



ARNE NAESS

Metaphysics of the Treeline

BY ARNE NAESS

In many parts of the world, but perhaps most clearly in the far north, the treeline is full of symbolic value: enigmatic, mystical, threatening, liberating, alluring—and repulsive and ominous. No single person or animal has the capacity to experience all these tertiary qualities of the treeline. The same holds true for the drama of crossing the treeline, either from above or from below.

The term *treeline* is misleading. There is actually no line but rather a narrow or wide border area. If the terrain is nearly horizontal, the area is wide—perhaps miles wide. If the terrain is steep, the line is narrow but never sharp. Thus it is a shock to see an artificial forest, actually a “tree farm,” covering a slope high on the side of a valley and then suddenly coming to a halt.

Suddenly, there is not a single tree! From full-grown trees to nothing: an abnormality, an experience of something utterly valuable having been destroyed,

the landscape desecrated, a personal loss even if one has never been near the place.

Here I shall relate the immensely rich reality that a certain group of people has experienced, a group that includes millions of people. I shall start with the simple, obvious experiences.

As one moves up toward the treeline, there are signs of new challenges being met by the trees. In the strong winds and thinning soil, trees become smaller and take on gnarled and fantastic shapes. Some have fallen over. They tend to clump together, as we would do. Sometime there are only clusters of trees at particular spots, or single trees that are altogether isolated. They may be courageous, haughty, even triumphant, but also miserable.

These characteristics of trees, however, are subordinate gestalts, lesser forms of what is real. The higher-order gestalts predominate. One gestalt is that of upward movement, as far as possible, overcoming ob-

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PHOTO ABOVE: JØRN MOEN

stacles, trying to “clothe the mountain.”

Some trees succeed in clothing the mountain. Compared with lowland trees, they resemble tiny bushes. They may be only a few feet tall, whereas their lowland kin soar 50 to 100 feet or more. Yet call them stunted and they ask: what am I lacking? These trees have produced cones. They’ve realized all their possibilities; they’ve fulfilled essential functions. Mere size has nothing to do with the quality of life.

Others merely survive, stunted and deformed. No cones, no expression of fulfillment, half-dead from exposure to winter after winter, and summers that alternate from drenching rain to dry.

Each tree has a different life experience from birth. Still others thrive in small ways by managing merely to survive. The rough terrain and numerous variations in conditions have obvious consequences—no tree is identical to any other. Each tree is a mighty presentation of the drama of life. To some you feel near, others you feel farther from.

A few people have the background to enlarge the high-order gestalts in the time dimension. These peo-

ple will see the waves of cold and warm climates after the last ice age. They see waves of trees further clothing the mountain, or in retreat, leaving broken trunks clinging high on the open slopes. The treeline is seen as constantly moving up or down, never resting.

People living near thick spruce forests may see the forest density as a protective wall. Others feel that these trees block the view, or even one’s existence, hindering free expression of life and thought. If the trees are old with drooping branches, they may communicate resignation, sorrow, melancholy. Swayed by the wind, large trees move in slow rhythms, and the music can have the heartbreaking feel of a funeral march. Or they may express slowly something like “doomed, doomed, doomed . . .” Through the dimness of night, the wall of trees may invite merciful death. The existence of the treeline somewhere high—reachable, but far away—then inevitably becomes a promise of freedom, a proof of limits to any sorrow, any prison, any doubt or guilt. As one approaches the treeline, walls disappear. Trees shrink, gaps enlarge, light shines between them and between their branches. It has been my privilege to see all this.



Hallingskarvet from above.
PHOTO: JOHAN BRUN



Top to bottom:

Tvergastein in winter time; in the background the Hardangervidda mountain plateau.

PHOTO: PETTER MEJLÆNDER

Above the treeline. PHOTO: TAYO VAN BOECKEL

Camping at the treeline, 1925.

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When rich, high-order gestalts contrast low and high, dark and light, they are apt to acquire metaphysical dimensions. Movement from low and dark toward high and light treeline strengthens this contrast. Lightness is further strengthened by the ease of movement at treeline. Being at treeline becomes an experience of reaching supreme freedom. For some, a change from a tragic to a more cheerful outlook on life occurs.

Those who live in the forest, or feel at home there, may have experiences that vary even more. The upper limit of the forest marks the end of security, the end of the world we master, the beginning of the harsh world of wind-driven snow, dangerous precipices, useless expanse.

Above treeline it is cold and hostile; below is warm and friendly. Even in these negative experiences there is a contrast of metaphysical dimensions. The positive and negative gestalts attest to the supreme gestalt of Janus-faced existence, comprising good and bad on an equal footing, or emphasizing one aspect more than the other.

How is this metaphysical aspect to be understood? What insight can it offer? This is a meta-metaphysical question that cannot be entirely answered here, or anywhere, although certain essentials can be gleaned from three approaches.

1. *The Homocentrist.* The power of human imagination is overwhelming. There is no limit to what human genius is able to *project into* nature. The richness of treeline symbols attests to this. Flights of imagination soar from the plane of brute facts:

the leaves are green, stems grow upward. . . . The rest is a wonderful projection of the human mind.

2. *The Idealist Philosopher.* Strictly speaking, the leaves are not green. Their atoms are colorless, not even gray, and the stems' electromagnetic waves or particles do not grow upward. There is a realm beyond the material world. The new physics confirms it—a spirit world beyond space and time, a spiritual realm. The human mind is in direct touch with this realm and “spiritualizes” nature.
3. *The Ecosopher.* The richness and fecundity of reality! How overwhelming! The treeline's abstract geographical structure points to a seemingly infinite variety of *concrete* contents! More is open to the human ecological self than can be experienced by any other living being.

The metaphysics of the treeline is a serious affair for ecosophers. It lets us understand the spontaneous immediate experience of the treeline as an experience of reality, beyond the divisions between subject and object, between spiritual and material.

One of today's most chilling realizations is that “reforestation” projects do not really restore a *forest*. Artificial tree plantations lack the immense biological richness and diversity of ancient forests, together with their metaphysical intensity and richness. With so many people now reacting negatively to sham reforestation, the time is ripe for a change in policy.