

‘The Umbrage of Green Shade’: Kelvin Corcoran and the Landscape Beyond the Landscape

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‘Events left me in the umbrage of green shade’ (*New and Selected Poems* 69): the phrase is a perfect one to encapsulate the unusual collision of different spaces that we encounter in the poetry of Kelvin Corcoran. It is not immediately apparent what we are supposed to do with such an image. It does not do what we expect of it. ‘Umbrage’ offers us an image of discontent, rancour, offence; ‘green shade’ offers us a rural, even pastoral space – sleepy, becalmed – in which we are supposed to situate this umbrage. Something in us does not want to compute this and we re-read the image. Was it in fact ‘the umbels of green shade’? That might sit a little more easily. But what we have is closer to collage – the pastoral scene is being disfigured in some way. The reclining shepherd/peasant is not reclining asleep; he is fuming, plotting. The umbrage undermines the peaceful effect of the green shade, but the green shade also undermines the umbrage: something about it neuters its anger. The shepherd wants out but every which way is a pastoral symphony echoing around the space of a Claude Lorrain scene. The tensions produce a very striking landscape that is that spatially rich and complex. This chapter will begin to offer a way into the difficult landscapes of Kelvin Corcoran’s poetry, exploring these tensions between landscape traditions and a more distinctly late twentieth century discontent. Why does Corcoran’s English landscape look the way it does? How does it develop throughout his work? What happens when we lean in and listen to the shepherd ‘in the umbrage of green shade’?

The documentary film maker Patrick Keiller recently curated an installation-cum-exhibition at the Tate Britain called *The Robinson Institute*, which playfully claimed to be considering nothing less serious than ‘the possibility of life’s survival on the planet’. When I visited, a group of American tourists could be heard moving from painting to painting discussing, with a surprising evenness, how beautiful each one was. The installation was composed of work – often juxtaposed quite jarringly – that had been selected by Keiller from the Tate collection and further afield as a complement to his 2010 film *Robinson in Ruins*. Both the film and the exhibition were attempts to better understand contemporary social and economic crises through the medium of landscape. They were overtly and radically political. At one point the film discussed the hanging and quartering of four men in 1596, men who had rebelled against the enclosure of the land on which they lived and worked, while offering a scenic view of the fields today. At one point the installation presented John Slack’s 1819 textile print of the Peterloo Massacre on which Shelley based his poem ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ (‘All things have a

home but one – Thou, Oh, Englishman, hast none!"). Both of these events, Keiller was suggesting, ought to be remembered in the context of late capitalism and the 2008 financial crisis. And yet, these visitors seemed only to be able to recognise a monotonous thread of aesthetic pleasure.

Yuriko Saito has a term for this. He suggests that the inability to see beyond the pictorial surface and aesthetic composition of a landscape to the real land and its social and ecological significance beyond is to be 'scenically challenged' (238). This isn't intended as a snipe against American tourists – they might have been from anywhere – but rather, we all might recognise and identify with that particular gaze from time to time, one that hopefully we wrestle against: a dopey, uninquiring cultural tourism that wants to *recognise – enjoy – share – move on – repeat*, ignoring anything that does not fit into this pattern, even when the writing on the wall (quite literally in this case) suggests a more difficult and a more uncomfortable story.

The tendency seems particularly acute when it comes to landscape. Perhaps this is because of the very close relationship between landscape painting and landscape tourism. Perhaps, and more seriously, it is because the very particular rules of sensibility and taste in the tradition of landscape emerge from a crucial optical distance from a framed scene, preventing too much of an inquiry into its living reality. John Barrell, for example, describes the English landscape painting around the turn of the nineteenth century as an 'image of harmony with nature whereby the labourers were merged as far as possible with their surroundings, too far away from us for the question about how contented or ragged they were to arise' (Barrell 16). Recently, however, there has been a re-evaluation of landscape as a tradition, with a host of critics, artists, essayists, film makers and poets revisiting some of its sub-genres like the pastoral, the sublime and the picturesque with an eye to subverting the tradition's powerful hold on our experience of the world around us. Patrick Keiller, for example, describes his method in the Robinson films as attempting 'to better understand a perceived 'problem' by looking at, and making images of, landscape.' (Keiller 9) Robinson, his fictional narrator, goes further: 'From a nearby car park, he surveyed the centre of the island on which he was shipwrecked: "the location", he wrote, "of a *Great Malady*, that I shall dispel, in the manner of Turner, by making *picturesque views*, on journeys to sites of special scientific and historic interest".'

It is within this contemporary context of subverted landscape genre, diagnosis of '*Great Malady*' and the desire to 'dispel [...] by making *picturesque views*' that I would like to explore the work of Kelvin Corcoran in this chapter. This might have seemed ill advised, impossible, even absurd, twenty years ago, when we were too close to the aesthetics of landscape to really see the land, but one of the things that lies behind Keiller's, Corcoran's and many others' resurgent

interest in a politicised English landscape is the spatial turn emanating out of Marxist cultural geographers like Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey. It is a renewed understanding of *space* as organised, produced, managed, mismanaged and reproduced by powerful social relations that has demanded this re-evaluation of landscape. The way that space has become encoded, the way it is now read as a means of structuring our perception and behaviour, have made it, and with it landscape, part of a process of cultural struggle that is politically potent.

Corcoran's poetry offers a scattered and uneasy, kaleidoscopic sense of space that is often in scabrous dialogue with the idea of the nation as a unified landscape, the recurrent 'Eng-a-land' that so many of his voices throw out. It is a space that disrupts landscape by exploring it, not quite as a parody so much as a living dismemberment. 'Eng-a-land' has to it, simultaneously, the wistful, nostalgic diction of a Georgian lyric, a note of paternal, imperial pride ('the triumph of Eng-a-lish classicism' 77) and the nationalist aggression of a boozy football crowd. The tight, angular, uneasy imagery that we read throughout the thirty years of work that Corcoran's poetry offers us seems set to undermine both these forms of 'scenically challenged' nationalism. The total view is always broken, something more vivid showing through the cracks. We cannot comment on how beautiful this poem and that poem are, consuming them evenly and moving on. There is a more carefully contorted space that we have to find our way through here, and to get a sense of it is to have certain disharmonies revealed to you. This is a poetry of disjuncture expressing anxiety, anger and uncertainty.

What is perhaps most interesting about this work, though, is that it is unable to entirely let go of the national myth. As the later poems move out to a Greek landscape they become more concerned with speaking back to the homeland (if such a word is appropriate to describe Corcoran's relation to England). A cosmopolitan and Romantic idealism seeps in, a utopianism that wants to believe that the English can be better than they are, a desire, as with Keiller's Robinson, to 'dispel' the '*Great Malady*':

This is Radio Free Byron on the short wave
broadcasting to the English shires: wake up.
We urge war against the west, against Fletcher;
the Maniots are the men for me, they will do the deed.

Wake up you boys and girls, you sneak careerists. ('Myriorama' 14)

The Maniots had been revolting against the Ottoman Empire for many years before the rest of Greece joined in the War of Independence in 1821 (Greenhalgh and Eliopoulis, 58). A regional pride and a warrior spirit, one affiliating them with the Spartans, characterised the Maniots, and it is this rebellious pride defying top-down imperial control that Corcoran seems to admire, though

war, here, is being waged against an empire to the *'west'* rather than to the east in the wake of the Iraq war. Corcoran's politics seem to find their familial place in the dissenting warrior spirit of nineteenth century Greece, as Byron's did before him, and he sees in this a lesson for England.

This 'broadcasting' back to England describes the space that arises in the later poems very well, a pan-European air space travelled by plane, radio waves, correspondence, foreign relations, trade and dialogue. It is very different from, say, Joyce's relating back to Ireland from France and Italy. It is not an exile. As Peter Riley has suggested the discovery of Greece for Corcoran is not a 'separate issue, like a travelogue, but a great expansion of resource' ('A Sphere of Abundance' 87). But before we come to the particular version of Greece that is so important to Corcoran, there are the 'English shires', asleep here, that ought to be better understood in the early poetry. The question is that of *two* Englands in fact and the tensions sparked between them: the 'scenically challenged', ideal 'Eng-a-land' and the much-decayed local reality of the late 1980s and 90s that wriggles uncomfortably beneath that scenic veneer.

The difference between these two can be understood in Michael Gardiner's terms as a difference between the institution of 'English literature' and the slow and difficult return of a 'literature of England' in the hundred years after the First World War. The former, 'English literature', Gardiner describes as 'an ideal cultural form which estranged the experience of England by a displacement which continues to structure literary study and marketing today' (1); and as a 'civilising discipline' based on 'an ideal of tradition – but not on tradition itself' (3). An ideal, then, that eclipses the place itself. And with the decline of this ideal throughout the twentieth century, a certain 'literature of England' begins to emerge for Gardiner, 'local, experiential and national again' (1). Gardiner places the most intense arrival of this literature between 1990-2010, though what makes Corcoran such an interesting poet from this point of view is the way the local England emerges with something of the failure of the old ideal about it.

TCL is a collection from 1989 in which Corcoran wrestles with the idea of hegemony in England at the end of a decade of insidious and violent Thatcherite change. 'A man came to feel that he did not fit well in his body; his hands from the outside were not his from the inside' (156). So a 'strange visitor' tells us. Later 'police drive in the eyes' and 'a sort of machinery is at work, / dumb song compulsory / enthralled by vacant ghosts' (162). Everywhere we look in this collection human agency is dulled. There is a form of diagnosis at work here, of another *Great Malady* perhaps. The *TCL* of the title refers to the computer scripting language invented by John Ousterhout in 1988 – 'Tool Command Language'. The ambiguity is clear: this is a language which, to speak, must command, must police and compel at some very deep level. In this picture, language is a rigged game; it perpetuates the broader system. This is not a repressive

apparatus of control but something quieter and more intimate, ‘dumb’, approaching ‘from the inside’ and all the more dangerous for it. *TCL* comes a little too close to *TLC*.

In the extraordinary poem ‘Watching the honeysuckle pour’ these anxieties are played out at the scale of landscape. The poem moves between several ‘styles’ of landscape: a garden; a more expansive regional-industrial vista; a shopping centre; and it ends on an imagined burial scene. Anachronism haunts each of these landscapes too. In the garden that the poem opens with, hung with clematis and honeysuckle over trellises, ‘talk of the devil scares the populace / encircles the world set aside’ (161). The sense is of a medieval feudal economy and its peasantry, or at least a pre-enclosure, rural poor, bounded by place, to whom ‘the edge of the orison’ (the phrase is John Clare’s) is the edge of the possible world. That is, so long as they believe what they have been told about the devil. It jars with the more modern notion of the garden trellises and flamboyant flowers. In fact the garden as environment becomes interchangeable with the fear of the devil that contains them. Both become a means of social control. We are picturing a diminutive Brueghel crowd huddled with their tools in the grass lawn of a suburban sun trap.

Beyond the garden walls, though, the anachronism continues: ‘the future falls from the sky / white blobs drill a Midland or Northern town’ – and here we have it – ‘attendant lords range rove / cower, smile, laugh full-throat’ (161). The brand-become-verb-phrase ‘range rove’ compounds the wealth and spatial freedom of these ‘attendant lords’. They are unconfined to the garden and hence unperturbed by the devil. Are these attendant lords the ones who have ‘set aside’ the garden space for ‘the populace’, whatever they can’t use? The ‘white blobs’ are strange though: the choice of words suggests a lack of vocabulary to describe the kind of reworking of the landscape that is taking place. There is a sense that change is taking place in the landscape quickly and covertly and that we are not keeping pace with the changes. We do not know what all these new structures are; we do not know what they do. It was only a few years after the publication of *TCL* that Graham Harvey published his highly controversial *The Killing of the Countryside*, an urgent and informed essay against the way the English government had abused and manipulated European agricultural subsidies to balloon its own industrial scale agribusiness, changing the face of the English landscape forever (‘less than 10 percent of farms account for 50 percent of farm output’ (15)). The farm owners, he suggests, ‘are neither shrewd stockmen nor horny-handed businessmen [...] They are more likely to be wearing Armani suits than overalls, and the closest they get to the fields is driving over them in the Range Rover.’ (15) This kind of farming (though it is less like farming than what was called ‘improvement’ in the eighteenth century) is concerned with short-term, high-profit investment. And yet most of us are quite blind to this when we gaze over the rolling hills.

‘Watching the honeysuckle pour’ opposes these two classes of people by positioning them spatially in two different orders, the unbridled capitalist free to rove over the landscape with the speculator’s eye, unhampered by the garden walls of the ‘scenically challenged’ and socially controlled peasant class. But the peasant class, in another sweep of anachronism, becomes the consumer class, ‘shoppers, dancing youths’ on CCTV: ‘the dream an endless promise / narrates first names with all accretions [...] a hoot and a holler away from paradise’. This is the language of marketing and advertising, replacing the fear of the devil as a means of social control. This is the ‘sort of machinery [that] is at work’ in *TCL*.

The poem ends with an image of a dead body in the ground ‘candid, coiled and waiting / – they fear it’s a woman / with shoes to buy, / biscuits and mince in the bag.’ (162) In another twist of anachronism, this can’t help but evoke Anglo Saxon or Viking burials with their grave goods, though here, pathetically, of ‘biscuits and mince’. But a ‘they’ is introduced too, who seem to fear for this woman, but as the line enjambes we find discover that what they fear is the loss of a consumer. There is the implication of a command, also, in ‘with shoes to buy’, an almost Ballardian necromancy, as if she is being called back from beyond the grave, as if she is defying the natural order by being dead when she should be buying shoes. How dare she? These are the ghosts we might be ‘enthralled’ to, ‘vacant’ but threaded through a form of everyday diction.

Paul Kingsnorth, in *Real England*, describes an epiphany walking around Bluewater shopping centre in Kent when he realises that what he is sensing is ‘totalitarian’:

And it is, in the original sense of that often abused word. Bluewater is a total experience. Every aspect of it is planned, controlled and monitored by authorities who you never see but who only ever have your welfare at heart. Their authority here is absolute, but unless you abuse their trust, break their rules, you will never see them. You are here to consume, and as long as you do so you will be left alone. (5)

The ‘ghosts’ to whom we are enthralled in this poem are vacant in the same totalitarian way, and only flare up into sight as the behaviour of the consumer becomes transgressive (insofar as she is dead: consumers must not die).

Corcoran’s English landscape is one that is fused with this same kind of totalitarianism. But this is by no means defeatist or cynical. He attempts to position himself, and us, outside it, if only for a difficult, glimpsed moment. He manufactures a viewpoint that can incorporate these heterogenous spaces, revealing the roving laughter of the ‘attendant lords’, revealing the trellis walls of the encircling garden, the ‘vacant ghosts’ and the ‘one-eyed camera’ watching all; in short revealing the total spatial regime, however difficult it might be, however we have to contort out thinking to see it. In doing so he carves out a position beyond that regime, however tentatively, and however fragile and difficult that position might be.

There is a strange rhythm of movement in the poems that follow throughout the 1990s. They oscillate between, firstly, tightly observed, unflattering detail – the landfill sites (164) and the retail pavilions (150) and the ‘imperishable plastic, gulls and jaded wrecks’ (134) – and, secondly, the expansive plane-window aerial views. Air space becomes an ambiguous no man’s land (‘Who owns it?’ (136)) into which we might read a form of retreat that is also a stepping back for perspective. (This double function also informs the perspective that looks back from Greece.)

What am I doing here flying over England?
at a nasty tilt, green fields and conservative clubs
flatten out like a grid to the Irish Sea,
off the road are houses where children live
and the heads of the republics return to the centre,
the country looks like a picture of itself,
state the name for it, petty towns and news shows,
drawn in the wake of a commercial van. (140)

The line ‘off the road are houses where children live’ hangs in the air like an accusation (“can’t you see, there are children present!”), as if the flattened ‘grid’ of the landscape itself is an explicit crime to which no one is shielding the children’s eyes. ‘Petty towns’ seems to have dropped an ‘r’ under a gaze that sees beneath their facade. You could almost compare this to a *flâneur’s* distanced view of the city, but it is not so disinterested and self-assured. It is scathing, certainly, but it is worried. ‘What am I doing...?’ The self-doubt prompted by Corcoran’s reaction to what he sees is as much a question about what he *should* be doing as it is an expression that he could be anywhere else. His engagement in the national question is still strong even if it is melancholic.

In this anxious and scathing altitude ‘the country looks like a picture of itself’. There is an interesting paradox here where to see a country as a whole it helps to have a generalised distance, but for Corcoran to see a country at all we must be intimate and precise. How, then, do we maintain the England that Gardiner calls ‘local, experiential and national’ (note that it can be ‘local’ *and* ‘national’) in the face of the desire to reach after something general and abstract? The answer is to acknowledge, as Corcoran does here, the resemblance to the ideal whilst in some sense re-imagining it, putting it under a certain pressure. The country might ‘look like a picture of itself’ but rather than the usual metaphor of ‘patchwork quilt’ here we have ‘grid’ with all its baggage of identification and control.

This poem comes from the 1993 collection *Lyric Lyric*, a collection which is threaded through with movement and mobility. If it wasn’t for the rest of the poem, this aerial passage might seem more liberated from the landscape below than it is. But all too often in this collection the movement and transport is passive: ‘I woke up on the two lane section, roving /

westward' (140); 'John Dowland in the passing traffic / goes over my head' (141); 'driven from the capital / under a sky of stupid messages, / sound tunnels with hoardings' (142). Like the 'populace' in *TCL* there is still a sense of being out of control, or rather of being controlled beyond one's own agency. Even that 'What am I doing here flying over England?' has a sense of having just woken up in the midst of a pre-programmed journey.

As if to counter all this though, *Lyric Lyric* has moments of standstill clarity that are intensely local, personal and present. They pierce the otherwise quite frenetic sense of movement cutting back and forth across space. In 'The garden surrounds me blowing' we find ourselves in another garden, hemmed in again, but this time looking up into the air space above wondering 'Who owns it? / Glitzy helicopters come and go / in the Spring drift above the town [...] all day, all day, this grating noise / shreds the sky in filmy strips.' (136) Then out of, or under, or right through, this paranoid and highly stressed domestic space:

I see the small child crouch
eye to eye with a red tulip,
in a moment of stillness
stick her fingers in the cup;
the flies and bees start up again
weaving the square of green and trees.
The world is all that is the case.
The world is the shrine. (136)

This is not a sentimental epiphany that isolates the natural scene to sanctify it. In fact, it might be the central image's vulnerability to the stressed sky overhead and the subsequent consumerism of the poem's ending, the way it shines out despite these, through them, that makes this scene work so well. The world is not, and cannot be, a shrine for Corcoran unless we recognise that the world 'is all that is the case' first. Again, there is a striking heterogeneity to the space of the poem. It ends by returning to the babble of pop consumerism, paraphrasing and parodying The Beatles: 'I work all day to earn the money / to buy you things [...] I bought my love a fridge, / now there's nothing we won't do'.

There is a similar movement in the poem that opens with lines from an old ballad: 'I run to some farr countrye / where noe man shall me know'. A poem that begins in a state of fugitive mobility ends with two stanzas of static luminosity:

The moon frozen in blue suede,
framed in a loom of cables,
left me standing alone
tilting traffic off centre.

Air filters my window,
my face, my table and literal sky,
a door into the river night

the site of deep assent. (131)

The first stanza's intense, moonlit landscape has something of a modern Samuel Palmer to it, self-consciously Romantic, the 'tilting traffic off centre' (a phrase that crops up elsewhere as well) almost solipsistic. There is a hint of pastoral about it, but in the form of a poem within a poem, as above, this time 'framed in a loom of cables'. That a landscape like this can be entered, 'assented to', at some deep level, for Corcoran, is not to be taken as a retreat from politics into an immediate tactile intimacy. Such assent is not selective but assent to 'all that is the case'. The pastoral becomes part of the collaged landscape, the strength of which is in the heterogeneity. Hence we can arrive later at a phrase such as 'Events left me in the umbrage of green shade' which brings together the placid, visual-pastoral 'green shade' with the disgruntled, conceptual 'umbrage' (though also with a pastoral ring of umbels). Corcoran's assent is to this form of heterogeneity, through which comes the rupture of the traditional landscape and homogenous ideal England. In the process a space becomes possible again for the local and experiential to speak through the dominating silence of traditional scenery. Challenging the ideal national landscape by juxtaposing it, collaging it with other ways of seeing represents an attack of sorts, but it is also a form of access for Corcoran, to a richness of experience, one that repays assent by being more plural and chaotic, by being more 'literal'. Rather than being evacuated of politics the pastoral moments – the moments of luminous beauty and stillness – flare up like a caged animal, a beatific saint on the rack.

The later poems that explore a Greek landscape abound with images of doors, entrances and immersions. These too are ways through the scenery to the literal world beyond. They are often connected to a kind of visionary epiphany: 'In delight a door opens in the air, / we see the whole of Thessaly rising.' (81) Or with a sense of portent, power and drama in the land of the chthonic gods: 'A door opened in the ground / releases the great blackness, / first light unfurled the sky.' (12) Whether they are cause for delight or alarm, they reveal a world that contains more than has been taken to be the case. The sea is 'chambered' (12); the earth is 'chambered' (22). Writing becomes a way of encountering what lies out of reach, historically, mythologically, experientially, linguistically, even politically; it becomes a way through. Again, this is part of what Riley calls an 'expansion of resource' in Corcoran: Greece, not as an escape from England but a place interconnected with it, a place through which to reflect on England.

Take this stanza from *My Life with Byron*, a fascinating selection published for the first time in the *New and Selected Poems*:

Then a door opens deep in the cell,
you hear the music of all your life:
to go in is dangerous,

to turn away is dangerous.

It is a poem that opens with a familiar image of the garden ('The ivy on the wall lifts in one wave') but here in the Greek landscape we can't help but think of a fresh significance to the ivy: symbol of Dionysus and the Maenads; ivy decorating the *thyrsus* or religious staff. Immersion, in this tradition, means a momentary letting go of the senses, intoxication, music, dancing; for Nietzsche, it is the Dionysiac stirrings which 'cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of self-forgetting' (*The Birth of Tragedy* 17). For Euripides, those who do not acknowledge the god are punished violently for their arrogance (*The Bacchae*). And yet the necessary excesses of Dionysus can be a daunting prospect to the reserved and rational Englishman. The call is to step away from the pre-programmed self and the pre-programmed language of *TCL* (the language of the 'sneak careerists') and find renewal in a fresh landscape, exposed, perhaps even for a moment, free. 'What scene unfolds in that domed snow shaker?' Corcoran asks in 'Empire Stores' (26). '[A] limited view of human nature / in a medium of implacable pessimism.' (26) 'Oh England on slick rails to the dumb chamber; / put your ear to the ground, your hands in the air'. (25)

Greece becomes the landscape beyond the domed snow shaker (an echo there of the English 'air space' again), the Greek gods tempting us off the 'slick rails' of careerism, coddled consumerism and 'Blairprint' duplicity. By no means is this a retreat from the English landscape; it is a rummaging around for inspiration. In fact, it begins to follow genuine connections that implicate the English in Greek history and the Greeks in English history: the theft of the Elgin marbles, the journey of Byron to Missolonghi to fight in the Greek War of Independence and the rise of cheap textile manufacture in Manchester sealing the fate of the Common Company of Ambelakia.

When we imagine a nation we imagine a distinct entity (not unlike the snow shaker), especially an island nation like Great Britain with its brooding uncertainty about its relationship to Europe. But to look more closely – especially in a nation with such a long history of empire and foreign interests – is to reveal networks of influence, dependency, trade, all of which are felt locally wherever that locale might be. Often it serves the national interest to play down such things. This is a kind of imagined community that constructs itself like a snow shaker. Critics such as Edward Said and Stuart Hall have shone a little light on 'the absences and the silences' on which everything that is spoken about a nation is grounded. *English* breakfast tea, for example, or sugar, by far the dominant ingredient of any traditional *English* hedgerow jam: quintessentially English but part of 'the outside history that is inside the history of the English' (Hall 202).

When Corcoran visits Ambelakia in his poem then, he unearths a whole nest of spatial and temporal connections. ‘The Common Company of Ambelakia’ (the title of the poem) was a co-operative founded in 1778 to help ease the burden of imperial taxation being wielded from Turkey. They were an essentially socialist enterprise providing people with ‘Schools Libraries Hospitals Mansions Welfare’ (Corcoran 75). They represented an empowering localism stepping in to resist the brutality of empire. But it all fell apart when the industrial revolution in England led to much cheaper production of textiles and when the bank of Vienna – who held the co-operative’s money – went bankrupt. After such weakening, the Turkish came to raid the village in 1810. An empowered local community is being pitted against an empire here. It is a story that appeals to those asking questions about England after the failure and retreat of the British Empire, even as the partial devolutions of Scotland and Wales bring the union of Britain itself into question. The memory of the Common Company of Ambelakia has a further resonance with the post-war English Welfare State that has, since the 1980s been eroded by party after party. ‘Remember schools; libraries; hospitals; mansions; welfare’, says Corcoran. He is speaking to his English readers in the year 2004; it is a question and an order.

The final poem in this sequence is titled ‘Disclaimer: Byron Never Went to Ambelakia (with the latter under erasure)’. It begins with the following from Byron, but it could as easily have been Corcoran himself: ‘I saw before me in the vivid occupation of the people of that place a living notion of the world made good, a species of heresy, a society unfallen – just suppose this were known in England – the very thing I had traversed the theatre of war to find, here ...’ (82) But the stage is set in the poem for Byron to watch them arrested and murdered by Ali Pasha’s troops. Whether in the form of the warrior spirit of the Maniots or the social welfare system of the Common Company of Amelakia, Corcoran, like Byron before him, admires their ‘species of heresy’ that will fight against domination, and it is this that he chooses to broadcast back to the English shires in the hope of stirring them from sleep. This is what Peter Riley has described as Corcoran ‘seeking [...] a visionary extent through the resources of the powerless of the earth’ (87).

Corcoran’s attack on English nationalism is at its heart utopian. It sees the people of England as somehow beset by an empire (at times British, at times American) in the way that the Greeks were by the Ottomans. He is calling them to action, attempting to inculcate an entirely English ‘species of heresy’ founded on principles that are felt locally but combined to effect nationally. So we have an extremely heterogeneous use of landscape, space and place that is – all at the same time – technological, imperial, national, pastoral, local and angry, political and radical. The art is in the grafting of them all together into the same picture, making such genres and

styles fit his own overarching view rather than making his view fit any of the genres or styles. The result is a landscape that is dystopian insofar as it is infused with anger and anxiety, and utopian insofar as its sights are on the horizon, and on how things can be re-imagined and re-made. It is no wonder that such poetry might be found to be difficult. Ease of reading is being quite deliberately assaulted in order to represent textures to the given space that are more literal, that are closer to the textures of instability and asymmetry that Corcoran sees shaping our experience. A landscape not for the pleasure of consumption but one for diagnosis, struggle and repair. So the poetry refuses its reader an easy ride as it refuses its English subject an easy nationalism. But the reward is a vision of the English landscape that is alert to its dilapidated and manhandled vulnerability, inspired by and hoping to inspire a brand new 'species of heresy' for difficult times.

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