

On the Art of Clare Woods
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Against darkness, crepuscular around their edges, arcs, tunnels, vortices and strata of colour create tableaux of semi-abstractness that almost tip into figurative coherence – yet prefer to remain on the wild side, like geology, like cyclones, or like some labyrinthine underworld of nature, worm-holed through altered states.

On first encounter, or close encounter, such could seem the visual language of the vast, multi-panelled enamel and oil on aluminium paintings by Clare Woods. They appear to have a sense of twilight about them, yet bring to mind bark and rock and lichen, the black water in freezing ditches and the fluorescent green light beneath a canopy of summer leaves. Two vast panoramas, *The Intended* and *Mistaken Point*, assert ancient landscapes like sacred places where sheep now graze, the 'sky' blood red and violet pink, eternal and not a little savage.

These paintings become objects: monoliths of form and colour, enfolding and engulfing the viewer. The colours are both clamorous and soft, at odds yet harmonious; the forms might resemble rock formations or geological 'faces'; elsewhere, the viewer seems to find himself within a stony maze of moorland paths. Each appears dense, fluid, craggy and moss-covered, capturing the moment when natural forms achieve abstraction and, in doing so, seeming to identify some deeper instance of transfiguration. These paintings might describe the consciousness of a landscape long abandoned, dormant, yet still alert: unfrequented places, exiled in spirit, alienated by the consequences of some rift or disruption, to enter their own stilled yet volatile dream state.

Oberon, invoking his power as King of the Fairies (or 'King of Shadows' to his mischievous emissary, Puck), is unequivocal in his intentions towards his estranged Queen, Titania: "Well, go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove, till I torment thee for this injury." Within a wood near Athens – the countryside of Elizabethan England, drained of temporality, rendered into classical archetype – the slow brewing of hate (as Alan Garner once described the 'old' magic, so different to the intellectual neatness of the modern variety) takes floral form: "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, where ox-lips and the nodding violet grows; quite o'er canopied with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk roses, and eglantine: There sleeps Titania, some time of the night..." The English countryside, to its poets, is inlaid and encoded with both a natural and a supernatural order. To Shakespeare, the conflict between the King and Queen of the Fairies – "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!" – was expressed in cosmic form: the universe being out of kilter, and so too the weather, on which all natural order was dependent. Centuries before the eco-awareness of Victorian art critic, aesthete and social commentator John Ruskin, the collapse of order was described in terms that to a contemporary audience seem close to those of modern climate change, social collapse or environmental crises: "The spring, the summer, the childing autumn, angry winter, change their wonted liveries, and the mazed world, by their increase, now knows not which is which..." Such is the "progeny of evil" that derives from the natural and supernatural collapse of cosmic order: the countryside overgrown, the weather in humid cyclone. Suppose

England, then, to possess countryside both sentient and dense with ancient histories – a place of unpredictable eeriness and sudden dead drops into a curious crease between the secular terrestrial and the enchanted.

A little under three centuries after Shakespeare's death, the supremely English novelist E. M. Forster – whose ambivalence towards England and sense of spiritual exile would make him his nation's greatest social anatomist – described the twitching of super-nature in a wooded clay pit near Cambridge. Here, his head full of sentimental fables about fauns and dryads, and his eyes filled with the all-too-secular charms of Miss Agnes Pembroke, a young would-be writer called Rickie Elliot also falls foul of a fracture in the cosmic order.

For Forster, the dread momentum of tragic destiny is triggered by anything domestic and mundane – a lost umbrella, a spoiled game of tennis, an afternoon walk through matted briars and undergrowth towards some fir trees: “Accordingly the dell became for him a kind of church – a church where indeed you could do anything you liked, but where anything you did would be transfigured.” And hence: “ ‘You see, a year or two ago I had a great idea of getting into touch with Nature, just as the Greeks were in touch; and seeing England so beautiful, I used to pretend that her trees and coppices and summer fields of parsley were alive. It's funny enough now, but it wasn't funny then...’ ” Miss Pembroke, on assuring Rickie that she is no dryad, consents to being his fiancée once within this perhaps enchanted, perhaps not, dell; a bird flies in, flies out. Some years later Rickie, emotionally barren and spiritually alienated, will suffer the consequences of what Dr David Mellor has described in reference to British Neo-Romantic art of the mid-twentieth century; those places “where the curses of history and hysteria spoke together.” Thus, writes Forster, “It was hard on Rickie to meet the Devil, thus.” And despite his avowal, admiring the Jacobean brick of a public school chapel: “Thank God I'm English...”

The surviving members of English folk rock group Fairport Convention, recording their album ‘Lief & Liege’ in the summer subsequent to a car accident that had killed two members of the band, adjourned to a sprawling English country house. Their music making took place within a circle: “old music on new instruments” one said – musicological research in the archives of English Folk at Cecil Sharpe House, matched by a barbed tension – drums, electric guitar, female voice, bass – not heard in such intensity since The Velvet Underground, a universe away, had recorded ‘Venus In Furs’. The circle became magical, drawing the musicians to play around its edge; the resultant recordings were simultaneously ancient and modern: haunting and haunted, keening, as the poet's west wind, as the wail of sirens over rubber-scarred asphalt.

When Englishness, as it will, exchanges its quotidian familiarity for that which is weird, unpredictable, hallucinogenic, it achieves its greatest eloquence of spirit. Such weirdness thrives in those unfrequented spaces, often invisible borders or boundaries, which appear to separate the knowable from the unknown – Rickie's church of transfiguration in a Cambridgeshire dell; the marshy undergrowth that lies beyond the edge of a fallow field; the bend in a lane where the light shifts at dusk. Such places, to the British Neo-Romantic artists of 1933-1955 – Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, John Piper et al – eschewed prettiness, anachronism and quaintness with equal force. They were untamed and canny with time-travel; place became

'personage', comprised of historical layers, each with its psychic stratum of tangible atmospheric being, overlain with wiry grass and foliage, pitted with millennia-old boulders, woodland debris in surrealist formation – a subject entirely suited to the enquiries of modern art, while drawn from the strange temporal crease, yet again, between nature and the supernatural. That which was ancient appeared intimate with the centuries that lay ahead; the beleaguered countryside, thoroughfare of change, derived heightened presence from advancing alienation. The art of Clare Woods, at once local and apocalyptic, in tune with nature and the supernatural, affirms the constancy of such a state.