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Work Ciara Healy ing Materials Linger a Little Longer

A few months ago, in a small antique shop in West Wales, we came across an old wind up gramophone. It was duck egg blue, bakelite plastic with a satisfying snap-click case cover. Although it was missing a crank handle, it could still be played by turning the record manually. As the needle wobbled on the dusty vinyl grooves a dry voice, like words unfolding from crumpled paper, seemed to surface slowly up from the darkness of the gramophone base, gathering speed and pitch with every turn, wheezing to a smooth *soto voce* through the speakers which were set into the needle head:

“Linger a little longer with me...”

The song was uncannily familiar, yet we were certain we had not heard it before. We were haunted by the thought that this singing voice had not filled the air for many years, (we later discovered it was almost 100 years old), yet at the same time it felt eerily present. The gramophone as an object, accompanied by the song became a sort of temporary passage tomb at the back of the shop, calling to us from over some invisible boundary, momentarily lifting the veil between past and present.

Celtic Christianity describes such an experience as *Thin*. A *Thin Place* beckons us towards and connects us to the unknown, to the unfathomable divine, where we might recognise what Hillman (1979:9) refers to as the “a priori remembrance of imaginal presences transferred with us into this life”.

These presences, it could be argued, have been transferred to us through love. *Linger a little longer* is a love song. Love prompts our ability to imagine and when we are given the space to imagine we fall in love. Our hearts, therefore, are filled with many forms of imagined love from many different points in time. This love, felt and experienced in countless bodies and sentient forms, existed long before we became the physical manifestations we currently occupy. So when we encounter a *Thin Place*, be that a landscape, an object or a song, the traces of other loves that linger and pulse within us are awoken, reminding us of an experience of love from another past. The experience presents us with what Bruckner (2012:33) calls “the most precious stages of destiny” in a condensed form. This transference of the emotion of love from other times and other bodies can penetrate our being deeply, making the unfamiliar recognisable. An experience Berger (2011:21) describes as “the gasp of home”.

If the transference of love from many hearts of the past can occupy our present, perhaps it creates in the imagination a *Thin* mind, allowing one to occupy the many selves from which that love has been transferred, thus making perception and time a shifting entity. Virginia Woolf spoke of the walls of the mind growing thin, as a means of *seeing* from a wide-angled vantage point, an approach that allowed her to occupy many selves. She referred to her multiple perspectives as her ‘six little pocket knives’. (1942:34) These ‘knives’ allowed her to empathise

with and see from more than her human form, to inhabit existence and, as a consequence to develop empathy towards all living things. This notion is beautifully expressed in an extract from her diary (cited in Gwyn, 2011:54) when she recalls:

*Lying on the side of a hollow, waiting for
L[eonard] to come & mushroom & seeing a red hare
Loping up the side & thinking suddenly 'This is Earth Life.'
I seemed to see how earthy it all was, & I myself an evolved kind of hare; as if
a moon-visitor saw me.*

Woolf's six knives are the metaphorical equivalent to Lessing's (1962) notebooks in her feminist, Sufist text *The Golden Notebook* and to Sartre's (1974:88) assertion that Love opens "the doors into everything, including and perhaps most of all, the doors into one's own secret, and often terrible and frightening, real self." This *real self*, described by Sufists as the *Perfection of the Absolute* (cited in Barker, 2012) comes from the very ancient mystical need to transcend individuality and experience existence within one dynamic whole; that of a collective consciousness. Lessing wrote extensively about these ideas because they strove to connect with the unknown and the unconscious, with the *Thin*.

A *Thin Place* therefore can induce a feeling that we are floating above or outside of ourselves and that the whole universe of concrete objects, as we know them, swims with us in a wider universe of abstract yet interconnected ideas. James describes this as a "belief that there is an unseen order". (1985:53). It is possible that passage tombs, like Newgrange in Ireland were constructed to facilitate such an experience, where distance and proximity collapse, where the atmosphere of the living and the dead temporarily converges in the seventeen minute beam of winter solstice sunlight every December the 21st. Standing in that beam of light one becomes a liminal link between this world and another world. Such an experience often enters our consciousness through our hearts, rather than our eyes because according to James Hillman this is where our imaginal intelligence resides, allowing us to experience what he calls "a simultaneous knowing and loving by means of imagining". (1979:7).

In an attempt to illustrate and make tangible this imagining created by the transference of love we can turn, like the 19th Century philosopher William James (1985:56) once did, to Kant's Ideas of Pure Reason, which argued that our conceptions always require a sense-content to work with. Through Kant, James conceded that we can spend our whole life convinced of the existence of a thing or a place in another world, and yet, with no distinctive sense-content whatsoever, it is unlikely to exist.

Hillman might describe such an interpretation and literal perception as 'The Heart of Harvey'¹, a view that reduces the imagined to mere symbolic lore, no longer real and present, no longer beating within us, but incidental history. Because James understood that vague impressions of something indefinable have no place in the rationalistic system, he tried to use the metaphor of magnetics, invisible yet powerful, to describe the sensation of being aroused and drawn to the presence or existence of some 'thing' which at the same time could not be 'seen'.

Perhaps then, if we are prevented from making sense of our environment and surroundings through our emotional responses, or if we are trained to give precedence to our rational responses, we run the risk of creating evermore *Thick Places* and of living an increasingly *Thick* life where existence is measured in terms of output. Heidegger claimed that aspects of everyday life, particularly in the western world, served as distractions from the 'proper' priorities of human experience, what he referred to as the 'authentic life.' For him, our thickness prevented us from being entranced by human 'being', from questioning why we are here on this earth. In a *Thick Place*, the only point at which we appreciate our existence was, according to Heidegger, when we experienced intensities of emotion, like falling in love or the death of someone close. Such experiences thrust our 'being' to our attention, making the scientific and technological preoccupations of daily life seem irrelevant.

A *Thick Place* therefore eviscerates traditional modes of thinking and ritual. It is a place where the heart loses its relation to organic nature and its empathy with all things. It makes a *Thick People*, where "the core of our breast moves from an animal to a mechanical imagination." (Hillman, 1979:25). Industrial agriculture is an example of how this process crushed our imagination and our ability to empathise with and see through the eyes of other living creatures. The ruthless suppression of instinct and intuition in farm animals², now penetrates all Western society as a (heart) and mind-set. Zinn's (1990:17) claim that thinking is a matter of life and death has never been more important, especially if we lose the ability to think *through* the heart. Robinson's (2006) assertion that we grow into creativity and are educated out of it exposes the extent to which Western culture has now become bereft of an adequate philosophy of the heart, and as a consequence, all imagined knowledge is at best held captive, at worst, like the instinct of the caged pig, lost for good. With such a heart's mind it is almost impossible to see ourselves as the red hare Woolf once imagined herself to be while lying in the woods.

Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill promoted the study of vernacular literature in the nineteenth century as a means to enhance and enchant perception in place of religious indoctrination, and possibly too as a means to protect the imagination in a time of the Heart of Harvey. But, as Gare (1995:23) points out, this perception came to be seriously doubted in the late 1960s, leading, he argued, to the demise of the humanities and the triumph of science. Heidegger's collection of essays, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, written in the late 1950s sought to counter this empirical *Thickness* just as it was about to explode. He wanted to challenge the authority of false certainties erected by science and technology at that time. Certainties, which, it could be argued, support a *Thick* mind-set. Two of these certainties identified by Brookfield (2005 : viii) included the assumption that Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies where discrimination is an empirical reality and that these discriminations are reproduced to seem normal, natural and inevitable, thereby heading off any potential challenges.

What, then if anything is to be done? Artist Richard Wentworth likens our current socio-economic climate as the "maddest central heating system, where nobody ever noticed what temperature the water was running at, or what speed it ran down what pipe, in which direction, for what purpose and what the consequences were, until it was too late" (cited in Chan 2012:61). In spite of the fact that we live in a world of finite resources, the prevailing economic models are referred to as *growth economies*, rather than *sustainable economies*, and if

economies do not perpetually grow in volume it is called (at best) stagnation and thought of as a problem. An economist cited by Gare (1996:12) writing in *The Business and Society Review* in the mid 1990s best sums up the lethargic attitude of the International Bourgeoisie³ towards the impoverishment of our education, cultural life and natural world when he says “Suppose that, as a result of using up all the world’s resources, human life did come to an end. So what?”

The language of the Heart of Harvey erases a nature-language literacy in our hearts and imaginations, replacing them with sense-content words such as target, audit, inspection and statistic. Robert Macfarlane’s (2010:124) *Counter Desecration Phrasebook* lists the words omitted from the 2010 Oxford Junior Dictionary. Words such as *Heron*, *conker*, *blackberry* and *Ash* have been replaced with words such as *block-graph*, *bungee-jump*, and *database*. The loss of these words invokes what Macfarlane calls: the loss of a kind of ‘language magic.’ This language magic is capable of re-enchanting our relationship with nature so that the hard Heart of Harvey might be softened and our ability to imagine and dream be awakened once more. For those of us who Laing (1967:11) describes as “still half alive, living in the often fibrillating heartland of [this] senescent capitalism,” we must be able to do more than lament the decay around us. We need to be re-encharnted, to resuscitate our hearts and remember all the past loves held within them. In doing so perhaps it will then be possible to really see how capitalist systems have affected us.

Some 400 miles from London, on the coastal periphery of West Wales it is less difficult to neglect the importance of things that one can’t quantify, perhaps because a place like this is not so limited by such a controlled system of economics. Wales at times, bears an uncanny resemblance to Ireland. Here one might assume that there is a shared sense of ebullience, known colloquially as ‘*the craic*’ but the residue of a traditional Chapel going culture alters that initial perception. There are, however, traces of the same ‘Celtic’ melancholy, the same kind of dissatisfaction, a physical and spiritual restlessness alongside a deep sense of longing or *Hireath*. There is a belief that freedom is geographical, as evidenced by the hippie communes dotted in the woods near Cenarth. Like Ireland, there is cultural insecurity, combined with a sense of umbrage, a feeling of being overlooked and undervalued, where the Welsh language is associated with the pomposity of a nationalist rhetoric as much as it is with beautiful poetry. Solnit said a place is about here and now and a road is about there and later. Wales can feel like a passing place at times, a site of restlessness, where there are those who wish neither to stay nor to wander. “If only we lived elsewhere, we would feel at home”. (Ambrecht, 2009:163)

This notion that we are all in some way enduring a journey of becoming, is echoed in the story of Helen and Thomas in Robert Macfarlane’s *The Old Ways* (2012). On the morning he departed for the front line in Arras, the poet soldier Thomas walked away from his cottage in Kent, calling out *coo-ee!* to Helen, as she answered *coo-ee!* in return. Their call and answer continuing like this in the frozen fog until it was no longer audible, until Thomas had disappeared from view. This call of arrival at the point of departure becomes a metaphor for the tangled paths that straddle our death and our life. Amongst the belongings returned to Helen when Thomas was killed in the trenches was a half written poem in his pocket that spoke of rain soaked roads winding their way both to heaven and hell. It was unclear what roads Thomas was referring to – the South Country of England, or the supply roads to the front. But their

convergence on paper beside his chest, suggests that one kind of path ultimately leads in its way to the other. The coming and going of both roads had become inextricably linked through Thomas and through time.

The real consummation in life, Solnit (2003:186) argued, is on the road, in the act of moving and travelling, because arrival holds only disenchantment. *Thin Places* are revealed on a journey, when the rational and the romantic coincide, when worlds overlap. They are like elusive road-side shelters, appearing at the point of confluence. They are spaces we pass through fleetingly. Yet they penetrate the heart first, and as a consequence feel paradoxically intense and eternal. When the known and the unknown converge like this, a gap in the landscape of our minds can open up, and in that clearing we are given the chance to linger a little longer in love.

¹Hillman's *Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World* contains a collection of different definitions of hearts we might possess, each of them informed by or influenced by the conditions of the times we live in and the cultures we come from. This problem with the rationalistic system, as later philosophers and theorists such as Heidegger, Guttari and Gare have argued is that it is hierarchical, placing significance on scientific, economic and technical statistics over the immediacies of the human and animal experience. Much of Heidegger's writing attempted to make us recognise that our intuitions come from a deeper level of our natures, embedded in the elusive unseen order of our subconscious. It is a place, he argued, we know to be truer than "any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it." (Sharr, 2007: 7)

²If, for example, a female farm animal produces a large number of offspring within a short space of time it is perceived as a success. What is not acknowledged is that the almost constantly pregnant mother will have a reduced life-span and "all her own accumulated wisdom to her progeny will be lost through forced weaning strategies". (Young, 2003 :7)

³Gare's *Postmodernism and the Environmental crisis* describes the number of different types of classes our Western economy has produced particularly within what was once called the middle class. They includes groups such as the *Service Sub-class*, the *Intelligentsia* as well as the *New International Bourgeoisie* whom he describes as being associated with the rise in status of economics, business studies and information science to the dominant intellectual positions within universities and government bureaucracies, thus devaluing everything which does not serve as an instrument of the international economy. (1996 :11)

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