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## Textual Transformations: Iain Sinclair’s *Black Apples of Gower* and the Merlin Legend

Iain Sinclair’s *Black Apples of Gower* (2015)<sup>1</sup> is a topographical non-fiction work illustrated with photographs and artwork, exploring the (pre)historical and literary connections between the Gower peninsula in South Wales, English-language Welsh poets (Vernon Watkins, Dylan Thomas), and artists. One of the recurrent themes in Sinclair’s book is the apple featured in the cycle of paintings *Afal Du Brogŵyr* (Black Apple of Gower) by Ceri Richards.<sup>2</sup> In the artworks, as well throughout Sinclair’s text, the fruit is charged with alchemical symbolism and associated with *nigredo* – the “blackening,” the first stage of the transformation of metal into gold, the elixir of life or the philosopher’s stone (Biedermann: 41). Although it is not stated in Sinclair’s book, the apple in the Welsh context is also linked with the figure of Myrddin, later recast as Merlin

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth abbreviated in the references as BAG followed by the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Born in the outskirts of Swansea, Ceri Richards (1903–1971) was a painter and graphic artist, trained in the Swansea College of Art and the Royal College of Art in London. Peter Lord draws attention to the fact that Richards was an artist moving across the boundaries of painting, music and literature: he was a pianist and drew heavily from music and literature (Lord: 383). For a detailed discussion of Ceri Richards’s work, see Burns (1981).

by Geoffrey of Monmouth.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this paper is to explore the affinities between the motif of the alchemical transformation, symbolized by the apple, and the mythical bedrock of the Merlin legend, as well as to examine the ways the transformative symbolism is mirrored in the text's compositional plane by the combination of, and relationship between, verbal and visual resources. This approach will hopefully allow us to throw additional light on Iain Sinclair's work in the context of its relationship with Welsh literature and culture.

Sinclair, although born in Cardiff to Welsh-Scottish parents in 1943 and brought up in Maesteg (Mid Glamorgan), has devoted most of his creative life to London. The writer attracted the interest of the Welsh literary world once he made a literary return to Wales with his 2001 novel *Landor's Tower* (see Jones 2001), and his London-set novel *Downriver* was nominated for the title of the "great Welsh novel" (Hitchins). Sinclair's writing, most frequently based on walks and drawing from local geography and history, is usually described as "topographical non-fiction" (Weston: 83) or "pedestrian travelogue" (Forsdick), and considered in relation to the topos of the *flâneur* and the aesthetics of the Situationists' *dérive* (Colombino: 113). Attention has also been drawn to the spiritual dimension of Sinclair's work as manifested in esoteric, ritual and processual motifs, and the sacralization of place (Bond: 47). What *Black Apples of Gower* shares with Sinclair's earlier work is the central role of other texts and the resulting poetics of the palimpsest (Weston: 76–77). It is also concerned with interrogating the historical past, although in this case Sinclair reaches out much further than in his London-based texts (Sinclair traces the remains of the Red Lady of Paviland, an almost complete skeleton of a man (*sic*) from the Upper Paleolithic period). The book's genre evades easy compartmentalization: as observed by Jo Mazelis, *Black Apples of Gower* is "neither a guide book, nor a history, nor an autobiography or a work of art criticism – it is all of those and more", the most appropriate category for it being perhaps Gérard Genette's term "generic chimera" (Genette: 259).

This quality of Sinclair's book is also evident at the compositional and aesthetic levels due to the mobilization of visual codes in the form of ekphrases

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<sup>3</sup> In order to avoid the cumbersome Merlin/Myrddin cluster, I will use the name Merlin to refer to all variants of the legend and recourse to Myrddin only wherever such a distinction is necessary.

and the reproduction of illustrations and photographs, which challenges and transgresses textual and medial boundaries. Any attempt to explore the role of this strategy and its connection with the thematic aspects of Sinclair's book requires a conceptual framework capacious enough to embrace both text-text and word-image relationships. Such a framework is provided by an approach that broadens the understanding of 'text' to other media (those being verbal, visual, acoustic and hybrid, e.g. film or comics) so that the relationships between verbal texts are conceived as one of many types of inter-medial relationships, as, for instance, by Peter Wagner who defines intermediality as "an umbrella term that includes intertextuality" (Wagner: 379).

Intermedial studies have developed a wide range of competing concepts and taxonomies of intermedial relations. For instance, Hans Lund distinguishes between bi-medial and unimedial communication, where the former involves the coexistence of two different media *in praesentia* (e.g. reproductions of photographs or illustrations) and the latter relies on the *transformation* of one medium into the other, as in the case of ekphrasis (Lund: 8–9). A similar distinction is made by Werner Wolf, who proposes the division of intermedial relationships into overt and covert, roughly equivalent to Lund's bi-medial and unimedial communication (Wolf: 39–41).

Lund defines ekphrasis as a type of transformation which includes "texts describing and/or interpreting real or fictitious pictures" (Lund: 16), but the phenomenon has been variously defined since the resurgence of interest in interart studies in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The understanding of this term ranges from the very narrow (Jean Hagstrum's prosopopoeia [18]) to the very broad, such as "an umbrella-term that subsumes various forms of rendering the visual object in words" (Yacobi: 23). An important aspect of the debate on ekphrasis is its capability to freeze the temporality of the narrative in a "still moment" – the tendency identified by W. J. T. Mitchell as "ekphrastic hope", and paired with "ekphrastic fear" – the desire to preclude intermingling between the verbal and the visual (Mitchell: 154–155). Understood in either way, ekphrasis is a borderline phenomenon *par excellence*: it strives to achieve what, in fact, cannot be achieved – the representation of what lies "beyond the representational powers of words as mere arbitrary signs" (Krieger, 1998: 4). In a similar vein, for Yacobi ekphrasis "entails a [...] representational nexus between the

domains” of the representing (the verbal) and the represented (the visual), the language creating the illusion of crossing over into another sign-system (Yacobi: 22). For Murray Krieger, one of the impulses behind ekphrasis is the pursuit of “the dream of an original, pre-fallen language of corporeal presence”, only with the fallen language at our disposal, the poet’s task being “to work the magical *transformation*” (Krieger, 1998: 5, my emphasis). More specifically, Krieger’s conception of ekphrasis is based on his idea of the “ekphrastic principle”, according to which a literary work is the “verbal equivalent of a plastic art object” (Krieger, 1998: 4). Thus, for a poem to be successful (Krieger does not discuss prose fiction), it needs to create a sense of roundness, thereby becoming a fixed, spatialized object, a feature that will be brought up in the final section of the present paper.

As far as the traditionally conceived intertextual relationships (between literary texts) are concerned, they form, as has already been stated, a sub-category of unimedial communication theorized by, for example, Irina O. Rajewsky as intramedial relationships (Rajewsky: 54). Different types of such relationships had been discussed under the aegis of intertextuality by Gérard Genette in his seminal work *Palimpsests: Literature of a Second Degree*, and I propose to use his basic terminology in both the intramedial and intermedial context. Thus, I will refer to target texts (in any medium) as hypertexts and to source texts as hypotexts, respectively.

Genette’s categories that seem to, although not unproblematically, best fit the relationship between *Black Apples of Gower* and the Merlin legend is architextuality, which “involves a relationship that is completely silent”, and metatextuality, which “unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it [or] naming it” (Genette: 4). In Genette’s understanding, however, the former category refers to the text’s taxonomy which may be “articulated at most only by a paratextual mention [...] or most often subtitled” (Genette: 4), neither of which could neatly be applied to Sinclair’s book. Metatextuality, in turn, which “is the *critical* relationship par excellence” (Genette: 4), requires at least a trace of awareness of the hypotext’s existence (i.e. the body of early Welsh merlinistic poetry), which in Sinclair’s case cannot be objectively demonstrated. The consanguinity between *Black Apples of Gower* and the Merlin figure seems coincidental, but it draws from a similar pattern

of transcendental experience, although the related motif of “transformation” inherent in the Merlin legend constitutes the kernel of *Black Apples of Gower* only on the deeper semiotic plane. The concealed hypotext may indeed be “the most irritating palimpsest of all” (Genette: 383), as opposed to the panoply of other, easily identifiable, hypotexts of which Sinclair’s book is composed. In this context, a common source (understood as a literary tradition or a structure of thought) can merely be presupposed, thus evoking Michael Riffaterre’s “structural homologue” (qtd. in Allen: 117) rather than Genette’s missing hypotext. A similar type of relationship has been discussed with regard to Welsh-language and English-language literatures of Wales by M. Wynn Thomas, who sees the relationships between the two traditions in terms of “silent interconnections and hidden attachments” (Thomas: 161).

As has been noted, Welsh poetic tradition related to Merlin is neither mentioned nor explicitly alluded to in Sinclair’s text. The name Myrddin appears only once, but in relation to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century self-proclaimed, eccentric druid associated with the Gower peninsula: William Price leading a parade in Merthyr Tydfil “accompanied by a half-naked man calling himself Myrddin” (BAG: 138). Other implicit links with the Myrddin of Welsh tradition include, for example, intertextual elements such as the quotation from Vernon Watkins’s poem “Taliesin in Gower”: “I have been taught the script of the stones, and I know the / tongue of the wave” (BAG: 51), Taliesin of the early Welsh-language tradition being Merlin’s peer: a shapeshifter, seer and prophet. Another indirect connection is established by evoking the ‘hairy anchorite’ topos: in Sinclair’s memories, the exploration of one of the Gower caves entails the penetration of a narrowing tunnel where a person is forced to assume the posture of the Babylonian king from Blake’s print “Nebuchadnezzar” (BAG: 38). As we will see below, the topos, also known as The Wild Man of the Woods, is linked to the Merlin legend. With no explicit references to the Welsh Merlin, however, any attempt to expose the affinities between the Welsh sorcerer and *Black Apples of Gower* must therefore begin with shedding more light on the motif of the apple in the context of the insular Celtic and merlinistic tradition.

In different traditions, the apple and the apple-tree connote eternity and time, sexual love and desire, immortality and mortality, death and rebirth. The apple-tree is also associated with the tree of life and *omphalos* (Tolstoy: 113).

The apple may stand for esoteric initiation, symbolized by the pentagram-like arrangement of apple seeds (Kopaliński: 112). It is also a fertility symbol in the Song of Songs, as well as in Greek mythology due to its connection with Aphrodite, as both a sign of immortality (Hesperides' orchard) and of discord (The Judgment of Paris). In Christian tradition, apart from being the symbol of sin and evil, the apple stands for deliverance from original sin, although, etymologically, it is not related to the fruit of the Garden of Eden (Ferber: 12). In the Celtic world, the apple tree “grew prolifically in the [...] Otherworld, putting forth leaves, blossom and fruit without cessation” (Ross: 423). In the Irish legend of Clíodne, the staple diet of Rhiannon's magical birds were otherworldly, everlasting apples (Green: 183). In the Irish Mythological Cycle, the island of apples, Emain Ablach – Emain of the apples (The Isle of Man) – is the dwelling place of Manannán mac Lir, the sea deity, and one of several synonyms for the Otherworld (Koch, 2012: 67). The Isle of Avalon of the Welsh tradition first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1139) and in his *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150) in which, as Taliesin reports to Merlin, *insula pomorum* (the island of apples) serves as the resting place for Arthur after the battle of Camlan (Clarke: 100–103). In the Welsh-language version of Geoffrey's *Historia*, in turn, the island is translated as Ynys Afallach (Island of Apples) (Koch, 2006: 146). As can be seen, the symbolism of the apple clearly points to the otherworld, hierophanic phenomena or esoteric knowledge, thereby tallying, as we will see, with the otherworldly and transformative qualities of the Merlin figure.

The pre-Galfridian version of the Merlin legend, i.e. before Geoffrey of Monmouth's creative intervention as a result of which the Welsh name Myrddin was changed into Merlin, probably constituted a large body of oral tradition of which only a handful of texts survive. Welsh pre-Galfridian material includes a poem in which Myrddin is explicitly associated with apples – “Yr Afallennau” (“Apple-tree stanzas”). In this poem, probably the oldest in Welsh-language Myrddin material, Merlin repeatedly invokes an apple tree, seen by Stephen Knight as the symbol of “desocialized natural wisdom” (Knight: 18). Other surviving texts include “Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thalesin” (“The colloquy of Myrddin and Taliesin”), “Pum Breuddwyd Gwenddydd” (“The five dreams of Gwenddydd”), “Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer” (“The colloquy

of Myrddin and Gwenddydd, his sister”), “Gwasgargerdd Fyrddin yn y Bedd” (“The separation song of Myrddin in his grave”). The picture of Myrddin that emerges from this corpus of vaticinary poetry makes him part of the battle of Arfderydd (6<sup>th</sup> century), as a result of which he loses his senses and seeks refuge in the Caledonian Forest and receives the gift of prophecy. According to Stephen Knight’s social-oriented interpretation, the variations of the Merlin story manifest the tension between knowledge and power in its different configurations (Knight: 4). Knight distinguishes between the Cumbric and Welsh variations of the early Merlin tradition, where the former represents Merlin’s rejection of the values inherent in his heroic social background and the latter embraces them with the view of effective opposition against the Anglo-Saxons (Knight: 6). The early Welsh Merlin tradition described by Knight is as “an ancient and mysterious story about an early British Celtic figure who represents disturbing and potent knowledge, who both separates himself from and criticizes the forces of secular power” (Knight: 20).

The motif of Myrddin as found in Welsh tradition is, however, an offshoot of a much more widespread motif known as the Wild Man of the Woods, which has affinities with the hairy anchorite, or the desert hermit theme going back as far as Nebuchadnezzar and the Gilgamesh Epic. As Brian Frykenberg asserts, however, the Celtic versions including Myrddin, the Scottish Lailoken and the Irish Buile Suibhne seem to have originated in Cumbric Strathclyde (1791). Frykenberg distinguishes 13 components forming the possible common nucleus of the Celtic version of the ‘hairy anchorite’ figure, most of them centered around religious practices (sacraments, last rites, burials, etc.) or other elements of potentially spiritual symbolism (apple trees, animal companions, a strangely long time spent in the wilderness, suggesting a sojourn in an ontologically different sphere known from European fairy tales or Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” (1792–1794)). In all of the versions, the stay in the wilderness is a form of penance leading to perfection and salvation/resurrection through the purification of communion, a miraculous meal or a sacrament, and death or burial (Frykenberg: 1794).

The hypothesis about the origins of the Merlin legend is taken further by Nikolai Tolstoy (1985), who offers a mythologically-oriented reconstruction of the possible archaic sources of the Wild Man of the Wood topos.

For Tolstoy, Merlin does not only echo a sacerdotal-druidic figure whose primary function was to ensure harmony in nature, but also betrays some more archaic shamanistic features (Tolstoy: 98–99). Tolstoy notes that places associated with the magus usually have sacral connotations, e.g. Stonehenge – Britain’s *omphalos*, the ‘cosmic navel’ – or such elements of natural landscape as caves or crevices which figure as passages to the Otherworld/Underworld (Tolstoy: 113, 164–170), which is in keeping with Merlin’s telluric connection suggested by his prophesying from the grave in “Gwasgargerdd Fyrddin yn y Bedd”. Tolstoy also points to the provenance of Merlin’s attributes such as the apple tree or the pig, which, together with the boar, has chthonic and otherworldly connotations (Tolstoy: 214). These, together with the analogies with another Welsh prophet, Taliesin, who acquires the gift of prophesy and poetry as a result of drinking a magical potion (and who is paired with Myrddin both in the poem “Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin” and in Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini*), suggest, according to Tolstoy, an archaic substrate of a shamanic initiation rite. Its skeletal feature would be the ritualistic pattern of death and rebirth, the defragmentation of the body (ritual death) followed by regeneration and revivification. This pattern can be further broadened to include the ensuing madness (shamanic ecstasy) and animal consort (in the Welsh-language poems, Myrddin’s companion in the wilderness is a piglet (Frykenberg: 1791)). At the core of the rite seems to lie a transcendental experience involving a *transformation* and a transition between different ontological realms.<sup>4</sup>

Before moving to the motif of transformation in *Black Apples of Gower*, let us first take a more detailed look at the motif of the apple which is the most tangible link between Sinclair’s narrative and the Merlin legend. The eponymous black apples are taken from Richards’s cycle of paintings *Afal Du Brogwŷyr* (The Black Apple of Gower): the black circle of the apple’s cross section and seeds, alongside Gower’s jagged coastline, cliffs and the surrounding sea, is one of the most characteristic motifs in Richards’s work, and reflects an attempt

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<sup>4</sup> Any speculations as to the specific sources of this pattern and the identity of Merlin (or Myrddin) must be reserved for another discussion. The model for the Merlin legend might have been a historical figure (see Knight: 12) or a collective figure of a druid or another form of “religious specialist” or “ritualist” (for the problems of historical and archeological interpretations of possible druids and druidic practices, see Aldhouse-Green: 2021).



to produce a synthetic representation of Gower, its landscape and history. The rejection of a linear perspective makes some of Richards's works reminiscent of cave paintings, while some canvases seem to employ the bird's eye view of archaeological sites with circular traces of fireplaces (e.g. *La Cathédrale engloutie: profondément calme*) or circular ritual enclosures characteristic of British Iron Age known as *temene* (Aldhouse-Green: 92). Richards's mandala-like apple is compared to "the paradisaical island of Ys or Avalon" (qtd. in BAG: 90) and constitutes, as Sinclair himself states, the key to Gower's mysteries: "Wherever the key to the essential mystery of the 'island' of Gower lies, it reveals itself through symbols exposed and rested in the poetry of Vernon Watkins and the paintings of Ceri Richards" (BAG: 85). The Gower landscape is explicitly identified with Avalon/Ynys Afallach, as the cliffs that embed Richards's black apples are interpreted by Richard Burns (quoted by Sinclair) as "a partially developed vision of the paradisaical island of Ys or Avalon" (BAG: 90). The blissful *insula pomorum* is also associated by Jo Mazelis with Sinclair's returns to his childhood moments which she identifies as "Eden" which is "fruited with apples". Thus, the ekphrastic description of an old photo taken in a pleasure park in Wales activates the author's memory of a huge, bitten apple near the park entrance. This, in turn, leads to another fruit – an apple-shaped ice cream kiosk in Mumbles (on the western edge of Swansea Bay), whose photo is also reproduced (BAG: 28). The kiosk, Sinclair notes, "must have been there on the one occasion when Watkins risked a pub crawl with Dylan Thomas [there]" (BAG: 28).

The symbolism of the apple is also interwoven with the intertextual and the historico-literary planes. In his account of Dylan Thomas's death, Sinclair chooses to draw from the memories of Vernon Watkins's widow and the way she remembered Thomas's wife, Caitlin, drawing attention to her "apple blossom cheeks" (BAG: 54) and comparing her to Blodeuwedd, the woman made of flowers (one of the characters in the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*). The mythological and Welsh literary discourses are linked to the landscape and the "occulted sun," the motif immediately followed by the ekphrasis of Dylan Thomas's photo, captioned by Gwen "A bulging Apple among poets" (BAG: 54). These sequences of photographs, their ekphrases and intertextual references (Watkins and Thomas), may be taken to illustrate the aesthetics of the

image-text interlace used in Sinclair's book: pictures activate memories that propel the narrative, the apple motif being relayed throughout the entire text.

Yet, apart from constituting a *leitmotif*, the apple in Sinclair's book has a deeper semiotic dimension. By comparing "the integrity of the black apple" to an "opiate lump of *nigredo*" (BAG: 90), Sinclair activates the alchemical symbolism attached to Richards's fruit by Carl Gustav Jung. Jung, who was presented by Ceri Richards with one of the first sketches for *Afal Du Brogŵyr*, in his letter to the painter from 21 May 1958 calls "the round thing" in the picture "pure black substance, which the old alchemists called *nigredo*" (Jung: 440). Jung indeed sees Richards's apple as "filled with compressed corruption", but, simultaneously, dubs it "the *prima materia* of gold, sun, and eternal incorruptibility" (Jung: 440). Likewise, for Richards the apple is "the metaphor expressing the somber germinating force of nature – surrounded by the petals of a flower and seated within earth and sea" (Jung: 440). The saturation of *Black Apples of Gower* with alchemical symbolism echoes Sinclair's esoteric interests observed in his earlier work (Weston: 77; Bond: 44–45) and is rooted in a specific strand of thinking about this proto-science. References to alchemy are directly linked to Carl Gustav Jung and have parallels with the perspective developed by Mircea Eliade. As demonstrated by Principe and Newman, the Eliadean and Jungian concepts of alchemy are firmly grounded in 19<sup>th</sup>-century occultist traditions and fascination with the supernatural. In the modern period, Principe and Newman assert, most alchemists worked on "material substances toward material goals" and much of the "hermetic" imaginary was used metaphorically and for cryptographic purposes (Principe, Newman: 385–431). The shift in perceiving alchemy came in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it began to be associated with magic, astrology and demonology (Principe, Newman: 387). The transmutation of metal into gold became, through the writings of Mary Anne Atwood and Ethan Allen Hitchcock, an allusion to the spiritual transformation of the alchemist himself "into a more noble, more spiritual, more moral, or more divine state" and, consequently, an essentially spiritual practice (Principe, Newman: 388). The spiritual aspect of thinking about alchemy was espoused by such twentieth-century scholars as Jung and Eliade, who "adopted this viewpoint and put it into the language of psychology and anthropology" (Newman, Grafton: 30). Eliade himself confirms this perspective, clearly

differentiating between alchemy and chemistry, locating the sources of the latter in the secularization of the former (Eliade: 11). For him, the early (ancient) roots of alchemy (and alchemical transmutation) were “probably [in] the old conception of the Earth-Mother, bearer of embryo-ores, which crystallized faith in artificial transmutation” (Eliade: 148). The transformation took place in the mother’s womb, usually identified with the “telluric darkness” of caves (Eliade: 41–2). In this context, the alchemist’s project is inherently religious: his work aims at the ritualistic emulation of divine cosmogony, death and rebirth/re-creation (Eliade: 163). To do so, he needs to retrace his steps to the state of primary matter (*materia prima*) which in the phase of *nigredo* takes the form of a black amorphous or aquatic substance (Eliade: 150).

The roots of alchemy as seen from Eliade’s perspective share many analogies with shamanic practices which involve shapeshifting and a transgression of the borderlines between this world and the world of the spirits. This transgression usually involves transformation in the form of shapeshifting, often paired with gender shifting (Aldhouse-Green: 70). Shamanic (and druidic) rituals frequently required a sacral space which, in the prehistoric or Iron Age periods, would be located in natural sites such as groves<sup>5</sup> or caves. It was particularly the latter, as archeologists have shown, which would seem to have formed a porous borderline between the human world and the under-/otherworld: “caves contain a multitude of meanings as sacral symbols or as diverse parts of comprehensive ideological systems, and when associated with the vagina or the womb of the earth and fertility, they may represent places of transition between different states of existence used often by shamans” (Peša: 80). In a similar vein, Miranda Aldhouse-Green speculates on possible sacred shamanic and druidic sites, her example being, interestingly, Culver Hole cave in the Gower peninsula, in which a figurine of a lunar goddess was found (Aldhouse-Green: 4–5). For her, the cave, “an edgy, dark, secret place”, is a conduit to the spirit world that has been used since prehistoric times, also, possibly, by druids (Aldhouse-Green: 5)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Aldhouse-Green calls them “black holes of dark matter” (18), which opportunely tallies with the alchemical imagery discussed above.

<sup>6</sup> Aldhouse-Green draws parallels between archaic shamanic practice and Celtic (mostly British) druids and she also speculates on the possible British (and specifically Welsh) origin of druidry (Aldhouse-Green: 3). It would be tempting to see the figure of Merlin as the

Aldhouse-Green also draws attention to the darkness, a symbol of the underworld, which, as research has demonstrated, might have played a particularly powerful symbolic role during rituals involving firelight (Aldhouse-Green: 42). The motif of lighting the darkness, however, will be taken up later in relation to Sinclair's text.

Alongside the apple, the caves of the Gower peninsula are one of the most prominent motifs in *Black Apples of Gower*. In Sinclair's psychogeography, the Culver Hole cave and the Goat's Cave<sup>7</sup> are explicitly linked to Ceri Richards's painting and the telluric aspect of the alchemical transformation. The writer repeatedly emphasizes this aspect in his references to Richards's work: his dark circle in the *La Cathédrale* cycle is related to an embryo or uterus: "The circular image [...] is the metaphor expressing the sombre germinating force of nature" (BAG: 92). A similar symbolism is attached to the Gower caves, which are "natural doorways" (BAG: 88). Richards's circles indeed resemble cave mouths or holes in the ground, opening the way to some sort of transcendental reality: "Gower and its caves have been expressed time and again, by poets, painters and naturalists. What they are all trying to approach is something like Blake's chart of time and space, his 'Mundane Egg', inside which man can incubate and re-enter Eternity" (BAG: 66). The transference of the alchemical imagery to Richards's painting and the Gower landscape is frequent and straightforward: "sacred light [...] balanc[es] the alchemical darkness of the cliffs and caves in Wales" (BAG: 90) and the promontory above the Goat's Hole is "the receptacle for Richards's black apples" and "the generative sac" suitable for enfolding them (BAG: 145). Sinclair's account of his visit to Culver Hole shares with that of Aldhouse-Green the impression of a dark, liminal space: "[...] wet space, floors, stairways, ledges. *A columbarium*. Which is a fluttering pigeon chapel" (BAG: 40)<sup>8</sup>. In keeping with the book's strategy of inter- and intramedial textual interlace, the passage about the cave is followed by a quotation from Vernon Watkins's poem "Ballad of Culver's Hole", which establishes a connection between the prehistoric shamanic framework and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Welsh writing

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literary epigone of British (i.e. Brythonic) druidic tradition, but this connection must be left for another discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Another name for the Paviland cave where the Red 'Lady' was found.

<sup>8</sup> For the ritualistic significance of Celtic graves and burials see Aldhouse-Green: 53–55.

in English. During one of the walks on the peninsula the sun is compared to “the atomic kernel of the apple” (BAG: 106) and when shown one of Richards’s apple pictures the writer’s friend, diagnosed with testicular cancer, reacts: “That’s my scan” (BAG: 108).

As can thus be seen, the symbolism of the apple as *nigredo*, *materia prima* and the womb is omnipresent and multitiered. The apple-*nigredo* motif from Richards’s paintings is directly linked to the shamanistic concept of a chthonic womb and alchemical cosmogony. Thus, the apple-*nigredo* may be read as the text’s symbolic kernel connecting otherwise ontologically disparate planes, thus replicating the ‘*nigredo* effect’ on the textual level.

The motif of symbolic transformation on the thematic and intertextual level is also mirrored in the narrative’s structural plane. As was mentioned at the beginning, the axis of Sinclair’s book is formed by the author’s peregrination in search of the Red ‘Lady’ of Paviland. For the most part, the ‘Lady’ and ‘her’ cave always remain beyond the author’s reach: “Veering closer to the road, and the village of Pilton Green, I realise that once again I’ve succeeded in missing the Goat’s Hole Cave at Paviland” (BAG: 124). The narrator finally finds the remains in the Oxford University Museum. Again, the hole in the Cro-Magnon man’s ilium reminds Sinclair of the shape of Paviland Cave (BAG: 164). The bones then evoke associations with another species and are “a necessary assemblage” (BAG: 164). Sinclair does not follow the connotations of the term ‘assemblage’ as a three-dimensional artistic form, but the ‘Lady’, locked in the display cabinet, framed with explanatory notes, becomes a quasi-artistic piece her/himself and as such may undergo further semiotization. Thus, the skeleton seems to form an ideal model for the *materia prima* of Sinclair’s text: it literally ‘germinated’ in the Earth’s ‘uterus’ for thousands of years to become thematic material for *Black Apples of Gower* and thereby contributes to the creation of a new text of culture.

What is more, the generative potential of the Red ‘Lady’ has parallels with another aspect of the creative forces. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the time when the “Lady” was discovered, one of the dominant (although not unchallenged) beliefs among geologists (labelled “diluvianists”) was that, in the past, the world had experienced a series of catastrophes, each followed by a new act of creation, the last major cataclysm being the Flood recorded in Genesis (Cunliffe: 28).

This belief was shared by the geologist William Buckland – the discoverer of the human remains in the Goat’s Hole Cave, Paviland, in 1823. Intent on proving the biblical Flood, he wrongly identified the remains as female and dated them to the Roman period (Cunliffe: 29). Today, the skeleton is identified as a Cro-Magnon man who lived approximately 30, 000 years ago, which makes the burial the first known attestation of the belief in the afterlife in Britain (Cunliffe: 46). Although it would obviously be hard to argue that Sinclair shares Buckland’s beliefs in consecutive acts of creation, the hybridization of the text on different planes and the inclusion of the alchemical symbolism inscribes it in the diluvianist paradigm in the way it attempts, by drawing on alchemic symbolism, to emulate the act of creation on the thematic and textual level.

Moreover, the very action of roaming the Gower peninsula in search of caves and the ‘Lady’ has evidently ritual connotations. Walking has been described by Sinclair himself as circumambulation (Macfarlane) – a ritualistic walk round objects or persons “intended to ward off sinister influences or to abstract propitious influences, in the interest either of those who perform [it] or of the person or the thing placed in the centre” (D’Alviella: 658). In *Black Apples of Gower*, the (quasi-) religious character of the journeys is clearly seen. Here, the ‘sacred’ object around which the narrative ‘circumnavigates’ is the remains of one of the earliest inhabitants of Britain and the ‘seed’ of culture as opposed to the blind forces of nature. In this light, Sinclair’s text, saturated with alchemical imagery and intertextual/intermedial elements, can be read as a re-enactment of an act of (re)creation, a process that has parallels not only in the alchemic tradition but also in the more archaic magical practices aimed at curbing and taming the forces of nature. The acquisition by the Red ‘Lady’ of an ambivalent gender identity (at least on the semantic level) due to erroneous skeletal examinations highlights the associations with shamanic rituals which involved different forms of transformation in order to re-establish the balance between the material world and the world of the spirits.

The magico-ritualistic subtext of Sinclair’s text is also manifested on the intermedial plane, but in order to explore this aspect further we must first recall the dark ‘womb’ of the cave in which the ‘Lady’ was found. As Aldhouse-Green reminds us, the deposition of the figurine of a lunar goddess in the Culver Hole cave symbolized the dispelling of the darkness (Aldhouse-Green: 42).

Likewise, in the case of rock art located in inaccessible, dark parts of the cave, flickering firelight would animate painted figures and light up the underworld (Aldhouse-Green: 42). It is my contention that a similar ritual gesture of dispelling darkness, albeit on a textual level, is present in Sinclair's book. One of the last scenes in his narrative is the account of the eclipse of 20th March 2015. The eclipse evokes an anxiety linked to death (Sinclair narrowly avoiding being hit by a taxi) and the apocalypse (Glouster's words from *King Lear*) (BAG: 177). The eclipsed sun itself is correlated with Richards's black apple, so that the alchemical *nigredo* is symbolically transferred to the cosmic level (BAG: 176). The description of the eclipse is followed by a reproduction of Bicci di Lorenzo's painting "St Nicholas of Bari Banishing the Storm" that Sinclair finds on one of the postcards in the Ashmolean. It is significant that both the reproduction of the painting and its ekphrastic description are preceded by the statement: "This is what I needed: a device for banishing the storm" (BAG: 177) and once the threat of the lack of sunlight brought about by eclipse is averted, the narrator says: "And then, once more, with much to digest, I was back on the road" (BAG: 179). St. Nicholas of Bari seems to be the perfect choice for such a device: the saint, especially in his Mediterranean context, was credited with thaumaturgical powers: his miraculous activity was associated with natural disasters and controlling natural phenomena (Mercieca: 35). Thus, the transformation of Bicci's painting into the verbal code (ekphrasis) averts the 'apocalypse' brought about by the eclipse (i.e. dispels the darkness) and is anchored in a spiritual dimension (St. Nicholas). In this context, the ekphrasis acquires a ritualistic significance and becomes in fact an apotropaic device. This protective, magico-ritualistic function of ekphrasis is highlighted by Murray Krieger who draws our attention to the divine genesis of Achilles' shield wrought by Hephaestus and its protective function (both physical and symbolic) (Krieger, 1992: xiv–xv). Thus, the function of the description of Lorenzo's painting can be expressed by Krieger's words about the literary rendering of Achilles' armour: "The shield, like art conceived as shield [...] secures the soldier (reader) in his separateness. As he holds it in front of him, it bears with artful decoration on its face a likeness that, as *magic protection*, keeps off the world and its threatening dangers" (Krieger, 1992: xvi, emphasis added). In this context, Sinclair's ekphrasis, understood as the *transformation* of the image into word,

creates the illusion of the frozen temporality of the narrative, thus binding the visual and the verbal and *protecting* the otherwise generically amorphous text made out of the *materia prima* of intra- and inter-medial components from disintegration, by creating the illusion of a spatial, fixed object. This mechanism can also be extrapolated to the macroscale of Sinclair's text. The omnipresent alchemical symbolism in its Eliadean and Jungian guise allows us to interpret this strategy as the "*nigredo* effect" – a ritualistic process of the *transformation* of the intermedial and intertextual collage which involves, in Lund's terms, both combination and *transformation* into a compositionally integral whole.

The aim of the foregoing discussion has been to demonstrate that Ian Sinclair's *Black Apples of Gower*, and the Welsh Merlin legend at a deeper level, seem to be anchored in a similar, mythico-ritualistic complex that involves a transcendently-induced transformation and tension between nature and culture. As shown by Knight, Myrddin's relationship with his own social background may be ambivalent, but his withdrawal to the wilderness results in a transformation and acquisition of wisdom which, in turn, provides him with the power to influence the culture he forsakes. The alchemical subtext of *Black Apples of Gower* also points to the knowledge of, and the power over, the ways of controlling the forces of nature. Sinclair's ritualistic peregrination seems to be another version of his "ambulant signmaking" (Sinclair: 1) which, as a semiotization of reality, is, ultimately, a culture-generating practice.

It is worth noting that the archaic patterns discussed above are reproduced with the use of intermedial (visual vs verbal) configurations. The coexistence of picture and verbal medium may be conceived in terms of the dichotomy between nature ("natural signs") and culture ("arbitrary signs") respectively. Ekphrases, and the final apotropaic ekphrasis of Bicci's painting in particular, can be taken as expressing the continual transcendence of that dichotomy, a position also shared by the early Welsh figure of Merlin.

An important question raised by the affinities identified above, however realized, is their source. Although specific links with the Merlin figure of the early Welsh literary tradition are absent from Sinclair's text, its thematic concerns and the underlying transformative imagery observed both on the symbolic and textual plane are a telling indicator of a shared transcendently-oriented perspective. This is further supported by the largely Welsh setting of *Black*



*Apples of Gower* and the fact that Sinclair's *materia prima* is made up of chiefly Wales-related material, in some cases only at one remove from the early Welsh Myrddin tradition. Nevertheless, the precise reasons for the affinities between Sinclair's book and the Merlin tradition naturally must remain purely speculative and seem to corroborate Gérard Genette's observation that literature, "like any other activity of the mind, is based on conventions of which, with some exceptions, it is not aware" (qtd. in Culler: 135). The motif of transformation operating as a unifying deep structure may be seen as one of the hypotexts that, in Graham Allen's words, are "long buried in forgotten traditions" and thus no longer readily available (Allen: 108). For now, it may be safely concluded that Sinclair's book is yet another example of the "hidden attachments" between the English- and Welsh-language literatures and traditions of Wales as proposed by M. Wynn Thomas. The analogies between the early Welsh-language tradition and Sinclair's work, pointing towards similar frameworks of expression, may be taken to be yet another argument for embracing Sinclair as a Welsh writer. The alchemical-ritualistic bedrock identified in *Black Apples of Gower*, although already noted elsewhere, may provide a stimulus for a more detailed investigation of this motif in Sinclair's other works, their relationship with the Welsh-language literary tradition, as well as in the studies of the Merlin legend and the art of Ceri Richards.

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### Textual Transformations: Iain Sinclair's *Black Apples of Gower* and the Merlin Legend

#### Summary

This paper explores the connections between Iain Sinclair's 2015 travelogue *Black Apples of Gower* and the Merlin legend. Despite the fact that, on the surface, Sinclair does not refer to the early Welsh merlinistic tradition, on closer inspection both share what M. Wynn Thomas has described as "hidden attachments" – cross cultural connections and experiences between the two literatures of modern Wales. The archaic bedrock of the Merlin legend and the alchemical imagery in Sinclair's book are both rooted in the mythico-ritualistic complex of symbolic regeneration based on the repetition of the act of original creation. Both Merlin and the alchemical process involve an ontological transformation which is mirrored in *Black Apples of Gower* by the transcendence of textual and medial boundaries: a complex network of intertextual allusions and

word-image relationships (ekphrases, reproductions and illustrations). By exploring these relationships, along with the merlinistic and alchemical imagery present in the text, I argue that the work employs the strategy of what I call textual *nigredo* – a process of intertextual and intermedial transformation. The affinities identified between the Merlin legend and Sinclair's travelogue provide an argument for seeing Iain Sinclair as a Welsh writer and shed new light on the links between the Welsh-language literary tradition and English-language Welsh writing which may be pursued further in the future.

**Keywords:** Iain Sinclair, *Black Apples of Gower*, Myrddin, Merlin, Welsh Literature

**Słowa kluczowe:** Iain Sinclair, *Black Apples of Gower*, Myrddin, Merlin, literatura walijska

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