

Forests

By Lisa Hilton

We fear the forest. Hardly an accident that one of the adjectives most frequently attached to the noun in English is primeval. As every child who's read a fairy story knows, better stick to the path, to the light, or risk crossing over into that world beyond civilization where wolves and goblins prey... From Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" to Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" through "The Gruffalo" and the "Evil Dead" movies, the deep dark wood contains and epitomizes everything that we fear may lurk within the roots of our selves. The source of this fear is encapsulated in the title of Alberto Rugolotto's series, "Living Dead", reproduced here in 'Twill 11. The forest, in its constant flux between birth and decay, mirrors the cycle of our own lives, the vampiric incarnation of the dead by the living over the generations. The forest is the natural equivalent of the medieval memento mori, the reminder that even in life we are in death. One of the loveliest meditations on this analogy comes in Gerald Manley Hopkins's 1880 poem "Spring and Fall", a piece which seems peculiarly apposite in the context both of Rugolotto's work and that of Caroline Lejeune, also shown here. Addressed to a child, Hopkins's almost-sonnet runs thus:

Margaret are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can
you?

Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal
lie:

And yet you will weep and know why.
Now, no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, nor nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed.
It is the blight that man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

The forest here becomes the objective correlative of the mortality Margaret intuits within herself; death is "the blight that man was born for", the consequence of the Biblical Fall reflected in the autumn leaves which swirl about her feet. "Spring and Fall" is an elegy on innocence, a mourning for the inevitable process by which adults cease to be moved by their own fallen state, but it is also a poem which expresses a deep skepticism on the possibilities of language. "Unleaving" can be read in the sense of stripping away words, as from the pages of books, the "matter" of the "name" gestures towards the ontological fallacy, the impossibility of verbal apprehension of the object. Thus what the heart feels, the soul-ghost can guess, but can only gesture at. "Unleaved" we are left without words to make sense of our mortal plight, and this, too, is the "blight" we are born for.

If Hopkins's autumn leaves us speechless, how can we look at the forest? Hopkins's thoughts on the natural world were greatly influenced by John Ruskin's revolutionary volumes on aesthetics, "Modern Painters", published some forty years before the writing of "Spring and Fall". George Landow commented on Ruskin's theory that the contemplation of beauty is a moral act; "all beauty, if properly looked at, is theophany". Permitting ourselves to airily dispense with the Christian conundrums that plagued both Ruskin and Hopkins, we might still consider how Rugolotto and Lejeune engage with the forest in such a context. Lejeune cites Victor Hugo in considering the challenge the forest presents to the painter; 'la foret... est par excellence le lieu ou 'se perd le regard'. Her response it is to reduce its swirling verdure to a more refined monochrome palette, forcing the viewer to seek the horizon that the forest perpetually refuses. Rugolotto's savagely sophisticated woodland sprite is at first glance more accessible, her limbs organically twined between the branches, but his title plays with the relentless cycle of sylvan mortality- who is the "Living" and who the "Dead"?

What both artists offer here is a means of approaching the fear and ambivalence conjured by the forest through a visual sublime. Kant's elucidation of the process in "Critique of Judgement" moves through the striving for absolute comprehension beyond what the imagination is capable of representing, to the pain incurred by the failure to contain this to the pleasure of reducing nature to "a mere nothing" in comparison with reason. Taking the linguistic negation of the implication of mortality contained in the forest as expressed in "Spring and Fall" to the "theophany" of the contemplation of the beautiful, Lejeune and Rugolotto present a potential visual resolution to the conundrum by reordering the forest through the perspective of the artist. As Lejeune comments 'ce n'est plus la chlorophylle qui transforme la lumiere en energie, mais c'est l'intelligence de l'oeil'. We cannot speak of what we fear, but we can capture its immanence through the imposition of art. Even if what we seek remains as elusive as Rugolotto's nymph or proves as labyrinthine as Lejeune's quasi-tropical canvases, their work offers a path through those worlds of wanwood leafmeal.