The Narrator

Volume 2.3

The Narrator

January 2016, Volume 2.3

Edited by Emily Willis and Sam Kaufman, Christian Jackson

and Giorgia Garilli

Proofread by Noor Hemani

Advertising by Camille Graham

Further Editors: Daniel Underwood, Calder Marshall, Emma Goff-Legett,

Hannah Mullan and Mariana Rios-Sanchez

Cover image: Compartment C Car, 1938, by Edward Hopper

thenarratoryork.wix.com/the-narrator

Submissions: thenarratoryork@gmail.com

CONTENTS

Editorial Note

It is a pleasure to announce that the critical articles in our final publication as founding editors all offer interpretations of students' poetry, exemplifying this dialogic initiative behind The Narrator, to further passion for literature outside of university courses.

This term The Narrator has seen record numbers of submissions and membership. As current editors prepare for masters courses/ careers, we are delighted to welcome new Editors Giorgia Garilli (critical), and Christian Jackson (creative). Along with them, our editorial team have done a fantastic job: Calder Marshall, Emma Goff-Legett, Hannah Mullan, Mariana Rios-Sanchez and Daniel Underwood. I'd like to mention Daniel in particular, whose constant support of The Narrator throughout its evolution has been invaluable. We thank Noor Hemani for her undying enthusiasm and thorough proof reading, Camille Graham for advertising and Taghreed Ayaz for her efficiency in organising socials with Unknown Magazine and the recent joint event with poets Paul Mills and Carole Bromley reading alongside students. This was co-organised by Daniel Underwood and myself, supported by the English Department. We know that this team of insightful and devoted individuals will do a brilliant job with future volumes and events.

We express our gratitude to the English Department for supporting us with a fund left by F.R Leavis, an eminent 20th century critic, to support student journals fulfilling his critical vision. I would mention David Attwell and Bryan Radley in particular. Finally, it is only left to thank writers, for all their hard work and imagination, without whom the journal could not exist. We have been continually overwhelmed by the quality of your writing.

Undergraduates and postgraduates across the UK have contributed to Volume 2.3, from universities including: York, our partners at Durham University, Bristol, Essex, Sheffield, and St. Andrews. This issue is genre specific, complementing the poetry reading event. It features death, selfhood and relations to others, memory, natural imagery, metamorphosis and historic portraiture. Accompanied by Holly Huxter's illustrations of autumnal and winter trees, these vivid scenes enrich understandings of the intricate use of colour in the poems. Many pieces are also preoccupied with language; the poems are connected through arresting voices, yet the variety of forms employed present multiple avenues for interpretation. The critical pieces approach the poems using the idea of the historical construction of legendary figures, voices in Virginia Woolf's work and 19th century burial rituals and the theme of decay, to name a few.

Finally, we extend thanks to our readers and hope that you enjoy the issue!

Founding Editors:

Emily Willis, Sam Kaufman


Holly Huxter 2016

After the Death of Your Husband
Amanda Merritt

Orion right-side up in the winter sky.
Cross-cut by telephone-wires slack
with snow.

Once these stars did not exist. Once,
their stories were a knot of energy, thrumming
at the centre of the universe like a prenatal heart.

The dead are the bradycardia of the earth, a dysrhythmia
that swoons through the blood, hiccups in the ears,
rails past the corner of your eye—makes you turn. Makes you always
turn back twice.

Closets of clothing worn now unworn: heap them into a pile
like drifts of leaves, reveal the autumn stains beneath,
spoon-carve out a cavity in the dark. Lie down.
fold yourself in. Rest for a while. No,
this isn't him. These are his skins.

And here are my dense thoughts laid out like rock salts
in the grass. I want to be a locus—
a focal point. But I am no object. Not even this simple heart
is centre. I am my scorched certainties.
And perhaps a magnificent bird,
but just its parts.

Colour is an impurity, and all my halite thoughts are yellow.
I stand in the yard like an old woman without his glasses: teary but smiling.
I've drank the evening and everything is blown-out, gently spinning.
Silence repaints my figure.

I could be the corpse flower. I could love the evening, I could grow a nocturnal garden
because it's not fair that we lock the doors, draw down the shades, turn back in to the earth,
shut our eyes when the night sits gently on the edge of our bed.
There is the sound of a hinge, a chest. I must go.

White-pack field, the letter in my hand—crisp, frozen, too tired
of shivering. And land, here, is the inverse of sky,
plus the neighbour's car now an embedded sediment.
Fresh air is good. But these lungs
are too cold to scream. When winter's zolpidem
slows the blood, infuriates
a body that wants to dismantle the fireplace

and step through it, wants to be not a bypass
but an opening. Anger stiffens
like an artery. Understand this:
Real violence is not in the escalation,
it's in the sudden, terrifying seizure-pause,
the in suck of the universe. And then the explosion, after.

Sometimes this blurs at my peripheries,
like headlights through the kitchen window,
like a tune coming from no where in particular.
Leading away.
Sometimes this is more real:
the dark casing around the stars.

Remembering the Dead

Val Derbyshire

> I suggest to you… that it would be difficult to conceive of anything more ghastly and garish than some of the big cemeteries in Liverpool and other cities. For instance, some of the headstones surmounted by a blasé looking angel in a whitish nightie look particularly awful. The headstones are varied, but mostly in varying degrees of ugliness. Some here and there are simple and dignified. Others are ornate, and suggest a competition as to who could provide the more costly memorials than their neighbours, and seem to borrow their architecture from picture palaces or 'grand hotels'. (T. F. H. Wilson, addressing the Northwestern Branch of Cemetery Superintendants in 1936, quoted in Rugg 219).

> quickly bared flesh; apparition
> twenty-six years passed; and now returned
> to remain in this poetry. (C. P. Cavafy, "To Remain" 371)

After the Victorian obsession with death and mourning, ostentatious gravestones and funeral memorials, macabre mourning jewellery containing the hair of the deceased and even more macabre family photographs taken with the dead, the backlash to this came in the form of reactions akin to Wilson's quoted above. Cemeteries became spaces of consistency, headstones "simple and dignified" (Wilson, quoted in Rugg 219). Funeral rites were abridged, the dead were tidied away. As Freud remarked, summarising attitudes to death during the post-Victorian years prior to the First World War: "We showed an unmistakeable tendency to put death on one side, to eliminate it from life. We tried to hush it up." (Quoted in Ramazani 11).

However, there is one area where the dead are still celebrated: the elegiac poem. It may be the case, as Isabella Holmes argued in 1896, that the space which is dedicated to the bodies of the dead would be better served "by its dedication to the living" (Holmes 278), but the poetry of mourning provides infinite space, as Cavafy notes, "To Remain" (cited above). Amanda Merritt's "After the Death of your Husband" is a contemporary example of the anguish of mourning rendered into verse. With all the marks of raw pain and inconsolable grief which determines such modern texts as Maggie O'Farrell's first novel *After You'd Gone*, this poem recollects the much-missed husband, and mourns for him.

"Once these stars did not exist" (4) Merritt informs, providing a clue to the "prenatal heart" (6) of the poetic persona before the husband (and

the love they shared) was known to the mourner. This would be a point in time, presumably, before he had even entered her life and was subsequently lost. The awareness of "Orion right-side up in the winter sky" (1) hints at a knowledge which has been provided by the husband and gained through him. Orion, ever-present and ever-remaining after the husband was not, provides a sharp reminder of all that the narrator has lost.

These aide-memoires are just further impediments for the poetic persona to move on from their grief. "The dead are the bradycardia of the earth,.." (7), slowing the passage of time, much as bradycardia slows the rhythms of the heartbeat, preventing the mourner from progressing with their life at a more normative (less pathological) pace. The world in colour - the way we would normally see the world - becomes "an impurity". Instead, the narrator is stuck in the sepia tones of the past: "all my halite thoughts are yellow" (22). The inability to forget, and the desire to preserve and remember, become an attempt to literally re-member the body of the husband, recreating the shape and scent of the lost person in his "Closets of clothing worn now unworn" (11). Yet, for the griever, there is no comfort in these "his skins": "this isn't him" (15).

As the poem progresses, it seems to follow the path of other modern elegists, who, as Ramazani argues: "tend to enact the work not of normative but of "melancholic" mourning". Ramazani observes that these elegists tend to exercise a "fierce resistance to solace" (Ramazani 4). This resistance to relief in the "scorched" (19) mourner is exemplified as she comes to embody the memorial process: "I could be the corpse flower" (26). The poetic voice thus becomes a living memorial (a species of floral wreath) to the lost husband.

Indeed, the griever feels it is "not fair" 27) in some manner to progress without the lost one. "I could grow a nocturnal garden" (26), the narrator informs us; a garden of remembrance, where no daylight permeates and the "shades" are "drawn down" (27). The image of a garden in elegiac poetry is a prevalent one. In Thomas Hardy's celebrated elegiac verse, the loss of the days when "our paths through flowers" (Hardy, "After a Journey" 59) is frequently bemoaned. In lamenting the decay of a loved one, Hardy prevents himself from entering the garden, drawing down the "shades" in a manner akin to Meriton's narrator:

Close up the casement, draw the blind,
Shut out that stealing moon,
She wears too much the guise she wore
Before our lutes were strewn
With years-deep dust, and names we read
On a white stone were hewn.

Step not forth on the dew-dashed lawn
To view the Lady's Chair,
Immense Orion's glittering form,
The Less and Greater Bear:
Stay in; to such sights we were drawn
When faded ones were fair. (Hardy, "Shut Out that Moon" 33-4).

Like Merritt's "Orion" (1), Hardy's Moon is too painful a reminder of what has been lost. The garden becomes a no-go area: "Brush not the bough for midnight scents", Hardy peremptorily orders (Hardy, "Shut Out that Moon" 34). If, as Laura Vivanco argues in her study of Harlequin Mills & Boon romantic novels, the garden is a classical traditional space for courtship and romance (Vivanco, Loc. 4072), then upon the demise of one participant in that romance, it becomes a forbidden space. As Cecil Day Lewis observes in "The Album", the garden after the death of a loved one, previously a space enjoyed together, becomes an apocalyptic waste land: "a tree stripped bare/By intemperate gales, her amazing/Noonday of blossom spoilt" (Day Lewis, "The Album" 57). It is just one further reminder of what is irrecoverably lost.

The disease of mourning and *dis*-ease which the poetic persona of Merritt's elegy expresses at the inability to progress with life after this death is highlighted by the diseases which are present in the text. Utilising medical discourse and scientific language, for example prescription medicine names such as "zolpidem" (34) to describe the seasonal background to the poem, the poem hints at the illness which has deprived the husband of his life. Anger, the mourner confides, "stiffens like an artery" (38-9), just as a stiffened artery is a symptom of a heart attack. We are back with the "bradycardia" (7) again; that frightening slowing of the heart until it stops. That the death is sudden and unexpected, we know, because this is "real violence" (L40), a "sudden, terrifying seizure" (41). Unforeseen and startling in its consequences, the abrupt absence left by the dead leads to an "insuck of the universe" (42). A horrific stunned pause, before the realisation of loss, "the explosion, after" (42) follows: the broken heart of the griever. The sufferer - *both* sufferers, i.e. the diseased and the mourner - are suddenly no more. The husband is dead and gone. The mourner finds that they are unable to proceed with normal life.

Where the husband has gone, the poem does not make clear. We know the husband is dead. That much is apparent from the title of the poem. However, there is no grave space delineated within the lines of the text. The grave, as Julie Rugg argues, is, "despite its outdoor location" a "domestic space" (Rugg 219). Linked to the home, as the new home of the deceased, the grave provides a site for the mourner to visit, remember and provides tangible, physical evidence of the family ties which bond the

mourner with the mourned. That space is missing from the poetic remembrance; and a further analysis of the title of the poem provides a possible explanation for this. "After the Death of *your* Husband" (emphasis mine). That "your" with its lower case "y" is almost a coy, half-concealed indicator that the husband in question may not belong to the mourner. "[T]he Death of your Husband" seems to hint that this is the husband of somebody else. That someone else, like the grave which cements those family ties, is also absent from the text. The grave is absent because seemingly there are no family ties to cement: the one the mourner grieves for was potentially not family at all. Therefore, where the text or inscription of the headstone would mark the remains of the deceased, here, instead, all that remains is inscribed within the text of the poem.

Gerhard Joseph and Herbert Tucker argue that: "[m]ourning, unlike dying, is a lived and to that extent a communicable experience" (Joseph & Tucker 111). Almost universal in experience - nearly everybody, after all, has lost someone - Merritt's elegiac expression of grief is as individual and original as we all are. Every evocation of grief is unique to the mourner. What Merritt's "After the Death of your Husband" illustrates is a space in which to recall and recollect the dead. This is a space beyond the hospital where the disease was suffered, and beyond the grave where the deceased is interred. In a world which contains more people than ever before and more death than ever before, space for the dead is limited. The poem, however, is a space which lives on in the mind of the mourner (and the poetry reader); a space where the dead can be recalled, reconstructed, "and now returned/to remain in this poetry" (C. P. Cavafy, "To Remain" 371).

Biographical Information

Val Derbyshire is a WRoCAH supported AHRC Competition student researching the works of Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) in the School of English, University of Sheffield.

Works Cited

Cavafy, C. P. "To Remain". *The Penguin Book of Love Poetry*. Ed. Jon Stallworthy. London: Penguin Books, 1973. 370-1. Print.

Day Lewis, Cecil, "The Album". *Love Poems*. Ed. Ken Leeder. London: Judy Piatkus (Publishers) Limited, 1985. Print.

Hardy, Thomas. *Selected Shorter Poems*. Ed. John Wain. London: PaperMac, 1966. Print.

Holmes, Isabella M. *The London Burial Ground. Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day… Illustrated*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896. Historical Collection from the British Library. Print On Demand.

Joseph, Gerhard, and Tucker, Herbert F. "Passing On: Death". *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ed. Herbert Tucker. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1999. Print.

O'Farrell, Maggie. *After You'd Gone*. London: Headline Review, 2010. Print.

Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994. Print.

Rugg, Julie. "Lawn Cemeteries: the emergence of a new landscape of death." *Urban History* 33. 2. (2006): 213-233. Web. 02 December 2015.

Vivanco, Laura. *For Love and Money*. Penrith: Humanities e-books, 2011. Print.

Cancer

Louise Essex

in my dream.
You were naked
and bald.
Purplish
slippery.
You were in your bath.
It had been so long.
I couldn’t get you out -
the bath was so big
you were so thin.

You didn’t have a spine.
Flopping there
breastless and
aquatic.

I imagine the water salty.
I imagine seaweed - but
my dear woman why
did your maggot lips
smile up at me
when I brought you a towel?

as if I could rub you down and find
skin
as if you could feel *dry*
as if your bath would ever end

and

I couldn’t have felt more like
a mother to your daughter

when she spat salt and words at me
that your brain
had cancer.

December

Louise Essex

Two nights ago

mother

you were our Christmas tree

in the corner of the room

looming

half twisted to the left side

flicking a red-orange light

that spat colour on the tinsel

There you were

blinking in jumbled lights

and no bones

but a sparkling chaos

wheezing in colour

and you were almost pretty

But you melted in the heat into a treacle mess

glitter-green glue

on the floor

and I guess that’s where you felt safe, flattened

Water and Treacle: Identity and the Metamorphosis of the Mother's Body in Essex's Cancer *and* December

Francesca Arnavas

Louise Essex's poems *Cancer* and *December* are polysemous, evoking and in some ways disturbing works. Many topics can be discerned within them - the most evident ones being the speaker's relationship with the mother and the difficulty of coping with illness and death. I would like to take a closer look at *Cancer*, then at *December*, arguing that the mother's identity remains an ambiguous tissue of possibilities, due to her metamorphosis into liquids of varying viscosity and changing voices within the poems.

Cancer presents to us a sinister atmosphere: a woman is having a bath and a person, whose identity remains unclear, watches her seemingly within a dream. The body of the woman reveals itself to be elusive, disgusting, fish-like. The person who is looking at her is losing her, failing to reach her, and the bath becomes a kind of engulfing sea, which absorbs the thin creature in its salty abyss.

> I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me. (*The Waves* 122)

Here, Woolf speaks of the physical relation of the body to the sea, a body either "rolling over" or "falling" beneath the waves. But between this extremes, there is an existential loss of one's identity, a reconfiguration of the body in being "dissolved" by the sea, a body of water which Woolf uses as a metaphor for consciousness. From Shakespeare's Ophelia to the Pre-Raphaelites' representations of women in water (the charming sirens), to Eliot's death by water, to numerous contemporary images of women drowning in water (for instance, Cecilia in *The Virgin Suicides*), the association of women-death-water has a long

poetical tradition. Thinking about one of the most popular versions, Millais' *Ophelia*, we can observe the same metamorphosis in Louise Essex's *Cancer*. The body of Ophelia is no longer a human body, it is beginning to melt into its watery surroundings, braided with seaweed; Ophelia looks more like a siren, or an aquatic creature, than a woman. The water is absorbing her: to die means to become water, a formless, insubstantial, slippery element, and it is the effect of the body's formlessness on the mind, brought out by Woolf and Millais, which is what seems to be happening in *Cancer*.

This shapeless, indeterminate feature is the conceptual cipher of the entire poem, not only for the woman's body in the water, but also for the vague, dream-like atmosphere which permeates the scene, blurring the identities of the people. This suspension of reality may be the only possible way for the person to deal with the terrible power and experience of death. The only available words to describe the mysterious and ineffable acts of death are elusive and slippery ones. The first words of the poem are "in my dream" (1), words which mark immediately the volatile and fleeting substance of the identities involved in the composition.

In *Cancer,* the ambiguous relationship between voices further complicates the question of identity. The last sentences are intentionally unclear about *who is who*; until then the poem is written in first person speaking to the "you" represented by the woman in the bath. Then the last verses says "and / I couldn't have felt more like / a mother to your daughter / when she spat salt and words at me / that your brain / had cancer" (25-30). The "and" (25) stands alone, the only word in the entire poem to be so isolated on the page. It introduces a shifting of perspectives, something which happens frequently in dreams, where roles and identities continuously change, where the subconscious surfaces. Who is the mother and who is the daughter? And are there two persons in the poem or three? One possibility is that a daughter is looking at her mother whose physical condition is deteriorating. As a result the daughter has to become her own mother, since her true one no longer exists, having been completely modified: an incomprehensible and far away creature trapped in her own illness. This leads to a modification of past roles: the daughter becomes mother to the mother, and the last "she" in the poem is the daughter, desperately re-enacting the tragic state of the mother in order to feel close to her; she is becoming like her - "she spat salt" (28).

Another option is that the "I", the voice describing, and the "you", the one described, are the same person, the dreaming "I" is looking at her own self drowning and disappearing, and she is the mother to herself, now two selves rent apart, receiving the news about her own cancer. To take the idea of dreaming further, the poem could be seen as

reflecting different temporalities, different psychic dimensions: she is the mother observing her own future death, she is the repugnant creature absorbed by the watery death, whilst also the "she" saying to herself, like a premonition of death, that she has cancer.

A final interpretation of voice and identity is that actually there are three people involved: the narrator, the dying mother, and the daughter, who is the one conveying the news of her mother's cancer to the narrator whose identity is unknown. The narrator feels like he/she has to replace soon the role of the mother, since she is dying. The "salty words" (15) thus said by the daughter, announce death.

The reading of a mother-daughter relationship in *Cancer* is complimented by the more straightforward incorporation of the topic in *December,* also by Essex. Here Essex also plays with the relationship between voices and temporality. The daughter talks directly to the mother, visualizing her in the past as a luminous Christmas tree (but already with inhuman connotations: "no bones" [11]), and then in the present as "a treacle mess / glitter-green glue / on the floor" (15-17). As in *Cancer*, there is a metamorphosis of a woman into a non-human element with which she merges herself. Again the details of her transformation are somehow repellent, and again we find an absence of a rigid, formed identity. In fact, whilst in *Cancer* the woman's body "didn't have a spine" (11), in *December* she has "no bones", she's "half twisted to the left side" (6). In the first poem the woman becomes water, here she becomes treacle, but in both cases she disappears, absorbed by another liquid substance. The transition is more marked in *December* since she goes from being something tall and straight as a tree (even though already half twisted) to a flattened wet agglomerate on the floor. She collapses, renouncing her mother's role, because of death or metaphorical death.

The voices in *December* are more clearly delineated than in *Cancer*. The person speaking is the daughter, and the one whom the poem is addressed to is the mother. To further highlight the relevance of the figure of the mother in the poem, the term "mother" stands alone in the second verse, placed in a prominent position.

Literary traditions contain numerous examples of works related to the complex daughter/mother relationship, which is often contradictory and unresolved, since daughters (and writers) experience in relation to mothers "the fluctuations of symbiosis and separation" (Hirsch 20). Daughters/writers have in fact to negotiate "identification and distanciation, recognition and appropriation" (Hirsch 16), psychological processes which appear quite clear in what has just been said about Louise Essex's poems.

From Simone De Beauvoir, to Elsa Morante, to Jeanette Winterson, problematic areas regarding the relationship with the mother continue to be analysed and explored in literary works.

I choose to refer here to the writer whom I find more relevant; Virginia Woolf. The English writer was, as she wrote herself, "obsessed" (*Moments of Being* 93) by the presence of her mother and the memory of her death. Woolf writes that the death of her mother caused her something which "passed the normal limits of sorrow" (*Moments of Being* 11) and a great part of her artistic career was devoted to the attempt to come to terms with the constant ghost of her mother, haunting Woolf's own identity. These words from Hermion Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf are particularly meaningful also in relation to the figure of the mother in *Cancer* and *December*:

> Should we think through our mothers, or kill them? must we kill the ghosts for whom we feel (and who feel for us) such a fatal attraction, who are always creeping back from life when we thought they were dead? [...] this peculiar grieving formulation of an absence, an interruption and a continuation would be returned for the rest of her life. Coming to terms with this interruption, laying this ghost to rest, is one of the secret plots of Virginia Woolf's existence (Lee 79)

I've chosen to conclude with this quote, since it points to how the complex entanglement with memories in relation to death, illness and the body effect the identity of both mother and daughter and their relationship to each other, especially if the daughter is a writer.

Works Cited

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *The Waste Land and Four Quartets*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1995. Print

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. London: Fourth Estate, 2013. Print

Giorgio, Adalgisa. *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002. Print

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997. Print

Lee, Hermion. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage, 1997. Print

Rye, Gill. "Maternal Genealogies: the Figure of the Mother in/and Literature". *Journal of Romance Studies*, 6. 3 (2006): pp. 117-126. Web

Woolf, Virgina. *Moments of Being. Autobiographical Writings*. London: Pimlico, 2002. Print

---. *The Waves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Print


Holly Huxter 2016

The Boy I Used to Play Out With

Daniel Underwood

Where is he now, that boy with whom
once I ran around?
The boy with a one pence piece for a head,
a head as vast and dumb as the moon.
And those dirty hands
cut by the sharpened swords
of sticks torn from submissive trees.

He cannot grow old. Cannot feel the bristle of
a morning's unshaved stubble.
I shall not let him.
No, not even the brush of a kiss from some faceless girl.

Bad manners, grammar worse still -
To think that my parents permitted

Those dirty hands,
not near the table cloth please, you'll ruin it.

A house dingy with a film of cigarette smoke,
Dark, impenetrable but for the moonish face of a mother,
and the grunts of a father embedded in a corner chair.

We will never meet.
Not in the street of busy commuters
Will there ever be the secret, scared look of recognition
That unearths the bones of a perished afternoon spent waving arboreal swords at scared girls.

It shall remain stunted, embryonic;
sealed in a test tube, hidden from natural light
in the yellow haze of formaldehyde.

Daniel Underwood's The Boy I Used to Play Out With*: Seeing the Intertextual Mythology and Iconography of Loss through Eliot's Fragmentary Eye*

Thomas E. Barber

In Daniel Underwood's poem, we see an attempt, if a perpetually unresolved attempt, to construct from the fragments of memory, iconography, and language, an image of *The Boy I Used to Play Out With*. In struggling to find an answer to that initial question which echoes throughout the entire poem, 'Where is he now, that boy with whom / once I ran around?', we are brought into contact with partial images, snatched remembrances, and veiled allusions, the sum of which is no doubt greater than that of its parts, but still can never constitute a whole. The 'sacred look of recognition' which the poem tries so ardently to seize hold of, is perpetually deferred, 'stunted, embryonic,' such that the various constituent aspects of the poem can never be brought into view simultaneously. Therefore, it logically follows that when we are attempting to achieve a similar 'look of recognition' with regards to the poem, we should do so through the eyes of T. S. Eliot, whose pioneering use of fragmentation, most notably in *The Waste Land*, comes into a mutually enlightening dialogue with Underwood's *The Boy I Used to Play Out With*.

In striving to recapture 'The Boy I Used to Play Out With', Underwood utilises both a mythology and an iconography of loss. Both operate on the same principle and under the same system of representation, but on fundamentally different levels of meaning. The mythology of loss, conceived through the fragmentary discourse of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, occupies the same relationship with cultural and collective memory as the iconography of loss occupies to personal and individual memory: further, the former serves as a model for the latter. Therefore, by examining Underwood's manipulation of Eliot's mythology, we are able to access the iconography of personal loss that is present in the poem, thereby beginning to achieve the 'look of recognition' which initially seems so elusive.

Underwood's use of the classical mythology of loss, interpreted through the fragmentation of Eliot's *The Waste Land,* can be most conveniently demonstrated through three allusions which are particularly imbued with the latent meaning of loss. By unearthing the trail of allusions left by Underwood, we are able to reveal the fragmentary nature of these allusions and thereby better understand the iconography of loss which also pervades the poem. The first of these allusions is to the 'street of busy commuters' in the penultimate stanza. These lines may not immediately call to mind Dante's

Inferno, until we view them in the light of Eliot's *Wasteland*, which describes how

> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many. (62-3)
> (Eliot 65).

This allusion to Eliot's poem plays an important role in informing our understanding of *The Boy I Used to Play Out With*, as it is noteworthy that Underwood does not use the word 'death' once - it is Eliot on whom we must rely for our knowledge of the fate suffered speaker's companion. Whilst Underwood merely informs us that his friend 'cannot grow old' and 'will never meet' the speaker again, the duty of pronouncing his death is deferred to Eliot. Yet, returning to *Inferno*, it is evident that the tissue of citations exploited by Underwood goes yet further. Eliot's lines are themselves an allusion to Dante's epic work, wherein the poet observes a procession of the dead in the underworld:

> *…si` lunga tratta*
> *di gente, ch'i' non averei creduto*
> *che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta.*
> …so long a trail
> of men and women I should not have thought
> that death could ever have unmade so many. (III.55-7)
> (Dante 91).

Just as Underwood illuminated the fate of 'The Boy I Used to Play Out With' by citing *The Waste Land*, a further level of meaning becomes clear through the reference to Dante. By situating *The Waste Land* in the epic tradition of voyage to the underworld, we learn that 'The two poems [*The Waste Land* and the *Aenied*] share a mythic configuration, a pattern of quest that involves descent into and return from an experience of mystery and sacred knowledge […] If The Waste Land is a trip through hell, Virgil guides Eliot as he once guided Dante.' (Donke 164). The 'mythic configuration' of *The Boy I Used to Play Out With* now, therefore, becomes apparent through the linking function that Virgil performs between Eliot and Dante. Underwood follows Eliot as he descends into poetic hell; while Virgil has Aeneas descend into the underworld, and Dante into the medieval hell.

One might note the notions of physical and metaphorical height with which Underwood's poem begins, the 'moon' looking down from above, and the 'one pence piece', adorned with the literal head of the queen and thereby the figurative head of both the British church and class hierarchy. By the time we reach the fifth stanza, however, we have descended into 'A house of dingy cigarette smoke,' constituted by the same darkness and obscurity experienced by both Virgil's Aeneas and then Dante in their respective hells. This descent into the poetic inferno, however, is entirely reliant on the network of

fragmentary allusions, from Eliot to Dante to Virgil, which reveals the function of *The Boy I Used to Play Out With* as a descent into poetic knowledge.

Thus, when Underwood writes 'We will never meet. Not in the street of busy commuters,' we are presented with fundamentally fragmented lines of poetry; they do not belong entirely to Underwood, nor Eliot, nor Dante. Yet this fragmentary non-attributability serves a vital function in illuminating Underwood's work.

Just as perplexing as Underwood's 'street of busy commuters' is his 'moonish face of a mother,' a figure who shines alone through the 'film of cigarette smoke.' Why is it that she possesses this spectral radiance in the darkness? We might turn for our answer, once again, in *The Waste Land*, and to 'Mrs Porter', of whom Eliot tells us:

> …at my back from time to time I hear
> The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
> Sweeney to Mrs Porter in the Spring.
> O the moon shone bright on Mrs Porter
> And on her daughter (196-9)
> (Eliot 70-1).

Mrs Porter functions primarily as a mother figure, defined by the fact that she has a daughter; indeed, her very name appears to be constructed for the purpose of forming a couplet with her child. We are therefore presented with two 'moonish' mother figures. Eliot's mother figure, however, draws inspiration, as is explained in his notes, from John Day's *Parliament of Bees*, wherein we learn that:

> … I will have one built
> Like Pompeys Theatre, the feeling guilt
> And enterſeam'd with Pearle, to make it ſhine
> […]
> When of the ſudaine (liſtning) you ſhall heare
> A noiſe of Hornes, and hunting, which ſhall bring
> Actaeon on to Diana in the ſpring,
> (Day, Character 3)

The 'moonish' mother figure presented by Eliot is therefore shadowed by the myth of Actaeon, and yet also by the notion of mythologising. It is, of course, within the context of mythology that Actaeon is referred to in *Parliament of Bees*, and this is inescapable when we come to *The Waste Land*. When we encounter again Eliot's line 'the moon shone bright on Mrs Porter, it becomes clear that the moon is a monumentalising force: it is Day's 'Pearle' but on a far larger scale. This necessarily changes our perception of Underwood's 'moonish face of a mother', which is now imbued with the power of mythology and memorialisation, gazing through the darkness of the poetic hell as a living memorial to her son. Yet, just as our first allusion, the 'moonish' mother, has yet a deeper level of intertextuality, as Day's telling of the Actaeon myth is itself a reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

In Ovid's telling of the myth, the themes of sound and sight are equally important; he tells us that

qui simul intravit rorantia fontibus antra,
sicut erant, nudae viso sua pectora nymphae
percussere viro subitisque ululatibus omne
inplevere nemus circumfusaeque Dianam
corporibus texere suis; tamen altior illis
ipsa dea est colloque tenus supereminet omnis.
At once, at the sight of a man
They struck their bosoms in horror, their sudden screams re-echoing
Through the encircling woods. They clustered around Diana
To form a screen with their bodies, but sadly the goddess was taller;
Her neck and shoulders were visible over the heads of her maidens. (177-82)
(Ovid 101)

Diana here, just like Underwood's 'moonish' mother figure, is visible even when obscured. This time, though, she is a forbidden object, the sight of which condemns Actaeon to death at the mouths of his own hounds. Following the trail of intertextual citations from Underwood to Ovid, then, the 'moonish' mother becomes the embodiment of her son, a mythologising of her boy that embodies the memory that the speaker is striving to capture. Yet, we are only ever able to see a fragment of her, unverified knowledge is forbidden, as it is to Actaeon, on pain of death.

The final and most complex of the three allusions that we will see in *The Boy I Used to Play Out With* comes when we examine the lines:

And those dirty hands
Cut by sharpened swords
Of sticks torn from submissive trees (5-7)

To turn to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, we are immediately drawn to his

"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,

"Or with his nails he'll dig it up again! (70-5)
(Eliot 65)

The notion of a dog, excavating a corpse destined to bloom, destined for resurrection, is sinisterly inverted in Underwood's poem, as the dead boy himself is cut on the branches. Therefore, by introducing the notion of the tree as the potential for rebirth, we are able to locate a chilling finality to the death of 'The Boy I Used to Play Out With,' in his uprooting of his own potential to live again, seen graphically in the harm he does himself in doing so. Yet, as before, we do not have a simple intertextual allusion, we have a

mythological strand that runs through Eliot to Virgil, Dante, and Edmund Spenser, with each level of intertextuality adding new texture to Underwood's poem. The episode in Book Three of Virgil's *Aeneid* is worth quoting at length for its linguistic similarities to *The Boy I Used to Play Out With*.

tertia sed postquam maiore hastilia nisu

adgredior genibusque adversae obluctor harenae,

(eloquar an sileam?) gemitus lacrimabilis imo

auditur tumulo et vox reddita fertur ad auris:

> but after I had set about the spear-like shoots of a third shrub with greater vigour and was on my knees struggling to free it from the sandy soil (shall I speak? Or shall I be silent?)I heard a heart-rending groan emerge from deep in the mound and a voice rose into the air: (III.37-40) (Virgil 49)

Underwood's 'sharpened swords of sticks' recall closely Virgil's 'spear-like shoots,' and in doing so alter the referent of Underwood's fifth line. It draws attention to the end-stop at the end of the fourth line, and opens up the possibility that the referent of the fifth may in fact, therefore, be the speaker himself, occupying the position of Aeneas unknowingly hacking at Polydorus. Extending the proposition that the tree acts as a metaphor for rebirth, if only rebirth in death through poetry, in addition to the notion derived from Virgil that the referent is in fact the speaker, it now becomes clear that the speaker is painfully aware of his own efforts to resurrect his friend through his verse, yet cannot escape the wounds that such an endeavour necessarily incur. However, this image becomes yet more complicated, as we reach Dante's appropriation of it.

> *Presemi allor la mia scorta per mano,*
>
> *e menommi al cespuglio che piangea,*
>
> *per le rotture sanguinenti in vano.*
>
> My guide took me gently by the hand,
>
> and led me to the bush which wept (in vain)
>
> through all of its blood-stained lacerations, (XIII.130-2)
>
> (Dante 59)

The introduction of Dante's use of the bleeding tree image serves to amalgamate the two instances that have already been encountered. Firstly, it is to be noted that in the thirteenth canto of *Inferno*, Dante finds himself amongst suicides and squanderers, just as the speaker's companion has torn the branches from his own tree of life. More important, however, is that the tree becomes an inspiration for Dante's poetry, as he implores Virgil to enquire:

di dirne come l' anima si lega
in questi nocchi; e dinne, se tu puoi,
s' alcuna mai di tai membra si spiega

tell us, if you should care to, this; how souls,
are bound in these hard knots. And, if you can:
will anyone ever be loosed from limbs like these? (XIII.88-90)
(Dante 58)

The tree is here being implored for information so that it may become the object of Dante's poetry, as it is in the thirteenth canto. What is revealed in Dante's passage, then, is that the tree is not merely an image, to be used in aiding poetic expression, but is the muse itself, it is the end, not the means, it is 'The Boy Who I Used to Play Out With.'

> The final incarnation of the image comes in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene,* wherein Redcrosse
>
> pluckt a bough [of Frabudio]; out of whose rift there came
>
> Small drops of gory bloud, that trickled down the same.' (I.ii.30)
> (Spenser 62)

This final incarnation of the image briefly resurrects 'The Boy Who I Used to Play Out With,' as it is the tree who has lost his companion here.

> 'And by my wretched louers side me pight,
> Where now enclosed in wooden wals ful faste,
> Banisht from liuing wigthts, our wearied ayes we waste' (I.ii.42)
> (Spenser 65)

Gender fluidity and homosociality aside, then, Spenser is clearly presenting the same scene as Underwood, from a different perspective, from the perspective of the tree, from the perspective of the victim. As Underwood is clearly appropriating the same mythical image, we are therefore able to use Spenser's account to enrich our understanding of Underwood's poem. By using Eliot's *The Waste Land* to fragment his mythical allusions, Underwood creates unattributable, multi-faceted, and self-contradictory images which enrich and enlighten *The Boy Who I Used to Play Out With.*

This approach to mythology serves as a blueprint for the iconography of loss that is present in Underwood's poem. Compelled by brevity to take but a single image of loss as an example, we might examine,

> The boy with a one pence piece for a head,
> A head as vast and dumb as the moon (4-5).

We have already seen how, through its mythological intertextuality, the moon has come to stand both for what is to be attained, a remembrance of the speaker's companion, but also as what is forbidden, what is to be covered and cannot be seen. We have also learnt that the 'one pence piece' serves as a height from which the speaker descends into poetic hell. What, then, are we to make of this image in the light of the mythological blueprint of differing emphases in the same meaning? We might note how, in the image of the 'one pence piece', there

co-exists both value and valuelessness, monetary insignificance, but symbolic power. Just as Diana is both to be attained and unattainable, *The Boy Who I Used to Play Out With* is both to be sought after and yet is inescapably and fundamentally prosaic. Similarly, we can locate the coexistence of the small and the large, the penny and the moon; whilst the penny emphasises attainability at the cost of size, the moon emphasises stature at the cost of being forever out of reach. These emphases are inherently contradictory and thus lead to the fragmentation of the image, just as the contradictory emphases in the mythological appropriations of the bleeding tree lead to fragmentation to the extent that speaker and referent can become interchangeable in lines five to seven of the poem; however, this fragmentation of the single image is necessary in order to be able to enlighten the poem as a whole.

Therefore, by identifying the process by which mythology functions in *The Boy I Used to Play Out With*, by utilising Eliot's fragmentary eye to extract different emphases from the same mythological meaning, we are able to adopt the same method in relation to Underwood's iconography of loss, identifying the various and often contradictory emphases that coexist in the same image, and thereby come closer to a 'look of recognition,' a look that the poem strives to achieve.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante, *Inferno*. Trans. Robin Kirkpatrick. London: Penguin, 2013. Print.

Eliot, T.S., *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963. Print.

Day, John, *The Parliament of Bees, with their Proper Characters. Or a Bee-Hive Furnisht with Twelve Hony-Combes, as Pleasant as Profitable Being an allegoricall description of the actions of good and bad men in these our daies*. London : printed for William Lee, 1641. Print.

Donke, Marjorie, "The Waste Land and the Aeneid." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1974): 164-73. Print.

Ovid. *The Metamorphoses*. Trans. David Raeburn. London: Penguin, 2004. Print.

Spenser, Sir Edmund, *The Faerie Queene*. London: Penguin, 1987). Print.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. David West. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Brocéliande

Karl O’ Hanlon

Memory sharpened in the dark:
Mordred’ s violet eyes, ripe
ears, golden, withering unthreshed;
war councils, Camelot

in agony, frogs spawning in
tumbled goblets; hanks of
hair snagged where tapestries hung
like rat skins in the pied gloom.

Hating it at first his brow, nails
and whiskers grew like bark;
he became its sapient heart,
pipistrelles mobbed his robes.

Years went conjuring with her name,
loneliness’ solace
in two mere syllables. He cast
her in fifty-odd ways

till she lost her reality,
blackness only real; then
he warped into the tree itself,
his limbs searching the sun.

Merlin as Ubiquitous Experience

Val Derbyshire

> It is one of the mage's many ironies that the man whose surpassing powers conventionally depend upon separateness, and who is most often conceived as an old man supposedly beyond sexual blandishment, should in the end fall victim to the love service that ennobles the Round Table society he helped to build. How did the autoerotic dynamic of Camelot come to be motivated and embodied in Merlin? (Goodrich 94).

Close your eyes. Picture Merlin in your head. In the darkness behind your eyelids the pictures spring out vividly, just as they do for Merlin himself in the first stanzas of Karl O'Hanlon's beautifully evocative poem, *Brocéliande*. In my imagination, Merlin is old; so very old. He has long silvery white hair and a long silvery white beard. He is wearing a robe of midnight blue (possibly embroidered with silver moons and stars, to simultaneously illustrate his mysticism and match his silver beard).

I am not original. The Merlin I see is ubiquitous. He's been that way since at least the 13th century. A quick search on Wikipedia or Google Images will prove this.

13th century illustration of Merlin for *Merlin* by Robert de Boron. ("Merlin" Wikipedia).

The Enchanter Merlin by Howard Pyle from *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903) ("Merlin", Wikipedia)

It is difficult, as Peter Goodrich argues in his essay "The Erotic Merlin" to imagine this bearded geriatric as a locus for erotic imaginings.

Yet Merlin's downfall in popular legend, and as it is related in O'Hanlon's verses, is a tale of devastating sexual longing and thwarted desire. The story is as follows: Nimue meets Merlin when she is just sixteen years old. He falls immediately in love with her. He is so stricken by desire for her that he refuses to leave her side. Nimue agrees to accompany Merlin on a journey so that she can learn his magic. Nimue, perhaps, sees Merlin as we do: not as the romantic hero, but as the ancient instructor who can impart his wisdom to her. Realising that Merlin's magic threatens her, Nimue compels a promise from Merlin that he will not use his magic to make her lay with him. But as they travel, Nimue becomes increasingly afraid of this ancient Lothario and his increasingly insistent sexual advances. In some versions of the story, Nimue trades her love for lessons in sorcery.

Merlin knows that Nimue will be the end of him; but he is unable to forsake her. His desire, his love is too deep and too strong for him to break the spell of it. He has already fallen prey to her magic. There are different versions of the end of Merlin. In one, his spells are turned against him and he is imprisoned in a cave. In others, he is transformed into a tree or hawthorn bush, where the unwary wanderer may still hear his voice. In some of the stories, Merlin lives forever in his captivity; but other versions tell of his decent into madness and death. The stories all agree on one thing though: after his imprisonment/transformation/decent into madness and death, Nimue is free from both his relentless pursuit of her and to choose who she wants to marry herself. It's almost a happy ending. There's poetic justice in Merlin's fate. That's what comes from inflicting unwanted advances on girls young enough to be your daughter.

The Beguiling of Merlin by Edward Burne-Jones ("Merlin", Wikipedia)

Here's another version of the tale. In this one, Merlin is young and handsome, much like Edward Burne-Jones's rendering of him (left). It's harder to feel so little pity for the younger, handsomer, eternally-doomed Merlin. How we feel about the ending of the story rests entirely upon our understanding of how Merlin is portrayed; and as Goodrich argues, this "rests upon a broad spectrum of representative texts, especially ones that have established the 'ground rules' of the legend by influencing other texts and popular conceptions of the mage.' (Goodrich 94)

O'Hanlon, in *Brocéliande* does not concern himself with Niume's image; but solely with Merlin's post-imprisonment. O'Hanlon's Merlin feels much like Burne-Jones's Merlin. Young and handsome, he "[h]at[es] it at first his brow, nails/and whiskers grew like bark (ll. 9-10). It is a depressingly familiar story: who does enjoy growing old? Merlin, imprisoned within the bark of his tree, "mobbed" by "pipistrelles" (l. 12), is cognisant only of his own decay. It is a tale of magic, and yet it is morbidly ordinary. Everybody is cognisant of their own decay as they grow older. Merlin is once again ubiquitous in his fate: it is the fate of us all.

The mouldering away of Merlin's bones is not limited to Merlin. O'Hanlon's initial stanzas are also evocative of corrosion: this time of Camelot itself. The images of Merlin's thoughts are bright in the darkness, but soon fade into "pied gloom" as memory itself fades in old age (l. 8). The harvest rots upon the stalk, unharvested. The splendour of the legendary court is reduced to images of decomposing "ratskins" (l. 8). Time passes, Camelot is forgotten in the mists of the passing eons. Entombed within his tree, Merlin and his spiritual home becomes nothing more than legend in the modern imagination, just as he becomes nothing more than tree.

There is a curious ecology in O'Hanlon's poem which charts the evolution of Britain itself through our pagan past to the rise of the Christian religion. One version of Merlin, as Goodrich observes, is as the "wild man", the child of nature (Goodrich 95). His natural urges lead to his downfall, but once within the tree, Merlin evolves adapting to the landscape around him. He is literally cast into the wilderness (or cast *as* the wilderness, being as he comes to form part of it); an image which is pregnant with Christian allegorical imagery. Thus, the legend of Camelot with its pagan origins evolves in itself to adapt to the landscape of Christianity in Britain, which succeeded the ancient age of belief in magic and spirits.

In folklore, *Brocéliande* is the mystical forest where strange magical events occur and mysterious weather threatens. O'Hanlon's *Brocéliande* is much like many landscapes in fiction: it is no place and every place. Any wood, any forest, any tree could be the one described within the poem. Just as Ann Radcliffe could evoke a universally recognisable landscape of the sublime or picturesque in such tomes as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* without even visiting the Languedoc area she describes, O'Hanlon's wood is familiar to all readers even if they don't habitually visit woods. It is a literary landscape; a landscape of the imagination. It is as ubiquitous as the traditional image of Merlin himself.

Similarly, Merlin's experience of recovering from a failed relationship is one which is, again, depressingly familiar to all. There is the initial raw pang of loss which may lead to "Years [...] conjuring with her name," (l 13). Yet the pain inevitably fades with time. Eventually, the person missed loses

“her reality” (l. 17). Finally comes the realisation that the loss of the loved one is regretted no more. Life continues, even in the guise of a tree “limbs searching the sun” (l. 20) in attempts to grow within the landscape.

O’Hanlon’s evocation of landscape, legendary locations and figures, but most of all lost love, is a moving one, mainly because it speaks to us all. The shapes within the poem may hint at magic and mysticism, but they are ones which we are all familiar with. His poem presents a ubiquitous, and consequently heartfelt, experience.

Biographical Information

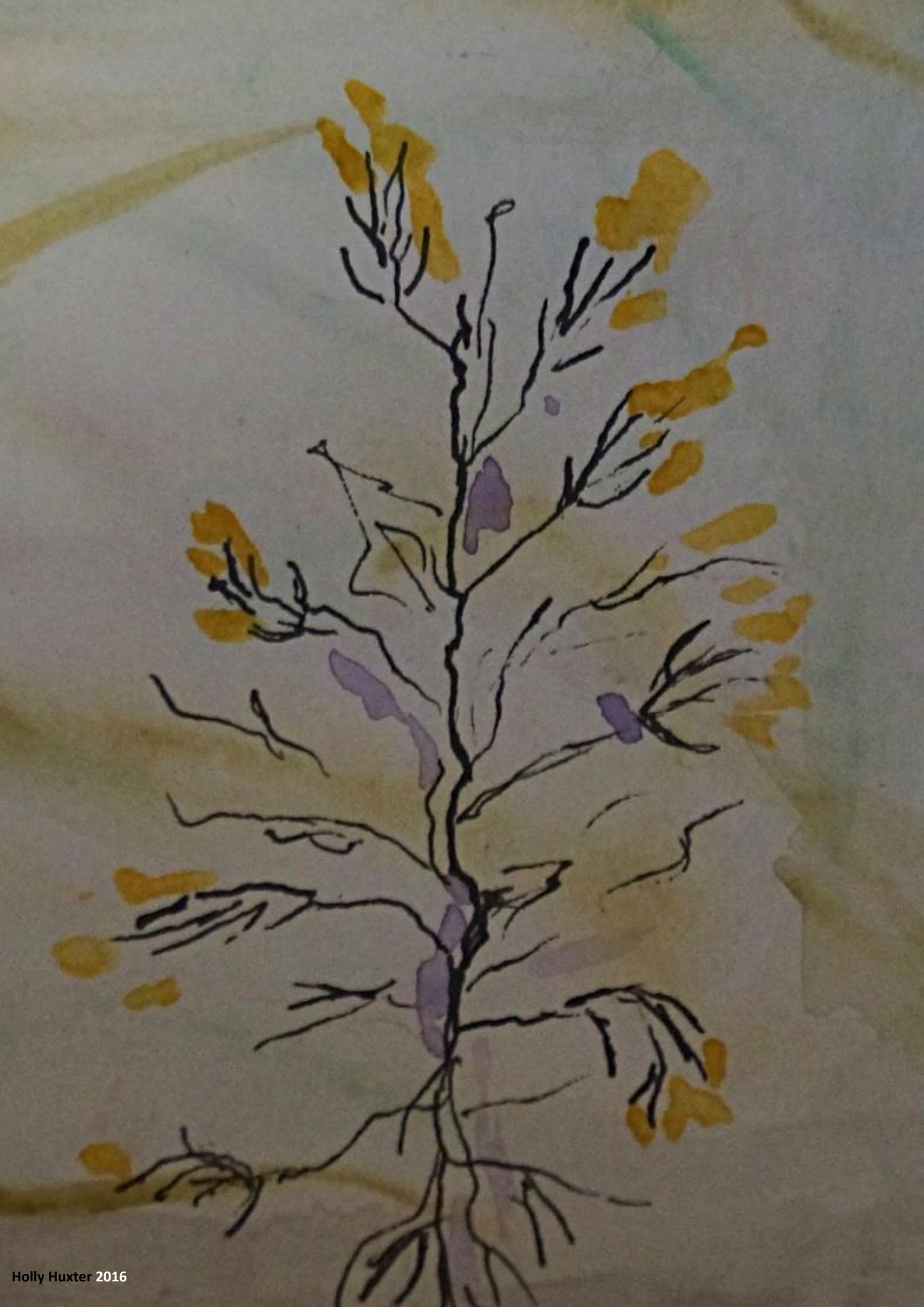
Val Derbyshire is a WRoCAH supported AHRC Competition student researching the works of Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) in the School of English, University of Sheffield.

Works Cited

Anon. “Merlin”. *Wikipedia*. Web. 16 January 2016

Goodrich, Peter H. “The Erotic Merlin”. *Arthurania*. 10. 1. (2000): 94-115. Web. 15 January 2016

Radcliffe, Ann. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Ed. Bonamy Dobrée. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. Print.


Holly Huxter 2016