a long time in waiting. In many cases successes take years or even decades, or show themselves contrary to all expectations, or come so late that the understandable impatience with the developments evident thus far lead to the implementation of new measures which impede the impending success.

Indeed, silviculture is a magnificent test of patience; the forester stands in opposition to nature and both trade their deliberate maneuvers, so deliberate that the former often perishes before his opponent has answered with a decisive response.

The friend of the woodlands generally has false expectations of this. Should he encounter the man clad in green in the midst of his domain, surrounded by the morning song of the birds, he has no idea that, under the green coat, a heart beats that is troubled by worries about his charge, that the man is racking his brains about why the stand of firs has suddenly stopped growing after it had flourished, much to his delight, for a decade. These two men stand next to each other, looking at the same thing, loving the same thing, but one of them sees and senses therein the woodlands, while the other worries about the forest.

In addition, it can happen that an aged forester, who has witnessed the transformation of his domain, watches with a sympathetic smile as the painter goes back and forth, searching in futile for a spot for his folding chair from whence he can see himself creating an artful woodland portrait. "You are too late, for my forest now stands in place of your woodlands."

Let us be honest: forest management does not profit from the poetry of the woodlands. At the same time, however, it can remain, as I reassured the friend of the woodlands above, that forest management need in no way undermine his love of the woodlands. The poetry of the former must, however, become intellectualized, clarified, just as we have been introduced via the woodlands to a higher calling that greatly influences our life, the significance of which is much greater than the value of the wood in the woodlands, and which the thoughtful individual can easily conflate with his poetic love of the woodlands. Is there a more poetic view of the woodlands than to see its leafy treetops and roots as sorcerers which contain and summon two of the three states of restless water, as a gas and liquid droplets, in the service of organic life—in short which master these? The woodlands hardly cease to be an object of our yearning when they become a source of our entire being. In those who know of the terrible consequences of the deforestation in the French department of the Upper Alps and the Dauphiné, or

have seen them in many areas of southern Spain, the childlike delight in trees will automatically mature to a grateful love.

To state it perfectly straightforwardly: the thing that has driven me to write this way about woodlands for many years, that ultimately those countries named above turned into an irrepressible urge, is the wish to place the woodlands under the protection of common knowledge in order to save them from such uncontrolled, thoughtless demands.

Truly it is probably high time to coin a third [term] alongside the concepts of the woodlands and the forest and not rest until this has become vivid in the common imagination. I have adequately alluded to this and will not try at this point to invent a name, simultaneously short and precise, for it.

2. Of What Do Woodlands Consist?

*“Here springeth forth the wistful,
primal vigor youthful
veiled within its stillness
life in all its fullness.”*

Lenau

If the correct answer here were “of trees,” then the question would be as pointless as it doubtless seems to some. This answer, however, would be a quite insufficient response to the question, and would at best apply to an expertly tended grove of firs. Indeed, if we recall our jaunts into the woods vividly, we both sense and know that woodlands do not consist merely of trees.

Our rich language lacks a word to succinctly and concisely describe the myriad entities and phenomena encompassed in the woodlands. I will not borrow from the French language, which does have such a term, so as to avoid the slightest tinge of the foreign in our study of the German woodlands.

Let us thus refer to the woodlands as a beautiful, a powerful amalgamation of entities and phenomena, in which, although no part is absolutely similar to the others, all nevertheless harmonize perfectly in a magnificent unison that resonates within every unspoiled breast.

That which might be construed in another context as an accusation finds an explanation—and thus a pardon—in the unison of the woodlands. Surrounded by hundreds of impressions upon us in the woods, we can lose track of the individual elements within the whole, it can happen to us, and indeed it happens to many—and this can be used as an accusation—that the traditional adage is reversed so that “we cannot see the trees for the woodlands.”

The disorder, the sheer independence, the unbridled boldness which so often confuses and injures us—in the woods, it is justified and has the opposite effect on us. It invokes in us the sort of percipient shudder that only nature in all its glory can. It is not a single sense which is aroused in us; all the senses well up within us into a lofty gate through which the magnificent woodland vision penetrates the inner being.

Once we have become aware of this, it would be pedantic desecration to dissect a woodland into its individual parts. The title question is thus not posed with the intention of divvying the woodland up into its members with the cold knife of the anatomist. It wants nothing more than to force us to remember, once more than happens habitually, that the woodlands are composed not merely of trees, composed not merely of individual things at all; but that rather the woodlands appear so rich and manifold that we, when we immerse ourselves in them, do not even conceive of their dissection and hardly realize what happens to us when a woodland completely and fully takes possession of our mind.

From this perspective, it might seem as if woodlands belong only to the poet and the painter, and we note that the content and task of this small section is primarily to recognize this right of possession.

Are, however, the poet the painter so far removed from the naturalist that their respective titles of possession to the woodlands are written on separate papers? By no means. Nature is after all the great conciliator calling the divergent paths of human activity to convene. The poet who fully lacks the urge of the painter, the urge of the naturalist, and the naturalist to whom the feelings of the poet and the painter are fully alien, are not true sons of nature.

It is one of the tasks of our work to bridge this schism between poets, painters, and naturalists, and nowhere are we more likely to succeed, and no location is worthier of this than the woodland. In the woods, every unadulterated mind capable of taking flight becomes a poet and a painter, and this transformation requires neither that its exclamations be composed in rhyme nor that the splendor before it be captured for itself or others with the stylus. In the end, in a woodland, one becomes a naturalist, and here one might ask, as we already have in the section above, whether scientific observation impedes this woodland poetry. I have no fear of this.

While the poet and the painter may be disinclined to answer the question in our title, or indeed to consider it at all, it will automatically occur to the naturalist, and, in answering this question, he not only serves himself but also the former two, who are one with him, or at least should be one with him, should he want to exclaim with the full justification of comprehension, “Oh, how lovely are the woodlands!”

And, in this context, the question concerning the composition of the woodlands no longer appears pointless. Our senses are heightened, we perceive and distinguish, we understand— whereas we once merely felt and delighted in—and in attaining the former ability we do not forfeit the latter. Moreover, not only do we forfeit nothing, but our delight becomes more sublime by virtue of our understanding.

NOTES

[1] Translator’s note: In this text, the author distinguishes between the German terms *Forst* and *Wald* and expounds upon the significance of this distinction in his mind. This presents a serious challenge in English translation, for both terms correspond to “forest” or “woods,” which are generally used in English as synonyms. In German, however, as the author points out, *Forst* generally refers to managed woodlands while *Wald* is a more general term that encompasses both managed forests and more natural woodlands. For the purposes of this translation, I have consistently chosen to use “forest” for the author’s *Forst* and “woodlands/woods” for *Wald*—and occasionally “groves” in compound variations of *Wald*. This is admittedly somewhat stilted and artificial in some instances—one need only consider the fact that the *Schwarzwald* is called the “Black Forest” in English to realize that English does not make this distinction. It is a telling reminder of the limits of translation.

[2] *segenschwer*, lit. “heavily blessed”

[3] A reference to the tradition of thanksgiving processions at the end of the harvest season.

[4] See translator’s note at beginning of text.

[5] Translator’s note: This is, of course, another example of how this distinction does not work in English, for, in fact, the standard expression is “virgin forest” [*Urforst*] rather than “virgin woodlands” [*Urwald*].

Source: E. A. Roßmäßler, *Der Wald. Den Freunden und Pflegern des Waldes*. Leipzig und Heidelberg: C. F. Winter’sche Verlagshandlung, 1863, pp. 3–13.

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