INTO THE WOODS: GERMANY AND ITS FOREST

Two weeks ago Simon gave us a whistle-stop tour through European thought to Modernism and Postmodernism, and asked where Nature features in a Human-dominated world: how can we relate to it, hear its voice? One story I know a little about is that of Germany and its forests.

Why should we take any interest in them? Well, we all know trees matter, and here's a comparison: forest covers about 3 million hectares in the UK, that's around 13% of the landmass; in Germany, which is more densely populated, there are 11.4 million hectares of forest, which represents 33% of the land area – quite some difference! How did a country not unlike ours, and more densely populated, do so much better in caring for nature?

It really all began with Arminius, prince of the Germanic Cherusci tribe and a Roman citizen who had rediscovered his roots. He won an extraordinary victory over the occupying Roman legions under Varus in 9 CE/AD, recorded by Tacitus. That brutal battle took place in the Teutoburger forest (in N. Germany) and was the first clear marker of distinction between the wild Germanic tribes and the world outside. It defined them: the forest was a locus of tribal cohesion, the place where you first knew yourself, a place to protect and be protected by. So the forest became in every sense Germanic heartland, a place of refuge, pride and self-identification.

The German-speaking lands remained divided over many centuries, but the forest continued to function as a cohesive cultural motif, as the place where significant human events play out. It is the setting chosen for pivotal scenes in the renowned medieval saga, the *Nibelungenlied*, the story of another archetypal German hero, Siegfried; in the early 16c forest figures very large in the paintings of Albrecht Altdorfer, e.g. his *St. George* where the forest is so huge and vibrantly alive that it seems to overwhelm the dragon rather than St. George himself. Even after the Thirty Years War ruined whole swathes of land, images of the idealised 'woodman' continued widely in popular art and kept the notion of the nurturing forest alive.

In the 1760s, forest hero Arminius – now called Hermann (possibly first by Luther?) - once again became a focus for proto-national resistance, this time against the French, who were seen as threatening native German language and values through their dominance of court culture in the many German principalities. In a drama about Hermann by the poet Klopstock, it is the forest oaks of Germany that are the abode of the gods, the very soul of the longed-for real Fatherland. From then on the desire to root German identity and culture firmly in native soil becomes an obsession. Johann Gottfried Herder argued that an authentic German voice was to be found only in vernacular arts – German ballads, German folksong and fairy-tale, in all of which forests figure large. Think of the Grimm brothers: who doesn't immediately picture Hansel and Gretel or Little Red Riding Hood and conjure up images of dense forests, full of unspeakable dangers, demanding real courage? The forest is a place to respect, where protagonists undergo trials but also transformation, and reach their destinies by trust in nature. Sometimes this trust had a more overtly political edge, especially during the Napoleonic Wars. You can see this clearly in Caspar David Friedrich's 1814 painting *Chasseur im Walde*, where a lone French soldier is lost in a magnificent, engulfing northern forest – a landscape of longed-for but as yet unrealised German national dreams.

Perhaps as a renewed process of identification with nature and a diversion from political impotence, immersive 'forest bathing' became a health cult in 19c. Germany, long before the Japanese popularised it. Through the 19c. and into the 20c., forests continued to be evoked and celebrated in German regional literature, poetry, and music (e.g. *Der Freischütz*)– unlike here, there were no urban centres to give rise to a Balzac or a Dickens until the late 19c., when Germany finally unified under Prussia in 1871. But the Romantic idea of the forest as the embodiment of German-ness was not lost even then, indeed its role in national self-definition re-emerged powerfully – and it must be said, dubiously - in the wake of WW1 and the rise of Nazism.

Nazi eugenics were closely tied to the twin concepts of *Blut und Boden*, blood and soil, and once again encouraged healthy, 'authentic' lifestyles to be lived out in woods and villages, away from dangerous 'intellectuals' and decadent (=socialist) cities. The Hitler Youth did a lot

of forest camping, and as Simon Schama points out in his wonderful book *Landscape and Memory*, Nazi leaders loved being photographed in woodland settings – and even gave "Hitler oaks" (saplings) to the Olympic gold medallists in 1936. Unsurprisingly Hermann became a cult figure, in a deeply suspect identification of forest dweller and racial type – and of course a lot could be said about the darker links between forest worship and destructive militarism too (cf. Anselm Kiefer's paintings). Yet something like a serious environmentalist movement also began to form, even if lessons on forest ecology in schools emphasised biological competition and the survival of the healthiest species. No surprise then that a beech wood, Buchenwald, gave its name to a concentration camp for 'lesser species', yet ironically without the Nazis' ideologically tainted contribution to ecological awareness quite probably the Green movement would not have established itself so early in Germany.

Post 1945 of course Germany lay in ruins, its forests plundered for wood to sustain basic life, yet I distinctly recall hearing terms like 'saurer Regen' (acid rain) and 'Waldsterben' (forest death) over there well before they were current here. Resistance to forest loss began earlier and more passionately in Germany than almost anywhere else, and so Germans' deep cultural and emotional engagement with their forests continues and has had measurable effects in the real world of forest survival. Not surprisingly, there has been a huge audience for books like *The Hidden Life* of *Trees* by the German forester Paul Wohlleben, though I will leave comment on ecological science to others.

Of course Germany is in an individual case, but it shows that where nature is allowed to speak within a culture there are real effects within history. Let me quote a short poem by the 19c.poet Eichendorff, with a fundamental question about the natural world and our response to it -

"Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen
Die da träumen fort und fort,
Und die Welt hebt an zu singen,
Triffst du nur das Zauberwort."

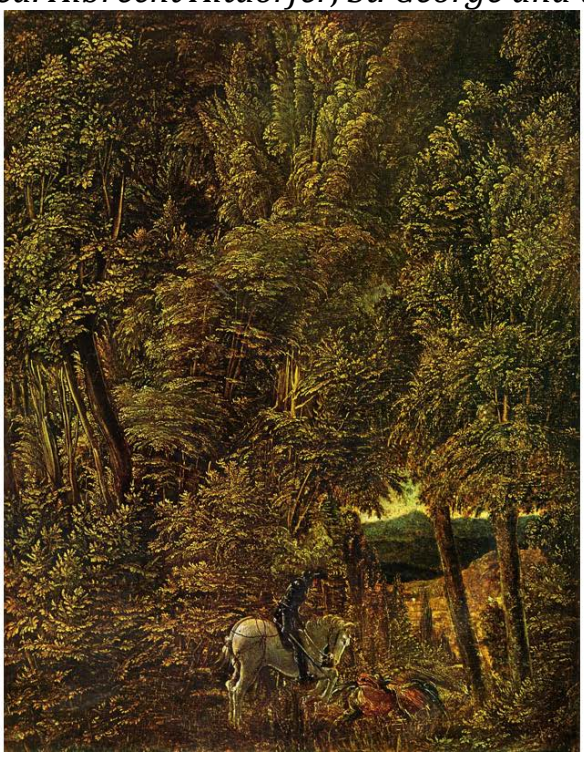
"There's a song in all things living,
Dreaming onward, undisturbed,
And the world begins its singing
If you find the magic word."

It's obvious theme is the poet's own art, but there's more to it, I think.

Is it suggesting that Man alone has 'magic' power to unlock and awaken nature? Or is it rather that Nature is waiting for us finally to awaken and grasp that we are already part of it, if only we have the eyes to see that?

The example of Germany suggests the latter: that history and culture are places where the voice of nature has always been present, and when we pay attention then nature benefits, and we with it. Maybe we in Britain, with our belief in "self-made men" and our much-vaunted pride in a "green and pleasant land" that we nevertheless bury under concrete – maybe we should have listened more carefully to nature's voice in our own cultural history. As the Austrian poet Rilke put it – loosely translated: "Only we in our arrogance/push out beyond what we each belong to/for some empty freedom./If we surrendered/to earth's intelligence/we could rise up rooted like trees."

Paintings mentioned: Albrecht Altdorfer, St. George and the Dragon



Caspar David Friedrich "Der Chasseur im Walde"