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ALEXANDRE DE RIQUER

The Forest Fights Back

*TRANSLATION BY SARA MARTÍN AND INTRODUCTION BY
MARIANO MARTÍN RODRÍGUEZ*

Alexandre de Riquer (1856-1920) is mainly known today for his multifarious artistic activity as a painter, illustrator, poster artist, and designer in the context of Catalan Modernism, though he was an outstanding poet as well. His beautiful prose poems from the book *Cristantemes* (Chrysanthemums, 1899), some of which are short symbolic fantasies, are among the first ones in Catalan in that genre. His episodic epic *Poema del bosc* (Poem of the Forest, 1910) is composed of a series of short narrative poems that can be read as independent pieces, although the whole constitutes a sort of poetic history of an archetypical forest. This is the true protagonist of the poem(s).

The forest is both real and symbolic, both a specific forest and an embodiment of an

unspoiled nature traversed by numinous forces, as if it were animated. The mystery of this kind of poetic animism is well served by the display of magical entities such as undines and fairies, presented as if they were real within the fantastic world of the forest. However, Riquer does not forget human history either and, in fact, the succession of narrative poems that make up the whole work broadly follows the chronological order of history, from the times when the forest begins to undergo human intervention back in Neolithic times to its modern destruction, when charcoal burners use the wood of the trees to feed (pre)industrial activities. Some episodes are set in ancient times, among the Celtic druids and under the Roman empire, while others are medieval, in

particular Riquer's original treatment of the Arthurian matter related to the famous sword "Escalibor", an episode which intertwines historical and legendary events.

Among the historical-legendary episodes of the whole poem, the one entitled "El bosc se defensa" (The forest defends itself)¹ stands out. By presenting a tribe of proud men who strive to clear the forest with rudimentary flint axes and then plough the resulting fields, Riquer transmutes into epic poetry, thanks to the heroic vision emerging from the difficulties of that undertaking, a scene that, despite the scarcity of specific archaeological details, seems to be set in a period prior to the Metal Ages. This poem can be, therefore, considered one of the earlier examples in the Catalan language of a narrative set in prehistorical times. Interestingly, the poem is written with a clear ecocritical stance; evidently, the author's sympathies lie with the forest, not the humans.

The first stanzas of the poem describe the forest in bucolic terms, as a space of beauty and harmony, full of light. Its warmth and vegetation, the singing waters crossing it beneath oaks and firs are the abode of happy birds, and other animals such as fallow deer, without any discernible predators. Only the sudden arrival of men and the noise of their

axes striking down the trees disturbs the ancestral peace of the forest. It is a time of terror for the fallen trees, presented as stricken giants bemoaning their disastrous end. When their task for the day is over, men celebrate in song the fulfilment of their dream of glory, upsetting the quiet sleep of the primeval forest.

However, man's triumph is short-lived. An army of vipers rises to kill the human invaders and soon their corpses lie on the floor, with poisoned blood flowing from their mouths. The forest, now fully personified, greets the rocks supporting it, confirming thus the supernatural dimension of the poem, already suggested by the impossible behaviour of the poisonous snakes attacking in military formation. These supernatural occurrences within the framework of a (proto)historical narrative seem, however, fully natural in the animistic and symbolic universe subcreated, in the Tolkienian sense, by the author, since every natural being is endowed with a soul and, therefore, with virtual agency. The forest becomes a sort of mythic being that succeeds, at least in the fantasy secondary world concocted by Riquer, in resisting human encroachment, keeping intact its ideal(ised) nature.

¹ The translation that follows is based on the following critical reedition: Alexandre de Riquer, «El bosc se defensa», *Poema del bosc*, edició i introducció a cura de Roger Miret, Martorell, Adesiara, 2020, pp. 65-71. The translator, Sara Martín, has chosen for the English version a slightly different title, "The Forest Strikes Back."

The forest fights back

The ancient forest swayed its soft breath of life
moving the haughty forehead of the enchanted ship,
and from the high cliff onto the flowery slope
it dreamed in sweet peace.

From the hollow the shadowy basins rose
full of corpulent oaks rising from all sides;
the mists conquered fresh pastures
tenanted by fir trees.

Gliding through the air like luminous dust,
as if with intangible wings, light as smoke,
with a very sweet heat, came down vaporously
the fertile light.

Amidst the mossy rite-chanting pines,
the murmuring waters ran down the mountains,
curving the supple wisps of blossoming mint,
and the kinglets flew.

From the thick branches of sunny leaves
to the undergrowth, starting from the highest shoot,
the orchestra of nests played day and night
a vital whisper.

The generous fountains on the margins opened

the mature kernels to the seeding air,
and in the shade of the rockery the reeds revealed
their dreaming chalices.

Here and there the varnished ivy swung,
garlands of leaves adorning intimate corners,
and the aromatic waves rose scattered
by virgin censers.

The fountains dripped, the fallow deer mooded
'see you tomorrow' to the gold and purple sun;
the fruit trees bloomed and the whole forest pulsed
trembling with love.
Thus, as a great landmark, from the shade to the sun,
the forest rose impenetrable, ecstatic,
and never its large ship the haughty human race
had rocked.

There, firm and mighty the beautiful dream of life,
the gigantic ship remained in its mystery
and from the very high chancel to the flowery slope
slept in sweet peace.

One day, though, it was shaken by a mighty shock:
there rose on the other side of the wide hollow,
from the flint axes a rhythmic beat,
and with a determined gesture, as it fell, the axe
razed the immense oaks of the mountains.

The wailing crackle of skinned logs
creaked deep in the forest; they were cutting it up
and the wailing of the shoots, the shattering of the branches,
joined the chants of those cutting them down,

and the heart shrank with fear and dread.
As the old trees moved, damaged, wrecked,
they launched a complaint of leaves that, kissing,
fell like sighing dismembered giants.

The forest was for the proud, aroused man
an imposing fence of leafy darkness
from which the beast in the heart of the night

throws the howl that frightens the restless tribe.

And like a phalanx of stocky, muscled athletes,
robust, drenched with pride, with serene eyes,
aware of their real value and vain,
the trees landed from the top of the cliffs.

Covered with the wide fur torn from the wild beasts,
the singing men bandied about the flint,
assaulting the dark copses of holm oaks,
making the splinters jump, splitting and chopping.

Of the oak, of the fir the raised heads,
are forced to lie down among tender grass shoots;
the branch that smiled at the lightning, at the storm,
sides by the trunk in the undergrowth.

Surprised, the wide virgin forest in its quiet peace
senses that an hour of agony has come
and tells itself, "If my power decays,
what god is this god that I did not know?"

And the man, with the palm of his heavy hand,
with beautiful gesture pulls back the frantic hair
to shake off his sweat; like a sovereign,
standing axe in hand and leaning back,
safe, willful,
the woods beholds that he has condemned,
widening the lungs, dominating, beautiful,
irradiating pride, his will firm.

The constant beating of the axe never stops;
following the pure destiny of omnipotent man,
it upsets the thick mountains of the Levant,
muddying the lazy waters of the torrent.

Yet another forest of prodigious strength watches,
who like a haughty lookout shivers grumbling:
it is the nave that guards like a mysterious ark
the intense life secret in the sacrosanct atrium.

It is the illustrious altar, the mysterious tabernacle

that dictates the threat from nature:
possessing germs enclosed in a locket,
he calls out the brief moment to halt the offense.

A virgin place, a gloomy corner still remaining
from the time when it flowed from the Creator's hands,
he sends springs across the wide space,
he is the germ of germs, the sower of summers.

From his haughty temple are the firm colonnades,
the old shady sandalwoods and the Levant cedars,
spreading their broad foreheads over the waterfalls,
over the black forests around him.
This is a nave and a temple that guards a holy ark,
a repository of life entrusted to him,
he is the harsh watchman who whispers or sings.

Beyond, the high land rises desolated:
on the slope the stumps lie immense,
bare of leaves, their branches damaged.
By a hundred athletic arms pushed down
the bottom of the rocks, from the cobbled peaks,
they intermingle prone or on their sides,
huge and defeated, amidst those rocks
through which a red thread oozes,
the vital sap seeping from the trunks,
moistening the bark of the wounded skin.

To the mess of wood that fills the hollow,
a golden mantle sends the setting sun from afar,
and the rhythmic march is still alive
of the flint axe ceaselessly beating.

Little by little the solemn afternoon died:
the night scattered the stars across the enamelled blue sky,
when the dreadful sign grew large in the air
that beyond the wide virgin forest proclaims its severity.

At the top of the summit a bonfire
flashes in the shadow, striking with red light
the space that it dyes with tragic beauty,
covered by the high flame, clouded by smoke.

Little by little the fading chants died away;
 the lights from the flames were already extinguished;
 in the sleepy forest the branches swayed;
 dreaming of glory, men fell asleep.

And nearby, very close to them, the vipers watched.

When the day rose, when the floodlit world
 awoke to another life, when the radiant star
 its light scatters through the cloven clearing,
 the forest vipers with their vibrant buzzing
 rose too, moving in for combat.
 From under each stone a viper surfaced,
 each one wounded the foolish tribe,
 and men, blinded by anger and pain,
 the poisoned serpent suffer with anguish,
 falling and cursing in mad confusion.

The women bend over with floating hair,
 all are stunned, wounded, desperate,
 watching the agony of man or child,
 rolling on the ground, wide-eyed,
 tragically lying on their faces or backs,
 vanquished, exterminated, among those rocks,
 a red thread flowing from the bodies
 of poisoned blood pouring from mouths.

All along the high slope the songs fall silent;
 flint no longer shatters with firm thrusts,
 and when slowly the sun sets,
 eagles and vultures appear in herds.

Rocking, the old forest mutters full of life,
 moving the haughty forehead of the enchanted nave,
 and, contemplating the wounded summit and slope,
 sends a call for peace.