

## Verity's Sky

Paul Hills, 2016

In Charlotte Verity's recent paintings, the colour and light of the sky is translated, brought within bounds. In *Sky-Blue Spring* a dozen or so ceramic tiles reflect an invisible sky of palest blue behind a screen of flowers. What by nature is above has descended into the white field of the painter's canvas; and what by nature is amorphous and without limit has been divided into rectangles and loosely ranked upon a receding plane. This translation or relocation calls to mind a passage in Walter Pater's essay on Luca della Robbia, the Florentine sculptor of the Early Renaissance, where Pater evokes 'those pieces of pale blue and white earthenware [...] like fragments of the milky sky itself, fallen into the cool streets and breaking into the darkened churches.'<sup>1</sup> In Verity's painting too a distillation of the sky and of the energy of light has taken place. The boundless is ordered.

Ordering within the rectangle of the canvas is a meditative act, and although the geometry that sustains these paintings is unobtrusive it is deeply considered; the lean of a stem, the arc of a leaf, the play of *inclination* is poignant. As in the work of Piero della Francesca, an artist Verity loves, the light-filled spaces are as fully realised, as *present*, as the forms themselves. The Renaissance painter has stories to tell and his principal actors are human figures, whereas Verity's narratives, devoid of all rhetoric and bombast, are carried by plants and flowers – snowdrops and long-stemmed daisies, sprigs of holly and fallen pears – living in concert with the light. There are no enlargements, no tricks of scale to suggest anthropomorphic analogies, no imposing of the artist's ego; and yet, notwithstanding the patient observation and selfless refusal to intrude, this is not botanical painting. Flowers for Charlotte Verity are what jugs and bottles are for Giorgio Morandi – vessels of light, markers of feeling.

The teleology of flowers and fruit – the appearance of the first snowdrop and the unfolding of each petal, the reddening leaves of a pear – afford metaphors for the movements, hesitations and pauses of life, the pulse of existence. Verity's titles – *Earliest Snowdrops*, *Height of Summer*, *September*, *Pear's Last Leaves*, *Where They Fell*, *Winter Ending* – prompt us to think about first appearing and last lingering, rising and declining. *Town-Light Winter* sets darkness and light in dialogue, while phosphorescent branches enter from the left with the mysterious, compressed power of an imagist poem or haiku. In *Cycle*, a small canvas in portrait format, a white cyclamen blossoms in a field of luminous grey. A single bloom has come into being; holding the light it leans towards the left-hand edge, its petals turning in the breeze like a child's whirligig held on a stick. The swirl of white petals is painted with a precise touch, while the leaves of the cyclamen are so thinly rubbed in with the brush that the weave of the

canvas is exposed as a common ground, a shared breath. In the field of grey, colours shift between muted yellow and green to shades of lilac and violet. Creation's cycle is in process, never finished or foreclosed, while a mysterious rift separates the leaves in the right-hand corner from the expanse of dove grey that extends high above. As in the canvases of Winifred Nicholson, this cyclamen blooms in a metaphysical space.

Larger paintings in landscape format choreograph narratives of entry, of coming to rest, of movement from and towards. Harboured light, they evoke time's passage. In *Betula Weeping* a veil of yellowing birch leaves, held by a thread to the falling branches, suggests a liminal place of passage between worlds. Like wandering thoughts or lost souls, the leaves go in and out of focus. Dividing and forking like arteries, the slender branches suggest the thread of life, the thread that the fates spin out and at any moment may cut. In *The Day's Eyes* the thread is loosely woven from the filaments of the long-stemmed daisies that incline and reach out, setting up a staccato movement from left to right across the light-filled canvas. Living stems rise up; dryer cut stems lie prone, tangling in mid-air while blurry patches of sky blue lie below and beyond.

This elegiac mood is even more marked in *Istalif*. When I first laid eyes on it, Renaissance paintings of the Deposition and the Lamentation at the foot of the Cross flashed across my mind. The lines of the falling branches seemed to express tender resignation and profound sorrow, the scatter of leaves clinging on suggested endurance. Later I learned that Istalif is a village renowned for its glazed ceramics and one of the most beautiful places in Afghanistan that has suffered terrible destruction in the recent wars. The distant mountains, powder blue, lie low on the horizon of the painting. As so often in Verity's canvases, the blue of the sky has descended, intimating the persistence of hope.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter H. Pater, "Luca Della Robbia," in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1873), pp. 53–61.