



First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing room, only things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get upon a chair – all but the bit behind the fireplace. Oh! I do so wish I could see *that* bit...smoke comes up in that room too – but that may be only pretence, just to make it look as if they had a fire. Well then, the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way... let's pretend there's some way of getting through into it... (Carroll, 1927: 9-10)



'Considering the numinous' sketch 23.10.18

Of all the tasks for the MA in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred, the learning journal has been for me, the most rewarding in process and as a sustained practice. However, I have struggled the most with writing this review. Whilst the course has a chronology of delivery, I wanted a frame for the review that replicated the spiralling and circling dynamics, as well as the reversals and inversions I experienced that destabilised my preconceptions and opened me to new learning.¹

I looked first at emulating the notion of circumambulation - the act of moving around a sacred object, yet it didn't echo the twists and turns. Walking around the labyrinth at St. Martin's Priory I wondered if I could somehow use this form? Again, it did not replicate my experience of feeling written forwards and backwards by the course. So it is, that I find the topography

¹ I have included longer quotes from my Learning Journey in coloured text boxes – these include dreams I have had. I have also embedded some questions that I've been pondering upon in my journal into the body of this review in thought bubbles.

of my journey most effectively mapped by Alice’s own adventures through her looking-glass (Carroll, 1927). I thank Carroll for his vision and will be using his chapter headings to structure this review.



Looking-Glass House

‘Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don’t exactly know what they are!’

(ibid: 24)



It is important to stress, the course found me. I had reached a choiceless choice in life. I felt as though I stood on the crossroads beneath a hanging man and I was haunted by this vision whichever way I turned. I had become thoroughly disenchanted with my career, anxious at the lack of imagination and story encouraged in our lives. I could not compromise my integrity by just going through the motions. I refused my manager’s requests to “just get on that treadmill and run” and to “stop questioning a system that’s bigger than you”. I leapt off and stepped through into the looking-glass world of the sacred reflected in the mirror of academia.

I found this alternative world on a Monday morning, a space and place of temenos furnished as Kripal’s third classroom.² By the Friday I was enrolled and listening to Maggie Hyde talk about her robin visitor thinking that I much preferred the look of thoughts on this side of the

Dreamt there was something like a ouija board that had been abandoned under the trees because it had been seen as too dangerous. As the light fell through the leaves of the oak tree under which it lay the light made a pattern on the board. It was spelling out a message. I remember thinking that it didn't matter if we weren't reading the message, the light was still sending it, it was still being spelt out. (19.10.18)

mirror (I saved her phrase ‘the mind raises itself under an image’ to the front of my journal). By the end of that first weekend the pattern of my meanderings was established. I opened my heart constantly to the new: writers, ideas, information, confusions, questions. I learnt to bring written voices up to the glass and ponder them: McGilchrist,

² See Kripal (2007) for further reading.

Kripal, Hillman, Corbin, Fort, Kingsley all shone. I found some voices to be in a dense language, their reflection as though through that glass darkly: Plato, Eliade, Milne, Kant. Others reflected my immediate concerns as to imagination being stolen from education: I enjoyed Monika Kostera’s impassioned talk on ‘The Future of Academia’ and took up her invitation to write two short stories to aid her research. I add many authors to my ‘must read more’ list: Couliano, Myers, Otto, as a way of managing the breadth and depth of this course. This means I focus on using my time for digesting and innovating upon the specific issues for each module— I cannot chase after each fascination – at least not within the year I have for this MA. I discovered that saving my lecture notes as mind maps (fig.1) went some way to charting the looking-glass land where handwriting failed. I aimed to map the topography in this visual way since I recognised very early on that many ideas would not be reconciled or ‘known’ until I had ventured further behind the fireplace.

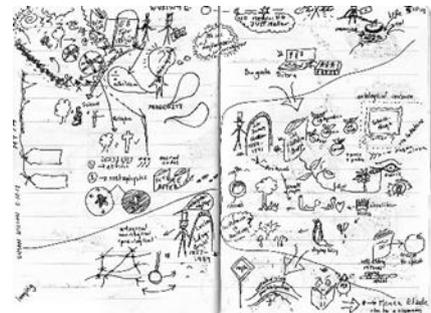


Figure 1

I had several false starts with my learning journal itself until I scrapped the idea of writing in sequence (I even trialled voice recording – thoughts often came to me when I was driving and consequently far from the page). I settled to a sketchbook with pages I tabulated as topics or themes so that new learning could be explored making my progress seem more visible and less constrained by the limits of lines and pages. I was thereby free to insert sketches, found objects and scrapplings of paper from ‘the field’. I could add in pages and extend the boundaries – the closest form to the feeling of my learning (fig. 2 below).



Figure 2



Figure 3

I later made a pair of bookmarks (fig. 3) for two prominent key questions as guide.

Friday groups and Saturday evening lectures became staples- enriching my heart and mind with more ideas and offering the opportunity to speculate with others and have a go at presenting my own (Shaun Tan talk 23.11.18).

Angela asked us to choose a wisdom card to contemplate. I drew 'discernment'- hoping I'll learn this as course grows... 8.10.18

I am curious concerning various poles: left hemisphere-right hemisphere, human-other, mythos-logos. I remain convinced that all things are connected, therefore between these poles there are lines between, spaces between. What falls in these places? What are the bridges between the poles? What happens at the hyphen? (18.4.19)

New terms:

*epistemology, ontological, empirical, esoteric, holistic, mythopoeic...



The Garden of Live Flowers

'I should see the garden far better... if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it – at least, no, it doesn't do that... how curiously it twists!'

(Carroll, 1927: 26)



Stepping into the landscape with Simon Wilson's introduction to symbolic walking encouraged me into a world where, as Alice discovered before me, plants speak and I am as a walking flower. With Ferrer's 'multidimensional cognition' (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008) I perceive the landscape as a living being in dialogue with me, or as a living expression of the two of us, speaking into me and being spoken by me in turn. I loved wandering round the



Looking-Glass Insects

'I don't belong to this railway journey at all – I was in a wood just now – and I wish I could get back there?' (Carroll, 1927: 53)



I know that significant change involves loss, anxiety and an inevitable struggle. Uncertainty has bubbled to the surface at different times and to different degrees over the year. I have had to fight my own inner monsters and ignore the outer monsters who wonder aloud whether I am having a mid-life crisis or breakdown. I learn not to take-up the inner and outer critics unless they can be useful to my own personal growth. These doubts do not require engagement or interaction. I find myself in tears in the Cathedral grounds having failed at Angela's drawing challenge. I felt utterly spooked and calmed myself drawing an early Spring flower (fig 5). It came with a poem.

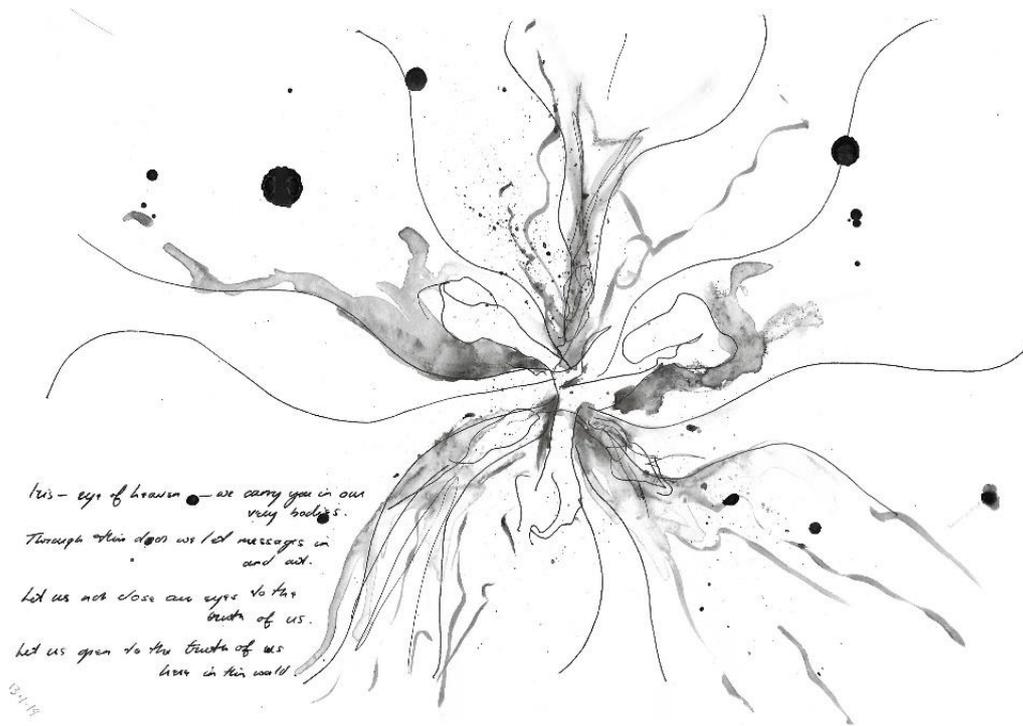
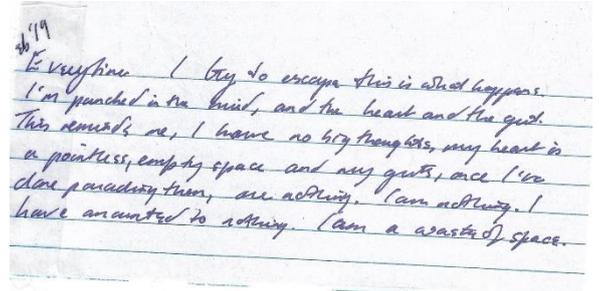


Figure 5

Changing learning journal groups for each module is also disconcerting for me. I find I just build up a sense of community and then we are broken apart. I try to be the “conscious container” to encourage others to share rather than monopolise. This doesn’t always work. I don’t like to be confrontational so for one module I just listened. The next group worked as it should, and I miss it. The biggest rift has been splitting off from my whole cohort since I am the only one following the course full-time – my fast train uncouples. I feel lost and disconnected in this carriage. I learn to re-inhabit this familiar lonely space again. My studies offer me resilience.



18/19
To experience / try to escape this is what happens.
I'm punched in the head, and the heart and the gut.
This reminds me, I have no big thoughts, my heart is
a pointless, empty space and my guts, once I've
done something there, are nothing. I am nothing. I
have an amount to nothing. I am a waste of space.

*I am curious concerning various poles: left hemisphere-
right hemisphere, human-other, mythos-logos.*

*I remain convinced that all things are connected,
therefore between these poles there are lines between,
spaces between. What falls in these places?*

What are the bridges between the poles?

What happens at the hyphen? (18.4.19)



Tweedledum and Tweedledee

‘I know what you’re thinking about,’ said Tweedledum: ‘but it isn’t so, nohow.’

‘Contrariwise,’ continued Tweedledee, ‘if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be, but as it ain’t, it ain’t. That’s logic.’ (Carroll, 1927: 70)



Alice gets provoked by Tweedledee and Tweedledum into questioning her very existence – they play with her mind (and temper) suggesting she is only an imaginary character in the Red

King's dreams. This course has made me think again on issues where I started with a certainty: for example, the sacred had no intentionality for me at the start of this course- I suppose this was my way of understanding why bad things happen – I later start changing my

Talk about synchronicities? In our LJ group I picked the card 'put a bit more humour in your life'. The next lecture was on Charles Fort – 'laughter is the very first sign that imagination has been liberated'!!

thinking after reading Kripal's *The Secret Body* (Kripal, 2017) wherein he theorises on the sacred as trans-moral – this makes many things fall in to place. I also reflect on areas where I had no previous convictions: Geoffrey Cornelius encouraged us to consider our spiritual beliefs in the light of Rawlinson's (1999) categories. At the time of his asking I note 'I suspect I would fall into a Hot Structured Tradition, yet I'm not certain about there being any help out there'. However, I am happy to let my mind play with these 'liberating confusions' (Kripal, 2010: 4). I relish the incongruities, absurdities and disorientation a "gnosis of antinomies" generates.



Wool and Water

'Living backwards!' Alice repeated in great astonishment. 'I never heard of such a thing

' – but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways.'

'I'm sure mine only works one way,' Alice remarked. 'I can't remember things before they happen.'

'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,' the Queen remarked. (Carroll, 1927: 95)



Whilst this essay (and the course) have the feel of the looking-glass world, there is also a sense of each module assignment being a Janus. I discover that I integrate my learning and understanding in the process of writing looking forwards and backwards. This was particularly apparent with the divination module essay. I had no prior experience of divination, nor any understanding of the oracles or the work of Evans-Pritchard and Barabara Tedlock, nor of the work of Geoffrey Cornelius (2014) on *theoros* and *hermeois*. However, I relished the mental

wrangling. I recognised that I did have a personal experience on which to draw for the essay. Untangling events from my past in this context was a defined moment of transformation for me. In working through the idea of authentic prophecy, I felt a shadow had been lifted from me. I felt changed. Finally, I had a means by which to get rid of thinking from the past that had been an obstacle. By living backwards through this module, I have been able to anchor myself in a safer future.

By keeping note of my dreams, I look back and realise how many are ideas which I can only interpret or grasp with prior learning. Attending the Andreas Kornevall rune workshop at St. Martin's Priory was another way in through the looking glass. I had come across runes when I was an undergraduate. I knew the sounds and could read some Old English. To be furnished with the myths and mysteries of this writing system was empowering. I started reading the eddas, learning about ancestors from Jenny Blain³, seeing the sacred hidden in these myths and decoding the Old Norse names to unlock further insights. I had never taken a shamanic journey before this workshop, nor explored having an animal spirit or fylgja. Whilst my mind worried that I was "just making it up" later learning about divination meant I can reflect

Having terms and structure to explain what happens internally when I meet a symbol is exceedingly helpful. Though I am not yet fully grasping the anagogical return I am leaving this module with a message from the book fairy which Geoffrey encouraged of us. I am 'listening at the ancient springs' (Raine, 2014). Curious what 'temenos' means too!

upon this with a different mode of reference. A few months after this first workshop I attended another of Andreas' day courses in London, deepening my experience and

3-3-19
*At night, you come to me as
Red Rain,
drenching my spirit, staining my
skin.
In the sand trap you burn for
me the window of escape.
The salt-whispering winds touch
your tears to my lips.
Teach me.*

participation. My dreams became so vivid and poured out of me. There was a series of dreams I had been having in February and March where I was constantly being drenched in red rain. I'd been sharing them in the learning journal groups – describing the rain as watery paint, specifically not blood. I wondered if the red connected with the red imagery in the Norse myths and the runes and its association

³ See Blain (2016) for further reading.

with Freyja? Still the dreams came, and I started to dialogue with them through my artwork as I did not have a secure means of reference to interpret them.

On the dissertation preparation weekend, I was introduced to alchemical enquiry by Debra Deaville. Alchemy had come up before in a module lecture and during the inspirational Saturday evening lecture ‘Goddess Mithra? Imaginal Light on Solar Mysteries’ by Dr Marie Angelo, but I hadn’t run with it at that time. It seemed too historical to me. However, when it was offered to me again as a possible framework for my dissertation and we were invited to meditate upon alchemical images, then it became a living knowledge and animated a research passion. When I read about the rubedo stage I gasped: I had my interpretation for the red rain dreams. Having kept a record of my dreams in the journal I was able to see that indeed our memory works both ways! My dreams had given me a symbol from an old alchemical knowledge base which I had to remember by researching in the present.



Humpty Dumpty

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’

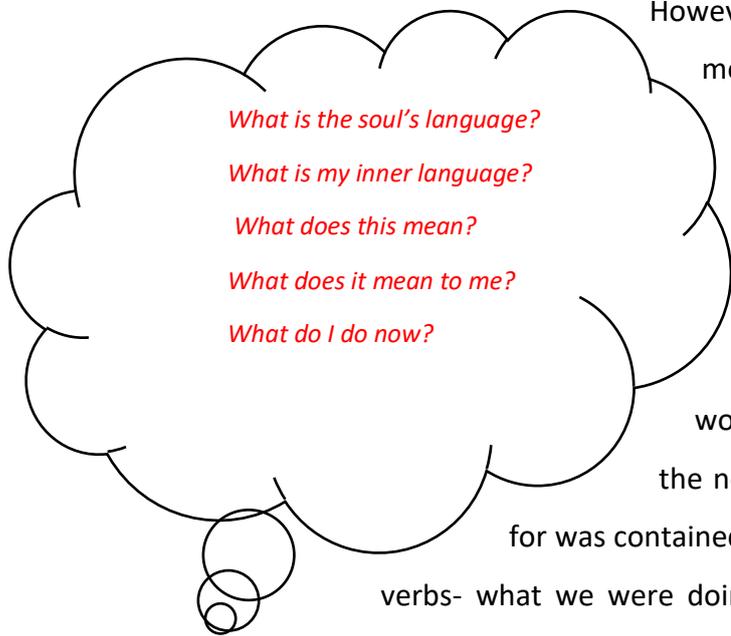
(Carroll, 1927: 125)



Being invited to explore a ‘hermeneutics of the impossible’ advocated by Angela Voss, I have been to take my previous experience of the humanities, poetry, of aesthetics and symbolism in art, as well as some studies of semiotics and to consider ‘Ah... this is all very well but what is behind all this... what does that mean?’ *The Fourfold Symbol* (Cornelius, 2003: ch 14 & 15) introduced to us has the mystical fourth element: the tropological turn.⁴ It is for this we aim, to cross the symbol as bridge into this realm. I have learnt how to use a Jungian approach to

⁴ Our course notes included Voss’ unpublished seminar material on Blackboard encouraging ‘The Four Sense of Interpretation’.

interpretation, to explore the world of archetypes and the collective unconscious, but with Simão Cortês' Saturday evening lecture I was led to consider Hillman's challenge to balance interpretation with observation as amplification.



However, an unexpected transformation came for me whilst I was listening to Jeremy Naydler's lecture on 'Binarius'.⁵ The beginning of the end of my work as a mainstream teacher and for my previous employer came when the school's mission statement was changed without consultation. It was reduced to six words. I value words immensely and I challenged the new wording since I felt that if what we stood for was contained in six words, of which two were verbs, those verbs- what we were doing- held immense significance and weight. I spoke up. It was not only an intellectual repulsion, but spiritually and bodily it felt wrong, perhaps I had what I learnt about later, a 'physiological register of meaning'? The word I took most umbrage to was 'striving'. I tried to rationalise my intuitive balk considering it was the fact that it derived from the term 'strife' and this was not something I want to invite into my life. My objection was dismissed by telling me I had misinterpreted the word, it merely meant 'to try'. I arrived at work the next day to the words painted large in the entrance hall, all over the corridors and "prayed" at the start and end of assembly in order to integrate the change in the school culture. I handed in my notice. It was therefore an emotional moment when Naydler presented a slide of an image in which all but the dark jinn, Iblis, knelt down before Adam. Naydler referred to Iblis as 'Strife'.

Words can mean many different things: this course has taught me about the paradoxical nature, the ambiguous and trickster character of language and its source. If we are to understand two critical elements of Kripal's human-as-two theory, then it is to go beyond simple dualisms and literalisms and to realise that super natural (or sacred) events demand participation and 'often behave very much like texts: they appear for us but rely on our active

⁵ These ideas are explored further in his book (Naydler, 2018).

engagement or “reading” to appear at all and achieve meaning... Realization is finally the insight that we are being written’ (Kripal, 2011: 269). I refused to participate in the story of strife in that setting. As Kripal explains, the second element is ‘Authorisation [which] is the decision to do something about it... Authorization involves the act of writing the paranormal writing us’ (ibid: 270). It is about language. It is about meaning. It is about story. Or as Kingsley writes

Often words are only words. Sometimes they’re not: sometimes they have the power to open up a whole world- to give reality to things that have been hovering on the horizon of our consciousness, just out of reach (Kingsley, 1999: 86).



*I am poetry.
I am carrying in coded form
The divine
The work of proof beyond doubt
A public expression of feelings
I am the cutting/
And growing
Wrap me up in the landscape
Bind me in a knot of hope.*



The Lion and the Unicorn

‘Well now that we *have* seen each other,’ said the Unicorn, ‘if you’ll believe in me, I’ll believe in you. Is that a bargain?’ (Carroll, 1927: 151)



I have no previous working knowledge of or belief in astrology. It was a field that remained unexplored and for the experts, until I participated in the astrodrama facilitated by Simão Cortês. I was willing to risk joining in but had not expected any personal connection or physical reaction. I was happy to play encouraged by my peers’ willingness to collaborate. It was with



Figure 6: 'Interrupted Landscape'

no small surprise that I perceived a somatic reaction. I distinctly felt what I could only describe as “butterflies in my knees”. I also became aware that wherever I moved I made others feel uncomfortable and could sense a magnetism similar to the spongy space I would sense around me when I practiced Tai Chi as a young adult. When Simão revealed I had been Mercury it meant very little to me. Later we had the opportunity to have our birth charts cast and briefly interpreted. What was a shock to be told by astrologer John Wadsworth, that at the very moment we had been doing the astrodrama Mercury was rising in my sign, Pisces, in almost exactly the same place it had when I was born. To have played Mercury, at that time, when Mercury was also an important planet in my birth chart was both curious and fascinating and peeled back another veil.



It's My Own Invention

‘What does it matter where my body happens to be?’ he said, ‘My mind goes on working all the same. In fact, the more head downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things.’ (Carroll, 1927: 174)



My learning journal has become a place to integrate my efforts to understand the course material as well as to experiment with activities such as active imagination, dialoguing with an image and using creative writing to explore my inner topography.

*10.2.19 Pulled the empty cave card from Angela's pack in answer to my question 'What do I have to learn?'
The supplied interpretation of the card was 'Bring to light what is hidden in the depths'.
Depths not shadows!*

What started as a mechanical task turned into a place where I could orientate myself within my learning. It has gone further. It has become a routine. Looking back through the pages in

order to write this essay I experience a sense of renewal as I re-evaluate the contents in the light of today.

*I am broken glass lantern
I am flame of fierce silence
I am dust on the hem of night's coat
I am she.*

*I am river growing seaward
I am bramble torn breath
I am the scream I never made
I am she.*

*I am candlesnuff lichen
I am deep earth strong
I am the severed left hand in Fenrir's belly
I am she.*



Queen Alice

‘Everything was happening so oddly that she didn’t feel a bit surprised at finding the Red Queen and the White Queen sitting close to her...’ (Carroll, 1927: 187)



The confused mass of me who commenced this course has been unsettled and reshaped by the looking-glass questions of this course. As I reach the end of the chessboard, I recognise that the confounding notion of employing academic rigour to deliberate upon sacred mystery has brought me to an unexpected party... I have learnt much about myself: least of all that I love studying and research and getting tangled in ideas that are often at odds and not having a straight and clear path. The course hides a subtle twist that enables one to be touched on the inside and the outside; to be as one surface, yet ever presenting as two.



Figure 7: from 'Chrysopoea of Cleopatra' (c1000-1100AD).



Shaking

‘She shook her off the table as she spoke’ (Carroll, 1927: 217)



Alice believes the red queen to be responsible for the chaos and begins to shake her. Perhaps in order to avoid the chaos of this course one of the coping mechanisms has been to use the Learning Journal and to share it in the groups. In this way, from the vast games that could be played on the chessboard of this MA one winning route can be established. I have learnt to decide what I chose to ‘keep on the table’ and what to shake loose. Yet, that is not to say that another time I may choose a very different game.



Waking

‘...and it really *was* a kitten after all’ (Carroll, 1927: 218)



Here, the pragmatic return. A time of consolidation before I step back through the looking glass into my dissertation. A moment to check citations and proof read, to see if the internal moebius path of the course has formed on the page. In my dreams I’m alerted that I must wake up at just the right moment. All the while the Red King has been sleeping...

4.3.19 Wake up worrying about what happens when we die. Have dreamt of wretched monsters all night. My alarm clock clicks the radio on to the lyrics “you have a whole life to live ahead of you”. Gulp. Told!



Which dreamed it?

‘Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question... it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of his dream...’ (Carroll, 1927: 222-223)



When I started this course, I had the following poem pinned to my wall:

‘Words’
I don’t take your words
Merely as words.
Far from it.

I listen
To what makes you talk-
Whatever that is –
And me listen.

(Takahashi, 2007: 141)

I used to read it as if I were the ‘I’, the subject of the poem listening to someone else with a seemingly divine entity listening on. I loved the slippery mystery of it. After stepping through the MA looking glass, I can still remember that reading, yet I now read the mirrored words. I read the ‘I’ as the sacred.

The ‘you’?

Why, that’s the whole object of this story and I am held between in the tension of divine gaze.

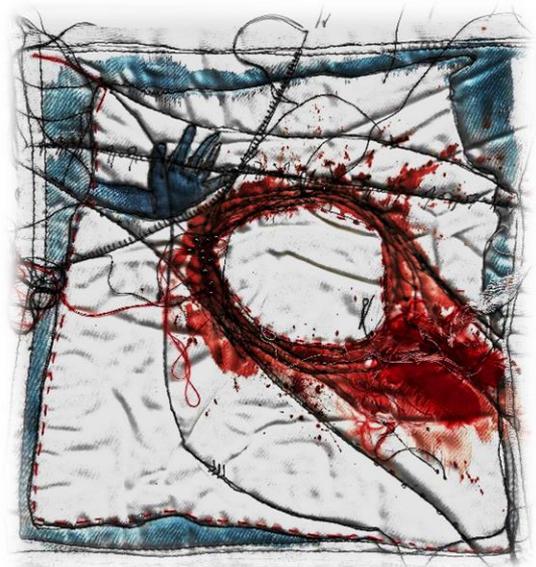


Figure 8: ‘Listening’

Reading List:

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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36915535> (Accessed: 16 July 2019).