

What Can We Learn from Trees?

Interview with Tiziano Fratus

In industrial societies, humans try to rebuild a direct relationship with nature by re-foresting cities or encroaching on woods and forests with tourism, without asking whether the well-being found is real or ephemeral. Nor what consequences it has on trees.



by Sara Perinetta

They absorb carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, counteract global warming, and provide us with fruit and materials. Trees have various practical uses, but can they also play a cultural role in human society? We asked Tiziano Fratus, *homo radix* and *literary nomad*, starting with his book *Il bosco è un mondo* (The forest is a world, Einaudi, 2018).

Born in 1975, writer of prose and poetry, translator, radio host, and photographer, Fratus puts trees at the center of his work. We could call him a scholar, a poet, an artist, but, as he himself says, it is better to avoid definitions because “they are limiting. I have been through many forests and many woods; I am more concerned with questioning trees to understand what they can tell us and what we can learn from them.”

In *Il bosco è un mondo* you talk about “ecosophical or, as I prefer, dendrosophic thinking.” Can you tell us more about this concept?

Ecosophy is a way of thinking codified by scholars who suggested moving from ecology, a superficial consideration of our home, i.e. the environment, to ecosophy, a deeper consideration of the relationship between man and nature. It starts from the realization that the world is the epidermis of the human being, so if we damage the planet, we damage ourselves. It may seem superfluous today, but in the 1960s these were new themes.



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The Assise state-owned forest is of significant ecological interest due to the numerous mosses and lichens that populate the undergrowth, good indicators of the degree of naturalness of an ecosystem.

Instead, dendrosophy is a term you invented.

In my own journey, I have enjoyed the process of minting concepts born out of the experiences I have had: dendrosophy is one of them. It is a branch of knowledge that combines studies, emotions, and experiences involving humans and trees, and, by extension, also landscape and nature. It can range from the description of an encounter with a tree, which can even take place in a public park or on a mountain trail, to more technical approaches or poetry written from the thought of a tree. All this is part of dendrosophy: that which unites man and tree.

“Although I meditate daily in a forest, I do not seek salvation in trees.” What does that mean?

Nowadays, we often talk about nature allowing us to regain a state of balance; we organize initiatives, such as forest baths, which are laudable but rhetorically insist that they can solve various problems. These are rituals that miss the point: a nice weekend in the woods is just a nice weekend in the woods; it won't make you discover God. Having a closer relationship with nature is not wrong, but we should not believe that it is an automatic form of well-being. Getting to real well-being requires a much deeper path.

Which would be?

Each person has their own answer; there is no general formula. If all it took was a little silence, and a little mindfulness, we would have really come out of the three years of Covid as better people. But instead, that is not the case. Each of us can choose – if we really have the time, the desire, and the interest – a more authentic relationship with these places and spaces.

In the book, you talk about nature reserves that “are stormed in the summer months by thousands of visitors” in search of “tamed nature.” But how can one, in this chaotic, man-made world, have “a more authentic relationship with these places and spaces”?

These are individual choices. For example, we discuss ecology as something to do outside of ourselves, but we don't know how to ecology within ourselves. Let's think about technology: for those who work from home, spending ten hours at the computer, if not more, it is worse than slavery. Our lifestyles are too conditioned by certain comforts. I am not against technology, but we have often given it wide access to our lives, which now depend on it. So, we should ask ourselves: in this society of ours, are trees doing well or are they doing poorly? We talk about reforestation

cities, but we don't question the fact that trees would perhaps be better off away from cities. We take them and place them wherever we want, in the backyard or on the wall of a building: if they survive, fine; if they die, we get more. We treat them with arrogance.

In short, on the one hand, we have overbuilt our cities and we are now trying to save ourselves by reforesting them; on the other hand, overbuilt cities make the trees sick, they live poorly and do not bring us the well-being we seek from them. Especially now that extreme weather events, such as this summer in northern Italy, pose administrations with a new problem: replacing the trees that traditionally inhabit our cities with others that can withstand long periods of drought as well as violent cloudbursts.

Which species of trees to plant is a practical and relevant question, not least because we already know how the climate will change in the next fifty years. Recently, however, when searching for news about various thunderstorms in the Milan area, I found a lot of information letting us know

A spruce tree attacked by bark beetles. The tree secretes resin from the holes the insects dig in its trunk to kill them, but when it is weakened by water stress, it is no longer able to defend itself.



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that, for a century, at least one has occurred every two or three years in and around the area. We talk about it more now, but it has happened often from the nineteenth century to the present: we just have short memories. Lombard administrators should check what happened in past years.

So, what is the right way to reforest cities?

I have no presumption to tell others what to do, but it seems necessary to reflect on what is happening. Reforestation of cities is taking place, several scholars claim the need for it, and it will be even more decisive in the coming years. But we should start from the assumption that the city is not the place for trees. We want to put them there at all costs, and certainly, a city with trees is better than one without, however, a number of practical issues need to be dealt with: it is not enough to say "Let's fill the streets with trees." Over the months and years after planting, for example, lack of water or maintenance will lead to the death of many trees. Planting them has a cost: doing it right, above all, costs money, and if it is done with public money, it must be done well. In short, there are many issues at stake in the relationship between man and tree.

And in this relationship, what can be the social role of trees?

Trees do not need to have a social role. We are the ones who can choose to help them feel better and figure out what kind of humanity we want to be in the future. Trees have been around for millions of years before us and will almost certainly survive our eventual demise, so they *do not need* to have a role: more than 80% of life on Earth is made up of plants, while humans and animals are about 5%. We should reflect on the proportions and realize that it is we, if anything, who have to adapt our way of life to the other existences we coexist with.

So, what can we learn from trees?

For years, I have tried to answer this question as one does today, formulating a positive and vaguely expected thought for listeners or readers. "If we were to do as the trees do, *then* we could..." For the past couple of years, I have been trying to get away from this. If anything, I think that we live in an almost opposite way to how trees live, as far as we know. So why should we learn anything from them to improve ourselves? Meditating near trees and in the woods, I thought for a while that we could, as several hermits did, aspire to their apparent impassibility, to their inhabiting time *here and now*, without past or future. Yet, even this risks being a mask, a spiritual garment we wear out of complacency and conceit. And so, what? And so, I really, to this day, cannot answer this question. ●