

Debatable Spaces

‘Have you seen milk morning sun brushing the tops of willow herb, nettle, thistle, in the unkempt field behind the car-crushers?’ So, somewhat curiously, ask Paul Farley and Michael Symons Roberts in their book *Edgelands*, a loving, inquisitive guide and extended ode to the marginal, minor landscapes of modern England. Together, these writers wander across what we might perceive to be neglected and dejected terrains, seeking out moments of odd grace and glanced beauty in settings that might customarily be considered ugly, uninspiring or of little value. Usually, these are the indeterminate territories where rural and urban converge in peculiar and sometimes fraught forms. Spaces such as those at the barely visible borders of towns or cities, where fraying suburb begins to become entangled with the complicated patterning of the contemporary countryside. But, just as likely, the unloved places traversed by Farley and Symons Roberts – places where, as Derek Mahon once said, ‘even now... a thought might grow’ – can bring to mind for us the undefined and undistinguished *inner* zones of the urban landscape: incidental, unremarkable and entirely familiar ‘interface’ areas between nature and culture in the city, spaces of edgy stillness within the frantic centres of modern life. City parks or canal-side paths provide such points on the maps of our daily routine, with their inevitable, intricate combinations of carefully cultivated and unanticipated, uncontrolled ‘wildlife’. Or again, there is that patch of scrappy, unmanaged land that you might see just beyond your own uncared-for garden fence: one of those purposeless, undeveloped zones of tangled urban forest, perhaps, that may be, from time to time, a scene of the illicit, the unsanctioned, and the seductively *unknown*, within the rational order of the city.

In each of these out-of-the-way or corner-of-the-eye cases, there is a potential strangeness to be reckoned with, a sense of something unfulfilled or open to question about the

landscape. Farley and Symons Roberts seek, despite the apparent mundanity or melancholia of their subjects, to view these diverse, dispersed regions as places of ‘possibility, mystery, beauty’. Richard Mabey, another keen-eyed and influential commentator on what he has termed ‘the unofficial countryside’, sees uncommon circumstances of ‘co-existence’ on such common nature/culture ground, but he also identifies problems about understanding and perception. In these places, Mabey says,

‘the labels “urban” and “rural” by which we find our bearings in a landscape, just do not apply. It is not the parks but the railway sidings that are thick with flowers. Hedgy scrub springs up and spreads luxuriantly in the wasteground between factories just as surely as it is clipped down to size in suburban front gardens. ... Nothing seems quite complete or rounded off.

The photographs that Mary McIntyre has taken in and around cities seem to carry with them something of this compelling and disconcerting complication. Often in her recent work, it seems that everything the camera has captured, every detail that is packed within the frame, is purely a feature of the natural world, and yet *nothing seems quite complete or rounded off*. One photograph, for instance brings us deep into a dark thicket, a dense mesh of countless leaves. There seems no way through this closed space of tree, bush and brier: if there was once a path here it has become wholly overgrown. But there is light just visible through this impeding jungle that is recognizably, reassuringly urban: a golden glow surely suggestive of the relative ‘security’ of proximate sodium street-lighting. It may be, perhaps, that McIntyre has caught here the final blush of a stunning sunset brightening the gaps in these woods (and what’s more the image has a Gothic or Fairy-Tale intensity, possibly casting us out to the fringes of an isolated forest, transporting us far from the certainties of city life) but there is an homogeneous sickliness to the glimpsed background sky that seems to

speak faintly of more constructed, constant illumination, and thus arguably, of a less ‘clear’, less easily defined vision of landscape.

Much the same can be said of other photographs that ostensibly exclude the built environment in order to create the appearance of contained concentrations of wild organic growth. One such work, *A Complex Variety of Greens (From Emerald to Viridian)* (2011) shows us a murky pond on which a thick layer of algae has settled. Along the congested bank, verdant bunches of scruffy grasses and shrubs edge onto the ‘solid’ green water. Tall, leafy trees crowd in behind. It is an apparently uninterrupted, focused representation of lush nature, and yet it is an airless, claustrophobia-inducing scene: a locked-room of a ‘landscape’. There is no distance in the image, no sky; the life-giving water seems clotted, corrupted. It could be an image from a guide to riverside plant-life – but one with a preface by J.G. Ballard.

Certainly, not all of McIntyre’s recent photographs are composed in this way, but all take us into what Robert McFarlane has called ‘debatable spaces’. Often, her images bring us close to home, showing us subtle or broken boundaries around or at the rear of ordinary houses: paying unusual attention to slight or damaged structures that mark the uncertain limits of domestic order, and that hint, in their fragility, at threats to the stability of these ‘private’ worlds. Often, too, McIntyre constructs anxious interior scenes, proposing spaces of protection from which to observe the unpredictable world. But these rooms appear un-lived-in, unwelcoming, unhomey. As in all McIntyre’s photographs, then, these are scenes of captivating ambiguity and of uncanny tension. They are concerned with material convergences of the rural and urban, the organic and the constructed, but also, simultaneously, with the disconcerting meeting places between landscape and dreamscape: with the obscure, mysterious edgelands of rational reality.

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