

The Desert-Forest in the Literary Imaginary: From Sacred Threshold to Hyperobject

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My current book project investigates how the desert and the forest—two of the most enduring liminal landscapes of the Western literary tradition—have been radically reconceived in contemporary fiction. Across the European and American canons, these secluded spaces long functioned as topoi of spiritual and ecological experience: thresholds the hero crossed in order to temper the spirit and access a higher form of awareness. My central argument is that, in the age of ecological crisis, this model no longer holds. The desert and the forest are increasingly represented not as backdrops to human adventure but as sentient entities endowed with their own agency—landscapes that resist anthropocentric appropriation and compel the human to capitulate before what Timothy Morton has termed the “hyperobject.”

The urgency of this reassessment is not only literary. Southern Europe’s water crisis and the advance of desertification are turning familiar ecosystems into desolate spaces and forcing public discourse to confront the prospect of climate migration. Reading the liminal landscape as it shifts from a place of experience to a sentient agent allows us to trace a new mode of existing on a damaged planet, one in which the gnostic adventure of pristine isolation is no longer available to the late-capitalist subject.

In its opening chapters, the book reconstructs the desert-forest as a central topos of early European romance, rooted in the Desert Fathers and the medieval ideal of the knight’s solitude, where isolation serves the chivalric quest as a graduated passage toward the vision of the Grail. I trace how this Western idea of purification through the crossing of a liminal zone survives in contemporary writing as a residual, crystallized notion.

The central and final chapters turn to the reversal of this paradigm. Through close readings of contemporary works of speculative and science fiction, I show the desert and the forest becoming spaces dominated by hyperobjects, where matter itself is endowed with agency and the place of hermitage reveals its monstrous face. Building on a corpus of recent novels and poetry, the book argues that contemporary narratives deny the human any redemptive new identity gained through the crossing of a sacred threshold, such as the forest or the desert. By bringing romance philology into dialogue with the environmental humanities, the project contributes to the wider effort to imagine a livable future for the whole planetary ecosystem, and not for the human alone.