Hitchens’ Places

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A few minutes along the road from Greenleaves, the house in West Sussex where Ivon Hitchens lived and painted for nearly forty years, a huge view opens up so that one feels suddenly suspended in fathoms of air, looking over farms and hamlets towards the scalloped slopes of Graffham Down. The whole area is a series of seductions for the lover of landscapes. Bends and crossroads and gaps in the trees are liable to reveal the chalk hills shouldering up from the earth, that ‘chain of majestic mountains’ as Gilbert White called it in the eighteenth century. An afternoon’s walk and you can be up there on the high white path that runs along the top. Or, if the taste for ideally composed scenery should take you, there is Petworth House close by, looking out over one of Capability Brown’s most famous exercises in virtuoso landscape gardening. Fallow deer wander across a sea of parkland that laps up to the stone terrace and stretches away, as JMW Turner painted it in the 1820s, towards lakes which catch the light of the setting sun.

Yet none of this was Hitchens’ central subject; none of this was what really gripped him. He went into the woods around his house and studied the relationship between slender birch trees and thick clumps of glossy-leaved rhododendron. In a region best known for its chalk uplands and the wide water-meadows below, he chose to live and paint on sandy heaths, enjoying an acid soiled ecology of bracken and firs. He stood in the half-light of a copse or plantation and he looked with rapture into some half-obscured clearing where colour sharpened and space beckoned one towards unreachable distance. He went to low, shadowed, secret places. He loved water most of all, especially secluded, shaded rivers moving between thickly-grown banks and into sheltered pools. Contrasts of still and running water absorbed him: painting them, he painted the stillness and energy of life itself.

Walking through the Rother Valley today, you can feel yourself coming into Hitchens places. They are the points at which you feel most curtained and enclosed, where you can’t quite remember how you arrived or how to get away. With Hitchens in mind, shifting one’s sense of these surroundings and bringing new things into focus, the quietest places become eventful. Hushed inaction is broken by what seems the mighty drama of a dead-straight plantation drive striking off or water flooding through a sluice into the dark stillness of a mill pond.

Sense of place is a complex phenomenon. Psychologists may be able to tell us more about it than geographers. What did Hitchens sense in his places? The birds, the sound of the wind, a hundred things he did not paint directly but which informed the rhythms of a picture. How did he inhabit his country? It seems, for instance, that he had little urge to reconnoitre territory; he didn’t walk urgently in all directions, investigating every possible path. He preferred to return over and over to a few favoured haunts. Place works unpredictably on people and people who love places can respond in the most unpredictable ways of all. Hitchens’ chosen spots tend to be hidden ones but what he made in them, and made of them, were paintings of utmost exuberance.

Hitchens chose large canvases, panoramic in shape, that gave him room to be expansive. His yellows call out to each other, his oranges blaze. Calligraphic brushstrokes float and dance over solid, structural colour beneath. Each composition establishes a tempo and keeps the eye moving. It lures us into shrouded tunnels, but we do not remain enclosed there because there is more of the painting to explore. We must delve into the next avenue or feast on the next group of colours. From secretive points of departure came art of Fauvist energy and extravagance.

It’s clear that Hitchens appreciated the country around him in all its variety. Inviting the young poet and painter Michael Ayrton down from London to stay at Greenleaves, he advised a taxi from Pulborough station and specified the route the driver should take. He wanted Ayrton to see the ‘lovely bit of country’ around the Amberley Wild Brooks and Coates Common.[[1]](#footnote-1) Late in life, after three decades in Sussex, he visited a friend north of Midhurst and discovered ‘the most beautiful ridge of this district – excepting – always excepting, the chalk hills’.[[2]](#footnote-2) ‘Always excepting’: it hardly needed saying that the Downs set the standard of beauty. And every so often Hitchens painted downland views. But it was the woods and streams that posed the questions he most wanted to answer, or suggested the visual music he most wanted to compose.

He looked in one direction through the trees, and then another. He looked ahead of him while remaining aware of what was behind. He drew together the mixed experiences of a whole ‘winter walk’. He ‘listened’ to the conversation between an open passage of mown path and an enclosed screen of undergrowth, and these conversations established the relationships between different parts of a painting. Very rarely did he settle for one point of focus at which all lines of perspective meet. The challenge was in the orchestration of two, three, four or even five ‘views’ all held together in sequence, each forming part of the whole. He worked freely with the techniques he had first developed in the *Winter Stage* paintings at Moatlands in Ashdown Forest (north of the Downs, in the heavily wooded Weald). It was as if he was looking through multiple window panes, each framing a different part of the same surroundings.

He divided the canvas of *Terwick Mill 7* into at least five vertical sections, each of which became a window opening on a view with a point of focus. Yet they are not separated off from each other, but joined in continuous sequence. We look around the banks of the pool, into the screens of trees, from the staccato wisps of foreground reeds to glimpses of deep distance, back to the ‘splashing fall’ of the title and away again. The mill pond changed with every passing week and time of day, so that these views kept changing in relation to each other: sometimes the sky became dominant, sometimes it was the reeds or the shadow beneath a tree. To Hitchens the environs of this pool were so complex and changeful as to require attention month after month. For a time in 1946-7 he commuted there daily (a good ten miles from Lavington, through Midhurst and up the Rother valley), intent on fathoming its private life.

Paul Nash often felt himself to be solving the ‘equation’ set by a landscape.[[3]](#footnote-3) He must find ‘equivalents for the megaliths’, for example, or work out how a full moon relates to the stone ball on a column or to the white funnel of a convolvulus flower. Hitchens, too, was an artist of precise geometries, though with very different intentions. There was for him no symbolic code that made the path through landscape a passage into psychological dream worlds. His paintings do not ask to be explicated. Nature’s shapes, lights and compositions, and the movement of colour on canvas, were for him the thing itself. A divided oak tree might find its echo in a divided patch of colour; the space between branches might assert itself as a solid presence.

The choice of double-square and even triple-square canvases suggests the baroque mathematician in him. Inigo Jones built a double-cube room that would stage an on-going dance of symmetries, making its inhabitants conscious of containment and expansiveness at once. That was a gilded state-room at Wilton House. Hitchens preferred to deploy his formal discoveries in relation to an out-of-the-way mill pond, and a few obscure acres of wood. These places on a grey day seemed more lavishly munificent to him than any palace.

He had only to step onto the terrace by the studio to find a landscape that thrilled him. It was partly garden, partly woodland, inhabited and wild at once. Among the most exuberant of all his pictures are those he made at Greenleaves during the war, when the studio had just been built next to the old gypsy waggon, and the blue-painted doors stood open from the work-room onto a little area of lawn and patio carved out among the bracken and bushes. He painted Mollie with their son John, a toddler of two or three years old, a mother and child in a paradise garden of hot colours and sensuous patterns. Matisse was happily invoked as a guiding spirit.

To look at the *John by Jordan* series and related pictures you might think Hitchens had gone on holiday to a jungle where parrots shot colour through the air and fruits hung ripe for the taking. The heath and scrubland of Lavington Common, with its stream running between trees and beds now rapidly sown with poppies, had that effect on him. Are those date palms or banana leaves making a green shade over the glowing figures? In Hitchens’ ericaceous Eden, the rhododendrons take a tropical turn.

Jordan was the nickname given to the blue tin tub in which John was given his baths. Piero della Francesca had painted the baptism of Christ in the holy river; Hitchens (who studied all his life the paintings of quattrocento Italy), painted his son’s metal tub in the back garden. In fact the filling and emptying of the bath, like many things at Greenleaves, required a good deal of work. There was no running water, no boiler or hot-tank; everything had to be done from scratch. This life in the woods sometimes felt bare and laborious, an unending round of fetching coals, emptying buckets, filling buckets, cutting firewood, filling paraffin lamps and lighting paraffin stoves.[[4]](#footnote-4) The frustration did not go into the painting; the art was never tired or resentful. Hitchens painted a world of warm luxuriance in which ordinary things were amplified and each space had a distinct intensity of its own.

The bath grew into the River Jordan (which Piero had, in any case, imagined as a quiet, glassy rivulet). The little brook that ran into the garden became the source of a lovingly engineered network of streams. Ted Floate, the local woodsman who worked in the garden and who became a trusted friend, built little wooden bridges over the water – though such crossings were hardly needed. ‘It was only a little ditch really’, Floate remembered, ‘but after he’d painted it, it looked like Cheddar Gorge.’[[5]](#footnote-5) It’s an observation that illuminates Hitchens’ approach to many other subjects. There was a magnifying quality in his attention. The sluice outlet at Terwick Mill became a major waterfall. Pictures which suggest rivers in spate or immense vistas, were often responses to a little pond or clearing that another person might have gone straight past.

The *Tangled Pool* series, pulsing with pattern and movement, was painted in the back garden at Greenleaves: the blue doors and pink walls of the house are just visible on the left in the British Council picture, with a bench in front. The pool is to be imagined somewhere within the ‘tangle’ of waterside growth, a hidden coolness behind the waving, fizzing, flaring eruption of shapes that suggest cow-parsley, rushes, grasses and flags. The tangle is a vegetable party, a noisy botanical crowd ready to take over. As Hitchens painted this subject again and again in 1947-8 (ten pictures in all), he broke away from the stabilising backdrop of the house, and let the vegetation burst across the canvas. The whole series, like much of Hitchens’ work, was a balancing act of freedom and control. The undergrowth romped in lush profligacy around the pond, but the artist divided his canvas into diptych and triptych, working out his colours in point and counterpoint.

‘In England today’, wrote Patrick Heron in the mid-1950s, ‘Hitchens in West Sussex provides the most distinguished example of […] profound personal identification of a painter with a special place, or landscape – although, in Cornwall, Peter Lanyon, much younger, has this same reverence for a particular landscape.’[[6]](#footnote-6) The comparison with Lanyon is a fertile one, not least because both artists moved close to abstraction even while immersing themselves more and more deeply in their environments. Their passion for place pushed them far out beyond topographical figuration. But what’s striking, too, is the great contrast in the places they chose. Lanyon stood on exposed granite, submitting himself to the elements, wanting to paint the path of the wind over the sea. Learning to fly gliders, he reinvented landscape painting while airborne. Hitchens, meanwhile, turned landscape painting inside-out by tunnelling into woods, and submerging himself in the marginal growth of ponds.

Letters went back and forth from the far edge of western Britain to the house in the thickets. Lanyon was one of many younger artists to whom Hitchens was a mentor and friend, and who championed him in turn, ensuring his presence as a lively influence on the next generation. The most vocal friend and admirer was Patrick Heron himself, who had moved to St Ives to work with Bernard Leach and stayed there, in a landscape of promontories and vertical drops, where a human figure stands up from the earth like a monument or beacon. In his high Cornish house, Eagles’ Nest, Patrick Heron lifted the telephone and the two artists talked across the miles. His voice came down the line into the hidden Sussex room among the trees.

If Hitchens felt the attraction of West Penwith, it was not enough to propel him down there; to go away was to lose time. He fended off invitations to other places with the defensiveness of a man for whom time is only meaningful when it is spent within the familiar radius. For his part, Heron was keen to see Sussex and studied in fascination Hitchens’ ‘special terrain’. He described its ‘variegated, undramatic beauty’. ‘Nowhere, naturally, is there any hint of that passionate bleakness of the rock-infested Celtic landscape of Cornwall or Wales which other contemporary painters now celebrate.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the 1960s, Hitchens adopted a new subject – one with rocks and waves. Ivon and Mollie bought themselves a holiday home at Selsey, one of a group of chalets made from old railway carriages sited right on the edge of the shingle, looking out to sea. It was as open and and windswept a place as could be found a half-hour’s drive from Lavington. Behind the bungalow was a tiny sheltered patio where cockle dinners could be enjoyed out of the wind, but the point of Selsey was to be out on the shore, on a peninsula jutting into the Channel, exposed on every side. Here were no lush green depths of pondside growth, but tough sea-kale and campion withstanding the salty breeze, and miles of stone and sky. Even on cloudy days the light was intense after the shady rivers and woods. The change brought a new phase of sensuous painting. Though the views were ostensibly stark, Hitchens painted this landscape by painting nudes, celebrating warm bodies under the sky. Though the beach was often grey, the sense of space expressed itself in a new palette of hot reds, oranges, and pinks.

Hitchens often mused on what might lie beyond the here-and-now. His immediate places were known points on a much larger canvas that stretched out into unknown regions of metaphysical space. He wondered what fellow artists were doing in the next life, and as he got older he speculated fancifully on what might await him beyond Lavington and Selsey. Would he be a free-roaming cosmonaut? He frowned at the thought of the future’s space machines. That kind of travel was not for him. ‘I’d far rather walk the downs and search out wooded glades & hollows in the chalk – watch the rabbits under thorn bushes, & see the wild rose thickets backed up by the black yews.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

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1. Ivon Hitchens to Michael Ayrton, 24 November 1945, Tate Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ivon Hitchens to Kit Barker, 10 November 1969, Tate Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, in a contribution to *Unit One* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934), 81, Nash described a summer conjunction of lichened monoliths and a convolvulus in the hedge, its white trumpet on a spiral stem: ‘In my art I would solve such an equation’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See eg. Ivon Hitchens to Michael Ayrton, 6 February 1946, Tate Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ted Floate interviewed for a Goldmark Gallery film, *Ivon Hitchens: Encounter in the Woods*, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Patrick Heron, *Ivon Hitchens*, Penguin Modern Painters (Harmondsworth, 1955), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Heron, *Hitchens*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ivon Hitchens to Kit Barker, 9 June 1979, Tate Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)