

Mycorrhizal Metaphors: The Buried Life of Language and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling*

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Abstract

Fungi generate and demand subterranean thinking: thinking beyond the visible, thinking that makes connections between things previously supposed to be separate or individual. This article traces an extended subterranean metaphor that likens human language to fungal networks, showing how *thinking fungally* can transform how we conceive of the strange, underground life of language and our entanglements in it. The article opens with a brief exploration of the relevant mycological science and the ways in which "symbiotic" metaphors shape and transform human thinking and being. I then offer a close reading of Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's beautiful reflection on the relations between memory, language and landscape, *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* (2019). I show how Burnett is attuned to what I call "the buried life of language": its subterranean or invisible connectivities, its undoing of notions of individuality and centrality, and its dispersed and incalculable mode of co-creation that troubles assumptions about human agency. I argue that the etymological and lyrical mode of *The Grassling* invites us to recognise what lies below the surface of land, language and consciousness, thereby unravelling some of our restrictive anthropocentrism.

Keywords: Fungi, language, metaphor, memoir, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett.

Resumen

Los hongos generan y exigen un pensamiento subterráneo: un pensamiento más allá de lo visible, un pensamiento que establece conexiones entre cosas que antes se suponían separadas o individuales. Este artículo rastrea una metáfora subterránea extendida que equipara el lenguaje humano con las redes fúngicas, demostrando cómo *pensar fúngicamente* puede transformar nuestra concepción de la vida extraña y subterránea del lenguaje y de nuestros enredos con ella. El artículo comienza con una breve exploración de la ciencia micológica relevante y las formas en que las metáforas "simbióticas" dan forma al pensamiento humano y lo transforman. Luego ofrezco una lectura detallada de la hermosa reflexión de Elizabeth-Jane Burnett sobre las relaciones entre la memoria, el lenguaje y el paisaje, *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* (2019). Muestro cómo Burnett está en sintonía con lo que llamo "la vida enterrada" del lenguaje: sus conectividades subterráneas o invisibles, su desconstrucción de las nociones de individualidad y centralidad, y su manera dispersa e incalculable de cocrear, la cual quebranta las suposiciones sobre la agencia humana. Sostengo que la forma etimológica y lírica de *The Grassling* nos invita a reconocer lo que se encuentra bajo la superficie de la tierra, el lenguaje y la conciencia, y de ese modo desentrañar algunos de nuestros antropocentrismos restrictivos.

Palabras clave: Hongos, lenguaje, metáfora, memorias, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett.

Symbiotic Metaphors

Fungi have long had the capacity to change the way that humans think, to disrupt the ground of our established conceptual repertoires. Neither plant nor animal, they digest and decompose old frameworks, and grow strange new shapes from the mulch. Mushrooms—the fungal emergences that so inspire our curiosity and our fear; our desire and our disgust—are but the brief fruit of an organism that is mostly out of sight, underground. The main body of the fungus is the mycelium, a vast meshwork of microscopic filaments (called hyphae) that wend and weave through the soil, and—in ways we are only beginning to understand—connect whole ecosystems together. Fungi generate and demand subterranean thinking: thinking beyond the visible, thinking that makes connections between things previously supposed to be separate or individual.

Fungi have troubled long-held assumptions in biology (assumptions based largely on animal or mammal tendencies and habits), demanding new concepts of life, species and relationship. Fungi *change our minds*—a fact recognised by the subtitle and contents of mycologist Merlin Sheldrake's book *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures* (2020). In this article, I propose a new way that fungi might fundamentally change our minds, by enabling us to think and feel differently about another form of buried life: the buried life of language. Thinking fungally can transform how we conceive of the strange, underground life of language and our inextricable entanglements in it. It can transform how we read literary texts—as well as how we read ourselves and the world. After delving into the relevant mycological science, and the ways in which language and metaphor affect and infect thinking and being, I will offer a close reading of Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's stunning reflection on the relations between memory, language and landscape, *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* (2019). Burnett's work—in its deep attention to the subterranean liveliness of language—provides fertile ground through which to demonstrate the transformative power of fungal thinking and being.

Ecologists now know that forest ecosystems are extensively connected underground by mycorrhizae, the mutually-beneficial partnerships between fungi and plants (“mycorrhiza” comes from the Ancient Greek *myco*, meaning “mushroom” or “fungus,” and *rhizo*, meaning “root”): the plants provide photosynthesised carbohydrates; the fungi share nutrients foraged from the soil. But mycorrhizae are much more than a partnership between two species. Mycorrhizal networks connect many plants together and transfer water, carbon, nutrients, bacteria, infochemicals and (possibly) electrical activity between them (Sheldrake 168–71; 181–83). Since the health and success of individual organisms is thus bound to others in the network—including others to whom they are not directly or genetically connected—entire ecosystems start to look like symbiotic entities. When the Caterpillar of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—who just so happens to be sitting on a “large mushroom”—asks Alice “Who are you?,” she replies: “I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, [...] because I'm not myself, you see” (Carroll 39–41). Alice has not (yet) eaten of the mushroom, but her troubling of individual identity seems already to be a kind of fungal thinking, anticipating the revelations of deeply

interdependent mycorrhizal ecologies. It is perhaps no coincidence that Alice's adventures—as Carroll's original title for the book emphasised—happened “under Ground.”¹

The most famous metaphor for these subterranean associations is the Wood Wide Web²—a metaphor that, in comparing mycorrhizal networks to the Internet, recognises the far-reaching connectivity of forest ecosystems, and the multiplicitous relationships this connectivity enables. However, as Sheldrake points out, the Wood Wide Web metaphor is “plant-centric”: the trees and plants are figured as agents, who make use of the underground network to share information and resources, just as humans make use of the Internet to organise their lives (177). Sheldrake reminds us that mycorrhizal fungi are “far from being passive cables”: they are living organisms with lives and interests of their own (178). And so the Wood Wide Web metaphor is insufficient to fully make sense of what goes on under the ground of a forest. After relating various discoveries about how mycorrhizal networks function, and the metaphors used to elaborate such functioning, Sheldrake asks:

How best to think about shared mycorrhizal networks then? Are we dealing with a superorganism? A metropolis? [...] Nursery schools for trees? Socialism in the soil? Deregulated markets of late capitalism, with fungi jostling on the trading floor of a forest stock exchange? Or maybe it's fungal feudalism, with mycorrhizal overlords presiding over the lives of their plant laborers for their own ultimate benefit. (190–91)

Sheldrake also considers forest ecologist Suzanne Simard's idea of conceiving of mycorrhizal networks in terms of brains—that is, as dynamic, self-organising networks of cells that give rise to complex adaptive behaviours (191).

Some of the metaphors listed by Sheldrake are “myco-centric” instead of “plant-centric”: they ascribe agency to the fungi and strip it from the plants. And yet what studying symbioses and mutualisms show us is that the question is not from which point of view we should see something (plant-centrism vs myco-centrism), but is rather a troubling of the very validity and logic of any “centrism” at all. As Donna Haraway writes, “the relationship is the smallest possible unit of analysis” (315). The point is not, then, to ask whether it is plants or fungi that are “in control” of mycorrhizal networks, but rather to appreciate them as inextricable entanglements, processes of co-becoming in which both plants and fungi are engaged.

Likewise, we can also think of metaphors as a kind of symbiotic relationship, conceptually entangling two separate entities together.³ The meaning that emerges out of this relationship works to transform *both* entities. So while the images of brains, cities, economies or the Internet might help us to make sense of mycorrhizal networks, the metaphors also work the other way too:⁴ how might mycorrhizal fungi change how we

¹ Charles Dodgson gave a version called *Alice's Adventures under Ground* to Alice Liddell (Hunt xxv–xxvi).

² The metaphor dates to 1997. It was used on the front page of *Nature* to introduce Suzanne Simard's ground-breaking work on mycorrhizal networks (Simard).

³ For a fuller exploration of the “life of metaphor” and its literary theoretical history, see *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World* (Deer 18–21; 111–12).

⁴ We might think here of Levinas's recognition that “Metaphor shatters the signifying structures that do not always go from the human to [the material], in order to humanize the natural but vice versa [...]; and inversely, it can evoke the energetic and voluntary element of a rigorously material situation” (320).

understand brains, cities, economies and the Internet? How might the mindless complexity and emergent properties of mycorrhizal networks help us to understand the emergent effects of other complex adaptive systems in new and interesting ways, so that they become entangled with fungi in generative conceptual symbioses that work to transform our understanding of the world? Simard's comparison between mycorrhizal networks and brains not only changes how we think about fungi, but also makes salient the fact that *thinking*, no matter how supposedly abstract or analytical, is always a material, embodied, inter-active process, despite the fact that it is often represented to the contrary. Thinking fungally, then, is also always—and inevitably—*feeling* fungally, *being* fungally, in collaboration with a lively world.

Human language, like a mycorrhizal network, is a complex adaptive system that is so much more than the sum of its parts. Examining the human brain or the little inanimate entities we call words cannot account for what language is or does. We might think of words and verbal thoughts as the visible fruiting bodies—the mushrooms—of a vast and complex subterranean network of associations and connections that occur under the ground of conscious awareness, and that, like mycorrhizal networks, are not just passive conduits for meaning, but rather have a certain life or agency of their own. As has long been recognised, language is entangled with human relationships and actions, affecting and determining what we think and say—and determining what we *can* think and *can* say—and shaping our relationships with other beings and the world around us. At the same time, the vast body of language is underground, out of sight or out of (conscious) mind. When we think or speak or write in language each word has its own abyssal and ultimately untraceable history, and relies on an unfathomably complex web of relations with other words and meanings.⁵

Like spores that are emitted by the thousands to drift on air flows or stick to other beings in order to establish a new territory for fungi, words and ideas drift by the million, hitching a ride on our tweets or tongues, on the pages of novels or newspapers. One can never be sure which spores have established themselves until after the fact, nor reliably trace their origin. It is impossible to trace the origin and emergence of individual words in the semantic ecology of one's mind. Just as the study of mycorrhizal networks problematises notions of organism and species individuality, so too does an appreciation of the buried life of language trouble the possibility of claiming a thought, an idea, a choice as one's "own."

The Buried Life of *The Grassling*

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's *The Grassling: A Geological Memoir* is not especially concerned with mushrooms or fungi (though a couple do crop up in its pages). But while this absence might make it seem a strange choice of text for an essay about fungi, it is actually key to what I want to convey. For I mean to demonstrate how we might think of *all* language as fungal, regardless of its subject-matter.

The Grassling is about human and earthly memory, about the earthliness of language and the languages of the earth. It is a book about being an embodied human

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari's description of language and books as "rhizomatic"—as heterogenous, multiplicitous, decentralised and interconnected assemblages—is important here (4, 11, 23).

animal, that inhabits particular soils and streams and hedgerows as much as a particular syntax and grammar. It is concerned with the ways in which human and nonhuman, verbal and nonverbal, conscious and unconscious traces entangle and cocreate. And it is attuned to the ways in which temporal and spatial connections—connections that are not always immediately visible to the human eye—form the weft of the present, the richness and complexity of which it is not possible to fully fathom. As such, *The Grassling* renders compellingly what I want to say about the buried life of language and its subterranean or invisible connectivities, its undoing of notions of individuality and centrality, its dispersed and incalculable mode of co-creation that troubles assumptions about human agency.

As its subtitle signals, the book is a “memoir”—the kind of text we usually take to be an autobiographical reminiscence. And, indeed, we find accounts of a time when, as her father lay terminally ill in bed, Burnett delves into the countryside surrounding the family home, exploring her father’s work (he “authored a local history of the village” (9)), and their family’s long-running connections to the local landscapes. Though Burnett was born and raised in Devon (a county in southwest England), her mixed British-Kenyan heritage causes some people she encounters to assume that she doesn’t belong. As with language and landscape, what is on the surface does not reveal all that is within. “While others see him [her father] as belonging, [...] they do not see that in me”; “my skin [...] seemed unfathomable” (47). But Burnett is not only alert to bodily and environmental traces of family history, she is also deeply interested in listening for and recording the ancient voices that live in language, and the voices of other beings: trees and birds, the grass and the soil.

Remarking on William Camden’s *Britannia*, an early 17th-century text that “explored the Celtic tribal areas within the counties’ boundaries,” Burnett notes that,

his methodology, a mix of archival and anecdotal research, is not so dissimilar to mine; though to his maps and records I add scribbled observations, feelings, phonemes: little edges of words that poke out from the landscape, that shoot up from the pit of language. For oral testimony, I start to wonder who else might be speaking. What might the grass tell of the ground? Or worms, of earth? Could the soil itself speak? (9)

Language is alive: “edges of words [...] poke out” or “shoot up” of their own accord, the emergent evidence of an extensive buried life that lies below the surface, like a mycelium. The image of language and landscape as the ground out of which words emerge (words emanate “from the landscape, [...] from the pit of language”), is, again, a metaphor that goes both ways. On the one hand, language itself becomes a domain, a field, with things going on both above and below ground, with landmarks to orient by and tangled thickets to get lost in, with well-trodden paths and deep sedimentations. On the other hand, the landscape becomes linguistic, has its own syntax and grammar, dialects and modes of expression; it has histories to recite, memories to tell. “I look at the speech of the field. [...] This is the pause in a conversation that is waiting for a reply. These are the sentences, lined along the ground, hoping to be heard. Here is a bank of memories, pulled from the back of the land” (Burnett 151–52).

In what follows, I show how Burnett listens and gives voice to the buried life of land and language, and how *thinking fungally* can transform how we think about language and our place within it. Like mushroom-hunters, we’ll need to engage a special kind of

attention in order to be able to find what we're looking for. Helen Macdonald writes that, when you are foraging, mushrooms "have an uncanny ability to hide from the searching eye. Instead, you have to alter the way you regard the ground around you, concern yourself with the strange phenomenology of leaf litter and try to give equal attention to all the colours, shapes and angles on the messy forest floor" (Macdonald). Or, as Anna Tsing remarks, "no one can find a mushroom by hurrying through the forest [...]. Inexperienced pickers miss most of the mushrooms by moving too fast, for only careful observation reveals those gentle heavens" (*Mushroom* 242).⁶ Likewise, to discover the linguistic life of *The Grassling* you have to (as Burnett herself does) go slow, get low, attune yourself to the various levels of textual operation: to the micrological shapes and sounds of individual letters or words, to the meshwork of personal and interpersonal associations, to the sediments of common usage, to the etymologies heaving under the surface—invisible to the untrained or hurried eye. If we read too quickly, we cannot see the words for the text. The strangeness of the experience—the way that words and grammar come *through* us, but not *from* us—is often obscured behind the illusion that we have of being conscious agents, authors of words and actions.⁷ *The Grassling* invites us to experience the ancient liveliness of language, to savour the taste and texture of human words and nonhuman traces, to attune ourselves to what lies below the surface of land, language and consciousness, and to thereby unravel some of our restrictive anthropocentrisms—anthropocentrisms that have engendered and exacerbated the environmental and social crises that today threaten the well-being of humans and other life forms.

Subterranean Connections: Under the Ground of Land and Language

Language connects us to minds beyond our time. Every word we speak, hear, read or write has been passed down to us through generations beyond number, far beyond written and recorded history. We look up the "definition" and "origin" of a word, and find out, for instance, that a "memoir" is "a written record of events in the past, especially one based on personal experience," or "a person's written account of his or her own life; an autobiography" (*Chambers*). We also discover that the word comes from the Latin *memor*, meaning "mindful," or "remembering," which is, says the *OED*, "perhaps a derivative of the Indo-European base of Sanskrit *smṛi*, to bear in mind." The "perhaps" in this etymology alerts us to the fact that we are already in murky waters, but even if we excise the uncertainty at this point, does the Sanskrit word really give us an *origin*, a starting point? This word too will have had its own deep history (or, rather, prehistory): countless utterances that, over millennia, conspired to endow this little vocable with a shape and a sense. Just as soil, as Burnett observes, bears the taste of "the softness of the rain of

⁶ It is perhaps no coincidence that both the authors I cite on foraging are female. As Keyser recognises, fungi themselves and the act of gathering of mushrooms both have something feminine and queer about them, something resistant to patriarchal systems (98–101). Similarly, Griffiths uses the challenge to biological individuality effected by lichen (a fungal-algal symbiosis) to critique heteronormativity and the prejudices it enables.

⁷ For an extended discussion about the externality of language see Clark.

hundreds of millions of summers” (84)—abyssal and unfathomable traces, the sediment of eons distilled into the indescribable aroma of a spoonful of soil—so too does each word we encounter hold within its diminutive confines a whole universe, coming to us as an ancient relic or rune, holding more secrets that we can hope to uncover. Language itself is a vast memoir: a repository of human thoughts and relations, each word with its own incalculable autobiography, each related—by finer or thicker threads, individual hyphae or aggregate cords—to all others in the language.

Burnett is keenly aware of this deep life below the surface of language, to the ways in which all words have these abyssal histories, connecting us to past times in fascinating and unfathomable ways. She muses on her father’s suggestions that the place name “Drewshill” might be a corruption of a “Druid’s Hill,” and “Churchills” naming not the hill of a church, but the hill of a *crich*, or burial mound (10, 13). These possibilities transform her relation to these places, imbuing them with a new and altered significance, but they also breathe life into these buried pasts, enabling them to live on. She reflects on how she has inherited a “family connection to the fields,” feeling drawn to places inhabited by her father, and drawn to the lively dynamism of the “fields themselves: what wild flowers are scenting, what animals grazing, what grasses growing” (70). But linguistic history and liveliness offer equal attraction and intrigue:

It is also something to do with words, this external current that draws me and draws him; an etymological mining, uncovering the past. How we see the Druid in Drewshill; how we glimpse the burial mound, *crich*, in Churchills field. And we both sense the importance of this looking, this tracing of the debris of words left in language. What will happen to these words if we don’t look closely enough at them? Where will they go? (70–71)

We can hear double meanings of the verb “draw” at work: Burnett and her father are not just drawn *to* “this external current” of words, but are also drawn *by* it. Their personalities, their personal narratives, are enriched, complicated, thickened, so that what “me” and “him” means is partially coloured, drawn or determined, by their shared attentiveness to land and language. But this is not a one-way process, it is a symbiotic relationship: if the words generate personal meanings for Burnett and her father, their attentiveness to language also sustains the life of these words. Without this act of remembrance (this geological *memoir*), the “debris of words” might erode away altogether, leaving the future to inherit a barren, lifeless landscape. “What will happen to these words if we don’t look closely enough at them? Where will they go?” Language is a symbiosis between present, past and future, all of which will suffer without this life-sustaining partnership: “The place without words is a dangerous place to linger. Where there are no words there is only rock to knock against. Where there are no words there is no join. Where there are no words there is nothing to bring it back” (181). Language makes “joins,” forms connections, builds relationships—between neurons, between people, between humans and the world around them—but it also grows out of these connections. And, as when looking at symbiotic relationships of living organisms, it is difficult (and unnecessary) to finally determine which entity is driving the process.

The word “Grassling” is and is not a word invented by Burnett. It appears to be the first instance printed in the English language, and her neologism—richly evocative as it

is—does a beautiful job of conjuring a lively little field-dwelling creature. And it does this by drawing on a complex web of etymological, homophonic, semantic and sonic relations. The suffix “-ling” has two distinct forms. First, forming nouns, it renders the sense of “a person or thing belonging to or concerned with” the noun to which it is appended (such as “groundling” or “nestling”), and also has “a diminutive force” (as in the case of words like “gosling” or “duckling”); second, forming adverbs, it is “expressive of direction or extent” (as in the case of “sideling”) (*OED*). The Grassling, then, is a little thing or ling of grass: belonging to, concerned with, being-toward grass. A little thing be-longing to or longing to *be* grass, to root into the ground, grassily grasping—I cannot hear “Grassling” without also hearing the “-ing” of a present participle, the “-ing” of things in process, of being and becoming, a Grassling *grassling*. The word “grass” comes from the Germanic root *grô-*, the same root as both “grow” and “green.” The Grassling thus embodies or incorporates not only the narrow sense of the low-growing, grazable green grasses so iconic of the British isles but also all that grows and greens, that grounds and grasps, gripping, grafting soil.

I said that “Grassling” is and is not a word invented by Burnett. The word “Grassling” appears in Old High German, as a word for the small bottom-dwelling freshwater fish we call, in English, a gudgeon, groundling (another “-ling”!) or goby, and that is found all over Europe, including in the River Exe that appears in Burnett’s text.⁸ This older, aquatic instance of the word is apt, for the Grassling of Burnett’s text also takes to the water, in dreams and in reality, and encounters there traces of the deep past and of an elemental relationality beyond species and beyond the present: “All the skin of me, the pigment, the falling dust, is called to the soil. All the water of me, the churning motion, is called to the fish: the bony lobe-fins, ancestors of dinosaurs and mammals, whose fossils remain in the Devon rocks” (73). Whether or not Burnett intentionally meant to invoke this older, alternate meaning of “Grassling”—or indeed the various associations I have identified in the previous paragraph—is not the point. Rather, it is a matter of attending to these chancy resonances, and recognising that the life of language is always beyond authorial intention and control. As Burnett suggests, “reading could be a many-layered thing, a digging thing: a harvest” (126).

As well as the vast inheritances of form and meaning that all words have, there are also meshes of personal associations, unique pathways—laid by individual experience—among words, objects and personal memory. Burnett recognises that language, like landscape, is not fixed and determined (as it sometimes appears to be), but dynamic and relational—a thing in process:

The earth has its own speed, slower than the eye. As you look at it, nothing seems to change. It has been that way always. The hills through the window. The slope of the wood, the same scattering of trees; even the sheep seem glued down.

But the landscape is a vast network of work: animal and plant, mineral and soil, and language too. The slope of the word, the same scattering of vowels, even the sense seems glued down. But it is a vast network and it is moving all the time. So that when I say “the daisies were beautiful,” I mean their shade matches the colour I brought you your first day out of hospital. You didn’t see them, but I brought them. “The daisies were beautiful” means

⁸ “Graßling, [...] eine im Oberdeutschen übliche Benennung des Gründlings [Graßling [...], a common name for Gudgeon in Upper German]” (Krünitz 693).

the outside came inside to show you what you couldn't see. "The daisies were beautiful" is running through the vase on the piano, down the walls you scrape past, nestling in the corner in the cobwebs. (54)

The phrase "the daisies were beautiful" relies on the innumerable utterances that have given sense to these words, a vast "network of work" spanning millennia that have made it possible for us to know what is meant by "daisy" and what is meant by "beauty." (You might know, too—consciously or unconsciously—that the word "daisy" comes from the Old English *dæges éage*, day's eye, named for the flower's sunlike golden anthers visible only in the daytime, protected by its closing petals at the fall of night.) But, as Burnett's passage shows, the phrase has its own weave of associations grounded in the context of visiting her father, so that words carry—as is so often the case—so much more than what is actually said. In this case they carry what *cannot* be said: a love and a pre-emptive mourning for a father already half-lost: a father that "didn't see them," a father that can no longer go outside ("the outside came inside to show you what you couldn't see"), a father that "scrape[s] past" the walls of the house. These deeper meanings remain underground. Burnett remarks that "every sentence of my mother's is its own story" (55), but this is true of every sentence, every word, in its weave and web of personal, interpersonal, individual and cultural meanings.

Such meanings are not always or even usually conscious, even when they seem to be. Nicholas Royle writes that "writing is not the activity of a subject, it is not what an author masterfully, consciously, deliberately *does*. It's more like what an author, without authority, lets happen or finds happening" (25). Or, to quote from an MRI study on poets at work, "the overall pattern associated with the generative phase of creative activity reflects a state in which spontaneous, self-generated behaviours [...] can unfold in the absence of conscious, attentional control" (Liu, et al. 3364). Thinking fungally about language and writing gives us a new way to understand the strangeness of the experience of speaking and writing language. Words emerge not from one's "self," but from the common ground of language. When one writes or speaks it is never really a case of spontaneous generation, even if one is the most "original" of authors. Rather it is a matter of tapping—always from one's singular personal and cultural context—into this vast, ancient, unfathomable repository.

One of the ways in which this strange externality is most evident is in dreaming. These cascading overnight narratives are products of our own minds, which therefore reveal just how much goes on below the surface of our conscious awareness. Sometimes we can trace dream images or narratives back to certain events from waking life, showing us that we have been thinking—consciously or unconsciously—about these events. But often things that appear in dreams seem to have come out of nowhere, and we cannot begin to fathom their provenance. Sigmund Freud recognises how there is always much which remains underground, ungraspable:

The dream thoughts that you come across in the course of the interpretation generally remain without closure; they extend out in every direction into the weblike entanglement of our thought-world. The dream wish emerges from a denser spot of this mesh, like a mushroom from its mycelium. (530; my translation)⁹

⁹Die Traumgedanken, auf die man bei der Deutung gerät, müssen ja ganz allgemein ohne Abschluß bleiben und nach allen Seiten hin in die netzartige Verstrickung unserer Gedankenwelt auslaufen. Aus einer

Freud's words underline the passivity, the lack of agency, of the dreamer in relation to the dream. You "come across" the dream thoughts quite by chance,¹⁰ and if you go out looking, like a forager, you can never be guaranteed of success. Dreams reveal the "weblike entanglement of our thought-world," the vast and complex underground network of meanings and associations that can never be fully apprehended. Just as mycelium is resistant to study—its ultra-fine and delicate strands so embedded in the soil that they cannot be excavated intact—so too does the subterranean world of the unconscious resist our probing. And while this is most evident to us in the strange night-time emergences of dreams, this unconscious, underground world is always there, whether we are aware of it or not. It is a reality that reveals just how far what you think of as your "self"—your sense of an authorial, individual "I"—is impossible to delimit and determine.

Early on in *The Grassling*, Burnett recounts a dream that renders how entangled and boundless the self really is:

I dream deeply of the earth: men in armour, women fading in and out of focus. I dream of boundary lines and farmers telling me which people belong to which earth. Whether it is one acre, or thirty, or hundreds, the sense of ownership is the same; the sense of self so deeply tangled in the soil that it is impossible to say who owns who. Pointing out the hedgerow and the channel of earth that runs beside it, the dream segues into another, earlier one I have had about swimming [...]. Submerged, I taste the water, the weeds and the soil in the water. There are people and fish I seem to know, swimming towards me. While we are from different species, other centuries, it's not too unsettling, just like meeting cousins you've only met once or twice, or relatives of your best friends. As I break the surface of the river and the dream I gasp: what fills my lungs is wider than breath could be. It is a place and a language torn, matted and melded; flowered and chiming with bones. (11)

This is a dream about going underground, underwater, submerging oneself under the surface of language or consciousness, and finding there inextricable entanglements of time, space and identity. The "boundary lines" attempt to delimit, to determine, but underground there can be no such confines: "the sense of self so deeply tangled in the soil that it is impossible to say who owns who." Likewise, when faced with "people and fish [she] seem[s] to know [...] from different species, other centuries," what is manifest is not their difference but a sense of relatedness or connection: it is "just like meeting cousins you've only met once or twice, or relatives of your best friends." These strangely familiar faces are foreigners within the self: they come both from "other species," "other centuries," but also arise from the depths of the dream, from Burnett's "own" subconscious ("it is impossible to say who owns who"). Just as our bodies are whole ecosystems of other species of bacteria and fungi, without which we could not survive, so too is our unconscious and our language densely populated with other lives. "As I break the surface of the river and the dream I gasp: what fills my lungs is wider than breath could be. It is a place and a language torn, matted and melded; flowered and chiming with

dichteren Stelle dieses Geflechts erhebt sich dann der Traumwunsch wie der Pilz aus seinem Mycelium" (Freud 530).

¹⁰ What I have translated here as "come across" is the German *gerät*, which comes from the infinitive *geraten*. This can mean "to get" or "to become," but often with a sense of passivity or loss of control, as in "*durcheinander geraten*" (to get confused or mixed up), "*außer Kontrolle geraten*" (to veer out of control).

bones.” The dream emerges from—or provokes—the revelation of how “matted and melded” our reality is, forever “flower[ing]” and “chiming” with the bones and relics of the past. Underground, underdream, the illusion of individuality so carefully constructed by our above-ground self is irrevocably ruptured, entangled, dispersed.

Surface Readings: the Soil of Language

Just as language forges connections with other places, people, beings and times, so too do words form connections between themselves, weaving lively webs within phrases and sentences, making ties on the basis of form, sound and rhythm. As Haraway writes, words are “thick, living, physical objects that do unexpected things” (200). The materiality of language is impulsive, compelling—driving, determining or shaping the way a writer presents their ideas, which words and syntax they choose. Because form and meaning, surface and depth, cannot be rigorously separated in language, to shape *how* something is said is also to shape *what* is said. And to shape what is said is to shape the sayer, to infect or inflect their personality, motives, dreams and desires.

One chapter that is particularly concerned with the compelling textures of land and language is called “Yslende” (Old English for “glowing,” from *ȳsle*, “glowing ash, spark, ember” (Borden 1604)). It opens with “a golden field [...] caught in the middle of a fold [of a map],” as if the phrase “golden field” has itself been folded up, crumpled into the word “fold”—as if one could take the compact little “fold,” open it out, smooth out its creases and find there a “golden field”: “You have to look deep into the fold to see what is there; it has been literally pressed down, so that a human hand has buried the land into the crevices of paper. You almost need to walk into the map to find it; to get out guy ropes and tack down the rugged paper” (Burnett 169). The chapter begins, then, with attention on surface, with how the surface of paper or earth or word is a textured thing, never a blank canvas or empty vessel for meaning or life forms, but always embroiled, folded, implicated in the weave of the world. One must read closely to apprehend such texture:

Here the land speaks through paper, weathered by centuries of waiting. But words have been pushing up all over the place lately: from soil, from wood, from stone; from all manner and matter of buried time. Records of earlier touchings of hand and earth; Old English tongues, Anglo-Saxon runes, are surfacing. I twist, dusted in gold, as the word *yslende* covers my lips. Glowing. My tongue has to feel its way into the word, like a bee to a flower, then out again, as the last push of its sound is whispered. *Yslende* glows the golden field, *yslende* all along the fold, *yslende* in between the hills. My petals pull apart. I spill. (169)

Words “have been pushing up all over the place lately: from soil, from wood, from stone; from all manner and matter of buried time.” Again, this is latently a fungal metaphor, for it is mushrooms and lichens that grow from soil, wood and stone, that emerge from all “manner and matter,” from the most unlikely of ground. The Old English word both emerges from and enriches the sensual experience of body and scene: tongue “feel[ing] its way into the word,” as eyes and hands feel into folds of fields, and mind feels into the shadows of language, of “Old English tongues, Anglo-Saxon runes.” The material shape of

yslende,¹¹ the way that the S, L, N and D cause the tongue to touch the alveolar ridge,¹² spills its splendour into the surrounding words: “*Yslende* glows the golden field, *yslende* all along the fold, *yslende* in between the hills. My petals pull apart. I spill.”

Dreamlike, we are transported from fold of map to fold of field, where Burnett is down on the ground, “lying still in the wheat”:

Sounds rise. A swallow. A swoop. A swallowing, swooping root. Layered in the hay, in the tightly bounded day, lightly woven. A netting barely visible: the skin starts to itch with each twitch of wheat.

Clover skin is tightly bound in pollen gusts, seeded dust, bursts of swallow in the hay swallowed swover. Words mix and swoop in the swallowing sway. My eyelids flutter. I swoon in the heat in the heart of a day in midsummer. [...] [T]he scent and the shape and the colour bursting and thirsting, swallowing, swovering, whooping and swooping. (169–70)

Hear how connections are woven between letters and sounds, that then seep or sweep into sense: “A swallow. A swoop. A swallowing, swooping root.” Airy puffs of Ws make the lips mime the swooping wingbeat of bird, air displaced as words take flight on the tongue, before verbs arrive to metamorphose bird and flight into the gulp of throat (for “swooping” is also a synonym for “swallowing” (*OED*)): sounds are drunk down, swallowed or consumed by the rooted Grassling. The next lines pass sounds back and forth in the warp and weft of words, as “layered” tolls in “hay” and “day,” “tightly” loosens into “lightly,” the “itch” a result of a “twitch,” and “gusts” bring “dust” and “bursts.” Is the “netting barely visible” the weave of words in these lines, or the textures of the day’s layers, earth and hay and swallow-swayed air? Sounds and shapes of words begin to transform each other, allowing alternate senses to emerge. “Words mix and swoop in the swallowing sway,” “in the hay swallowed swover.” Swal-loving sw-over: the loving of swallows swooping over? The loving of the swaving (loud singing) of birds, the shady nook or hollow of a “swale,” the swaling (or swaying) of the wheat in the wind (*OED*)? “I swoon in the heat in the heart of a day in midsummer”; a day that is perhaps also a little “swoly” (oppressively hot)? Other words and senses emerge unbidden—like mushrooms—from subterranean connections woven by letters and sounds.

In accordance with the text’s discarded title (“A Dictionary of the Soil”), *The Grassling* has short chapters arranged in alphabetical order (“Acreage,” “Burnett,” “Culm,” “Daffodil,” “Exe” and so on)—another way that the materiality of language asserts its agency, compelling the juxtapositions which create meaning in the flow of the text. Following the final numbered chapter (“Zygote”), there is one more entry, titled “After.” This “After” is perhaps an “afterword,” coming after the ABC of the main text, and it is also an “after death”: after the death of Burnett’s father, “now that there is nothing left to fear. It has already happened—the worst—and this is what’s left” (186). But this “after” is not only an “after.” Thanks to the alphabetic logic of letters (another inheritance from the past, each letter with its own, sometimes representational, origin¹³), a chapter title that starts

¹¹ The Old English *ȝ* is a long vowel pronounced like the “u” in “ruse.” The other consonants are pronounced as in Modern English, rendering something like: *oos-lenn-deh* (O’Donnell).

¹² These letters are all alveolar consonants, which are articulated with the tongue against or close to the superior alveolar ridge, behind the top front teeth.

¹³ For a description of the origins of the alphabet see Abram (93–136).

with an “A” also instigates a new beginning, a return to the start. It undoes the linearity of the A–Z progression, and instead inscribes a cycle of renewal, regeneration. And, indeed, the last words of “After” describe a sunrise: “I am all dew all field all hope. More than the day is beginning. Morning fire smudged to pastel, dusting over hedges. Sun-gasp. Electric orb fringed by field. That great sun going on. A perfect round, pulsing to skylark’s flight, unending light. That great continuing. Glow” (187). The wording re-invokes the description of dusk at the opening of the book: “More than the day is ending. Evening fire dulled to pastel, dusting over hedges. Moon-gasp. Electric orb fringed by firs. That great moon going on. A perfect round, pulsing to the bat flicker, trickle river. That great continuing. Glow” (3). This is a recycling of words and syntax, a decomposition that is also a regeneration, so that the pain of human death is cast within the endless renewal of night into day, winter into spring, Z back to A. Attending to the materiality of land and language precipitates the realisation that what is material does not end: it transforms, regenerates, gives rise to new beginnings. Mourning slides irresistibly into “new mornings” (159). Connections between words allow for new life to emerge.

After Words

Tsing writes that “*Human exceptionalism blinds us*. Science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions. These stories fuel assumptions about human autonomy, and they direct questions to the human *control* of nature [...] rather than to species interdependence” (“Unruly Edges” 144, cursive in original). One thing often taken for evidence of human exceptionalism and mastery is language. As such we can be blind to its power and its agency. We are so immersed in it that we regularly fail to apprehend it at all, but when we do, it is often assumed to be just one more thing that is under our control, a tool to be manipulated. Yet this is not true. Language is before and beyond us, affecting, infecting and inflecting our lives in incalculable ways. Language is said to be “proper to humans.” But what if it goes the other way? What if humans are “proper to language”? It was fungi that enabled plants’ algal ancestors to leave the oceans and move onto land. Perhaps it was the chancy evolution of verbal language—also a product of evolution by natural selection, as Darwin himself recognised¹⁴—that enabled our primate ancestors to awaken into what we now call the “human” mind. Daniel Dennett writes that “just as the eukaryotic cell came into existence in a relatively sudden instance of *technology transfer*, in which two independent legacies [...] were united in a single stroke of symbiosis to create a big leap forward, the human mind, the *comprehending* mind, is [...] a product of symbiosis” (389, cursive in original): symbiosis between primates and verbal language.

As we have seen, it makes no sense to think of symbioses in terms of centrism (plant- or myco-centrism, or, indeed, anthropocentrism). Instead, we should think of

¹⁴ Darwin writes of language in the exact terms of his theory of organic life: “no philologist now supposes that any language has been deliberately invented; each has been slowly and unconsciously developed by many steps,” and the “survival or preservation of certain favoured words in the struggle for existence is natural selection” (Darwin 53, 58–9)

them as processes of temporally- and spatially-dispersed co-creation. Thinking fungally about language can help us to attend to its buried life—its infinite connectivity and complexity, its dynamism and agency—and thus help us to loosen our delusions of authorial intention and control. We may never be able to apprehend its full extent, nor be able to say, as Burnett recognises, “who owns who,” but we can begin by admitting that there is much that goes on underground.

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