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'Dying to Live': Remembering and Forgetting May Sinclair

Suzanne Raitt

Virginia Woolf did not think much of May Sinclair. When she had tea with her in 1909, she wrote to Lady Robert Cecil that Sinclair was a 'woman of obtrusive, and medicinal morality' with 'little round eyes bright as steel' (Woolf 1976: 390). But Woolf was famously catty about writers with whom she felt a sense of rivalry, and it was Sinclair, not Woolf, who was the first of the pair to publish an experimental, stream-of-consciousness novel (*Mary Olivier: A Life*, in 1919). The two writers had more in common than Woolf would care to admit. Both were interested in reproducing the texture of the inner world; both were preoccupied with the psychology of women; and both sought to explore the process and experience of memory: the 'present sliding over the depths of the past', as Woolf would put it years later in her memoir (Woolf 1985: 98). In 1917, Sinclair imagined what it might be like if we had no psyche to select and shape what we remember:

Suppose that we remember, never because we choose, but always because we must [...] then our consciousness would be like nothing on earth but an immense fantastic telephone exchange; an exchange where messages, indeed, received and registered and answered themselves, but all at once, and in overwhelming multitudes; an exchange deafened and disorganised; hells ringing incessantly all through its working hours; messages rushing in from all parts of the city and suburbs at once, crossed and recrossed by trunk calls from all parts of the outlying country; casually crossing and recrossing, interrupting and utterly obliterating each other. (Sinclair 1917: 104-5)

Sinclair suggests that not the brain but the psyche brings order to this potential chaos: 'the psyche uses the brain, and the memories which have become the habits of its body and its brain, as its machine, and its vehicle; and [...] the secret of its remembering and forgetting is its own' (Sinclair 1917: 105). Sinclair favoured the idea that 'psychical

disposition' (Sinclair 1917: 105–6) working through 'an act of will' (Sinclair 1917: 17) could free the consciousness from the burden of the past, but she was not entirely sure that this idea was right. Indeed, she spent much of her career – at least after 1914 – preoccupied with how to manage her relationship to the past. For Sinclair, the past was a wound. She feared being unable to escape it, and she feared in turn her own persistence in a form that she could not control. Mystic ecstasy – what, in *The Defence of Idealism*, she called the 'new mysticism' (Chapter 7) – was a way of entering an other-worldly realm in which the past, dissolved into timelessness, could no longer do any harm. But she was also fascinated by what could never be left behind – hence her interest in heredity, the unconscious and the supernatural. This chapter traces the ambivalence with which Sinclair wrote about remembering, being remembered and being forgotten. Sinclair was both eager to be remembered (though in a form she could control) and also preoccupied with – and frightened of – what it means not to forget.

May Sinclair – like so many others – has a chequered history as far as her literary reputation is concerned. A bestseller in the early decades of the twentieth century, her star waned during the late 1920s and was almost extinguished for many years after her death in 1946. The tide began to turn when in 1959, Théophilus Boll, Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, to whom all Sinclair critics owe a great debt, met Harold and Muriel Sinclair – May Sinclair's nephew and his wife – while on a trip to scout out primary sources for a biography of an English modernist woman writer. The Sinclairs directed Boll to their aunt's last home in Aylesbury, where he found the papers that formed the basis for his biography of Sinclair in 1973 (Boll 1961: 4 ff.). There were intermittent articles on Sinclair throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, and Hrisey Zegger's book in the Twayne English Authors series came out in 1976.¹ During the wave of feminist recovery in the early 1980s, Virago Press reissued *Mary Olivier*, *The Life and Death of Harriett Frean* and *The Three Sisters* with introductions by Jean Radford in their Modern Classics series. But by the early 1990s, when I started work on my own biography of Sinclair, those three volumes were no longer in print. A few articles on Sinclair, stimulated perhaps by the continued circulation of the Virago volumes, appeared in the 1990s.² My own biography of Sinclair, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*, was published in 2000, and a few of Sinclair's novels were reissued during the subsequent decade. In 2002, New York Review Books published a new edition of *Mary Olivier*; in 2003, Random House republished *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* in their Twentieth-Century Rediscoveries series; and in 2006, the Wordsworth Press issued a volume containing *Uncanny Stories* and 'The

Intercessor'. Michele Troy and Andrew Kunka's edited collection, *May Sinclair: Moving Towards the Modern*, appeared in 2006, and three of Sinclair's stories ('Victim', 'Token', 'Villa Désirée') were anthologised in 2008 and in 2012 as classic examples of the ghostly and the erotic. Most of Sinclair's texts are now available online on Project Gutenberg, Hathitrust Digital Library and/or the Internet Archive; Bibliobazaar and HardPress will supply unedited photographic copies of many of the novels. In July 2013, Rebecca Bowler, Claire Drewery and I founded the May Sinclair Society, which held its inaugural conference in the summer of 2014. Edinburgh University Press will shortly embark on a series of critical editions of Sinclair's works. Add to that the increasing number of critics who have been steadily publishing on Sinclair over the last decade or so, and it looks as if May Sinclair is making a comeback.³ Even her Rolls-Royce resurfaced recently in Sarasota, Florida ('May Sinclair's Rolls Royce', 2015).

So what does this resurgence – if it is a resurgence, rather than a consolidation of work that has been quietly going on for thirty or forty years – mean? One obvious point is that it is easier to join a conversation than to start one. The existence of the Society and a small but growing body of secondary work means that academics are more likely to encounter May Sinclair and more likely to be supported in doing research on her. In other words, she is gaining critical legitimacy, and those who work on her can find a community. It is easier for academics to acquire her texts, and there are more reference works to fill in biographical and other details. She has always been popular with general readers, when they were able to find her works. I remember my excitement when in 1998, a friend handed me a copy of the *Nation* in which columnist Katha Pollitt mentioned in passing 'the once-celebrated, now totally forgotten novels of May Sinclair, which I love' (Pollitt 1998); in 2002 Pollitt wrote the introduction for the New York Review of Books reissue of *Mary Olivier*. More recently, Jonathan Coe and Charlotte Jones have sung May Sinclair's praises in a British national newspaper.

Critics have begun to speculate about the reasons for her comparative neglect. Philippa Martindale suggests that some women writers 'did not fit the traditional version of high Modernism' (Martindale 2003: 7) and were therefore to some extent unintelligible to the critical establishment; George Johnson notes that 'Sinclair produced a large number of novels, not all of which maintained a high quality, but the same might be said of D. H. Lawrence, who has consistently maintained a place in the canon' (Johnson 2004: 179). James Miracky is more forthright in his denunciation of some of Sinclair's early novels, calling them 'offensively elitist',

'numbingly clichéd', and full of 'passages of lofty prose, heavy-handed symbolism, and idealized characterization' (Miracky 2003: 75, 72). There is also the question of the wide range of Sinclair's interests and a division in her following because of it, some critics (such as Christine Battersby and Elizabeth Mosimann) emphasising her philosophical thought, others (for example, Philippa Martindale and Luke Thurston) looking at her through the lens of psychoanalytic theory and practice, some emphasising her poetry (Jane Dowson) and still others reading her as a feminist modernist. In the patchwork of responses to May Sinclair in the last three or four decades, we see the gradual (though uneven) establishment of a multifaceted critical reputation.

May Sinclair herself, of course, was no stranger to the making and breaking of literary reputations. In the early years of the twentieth century, she involved herself in the development of the Everyman series, founded by J. M. Dent in 1906 with the goal of making classic novels available – usually in single volumes – at affordable prices: 'for a few shillings, the reader may have a whole bookshelf of the immortals' ('History', 2015). Between 1907 and 1914, Sinclair wrote introductions to Everyman editions of six Brontë novels and to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and in 1912 she published a biography of the three Brontë sisters, *The Three Brontës*. A year or two later, she made efforts to build the reputations of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Dorothy Richardson, F. S. Flint, Richard Aldington and H.D., with essays published in the *Little Review*, *The Egoist*, the *English Review*, *The Dial* and the *Fortnightly Review* between 1915 and 1922. In a number of these essays, Sinclair positions herself as the defender of work that is ahead of its time: the 'genius' of *Prufrock, and Other Observations* has produced 'outbursts of silliness' on the part of critics, because Eliot's genius is 'not in any tradition' (Sinclair 1990a: 448, 449); in the essay on H.D., Sinclair defends H.D.'s 'novelty of [...] form' (Sinclair 1915: 89) and in the piece on 'The Reputation of Ezra Pound', Sinclair celebrates Pound's 'incorruptible devotion to his craft' (Sinclair 1990c: 469) against accusations of lack of originality and talent.

But she was worried all the same about the future. It is evident in the essays on the Imagists that she disliked it when literature that she valued was misunderstood, dismissed or forgotten. Like any author, she wanted to be read. But her work on the Brontës makes it clear that she did not want to be read for the wrong reasons. She objected to many of the interpretations of the Brontës' lives that were current in 1911, when she was working on *The Three Brontës*, and she explicitly presented her own book as a correction:

So, because all the best things about the Brontës have been said already, I have had to fall back on the humble day-labour of clearing away some of the rubbish that has gathered round them.

Round Charlotte it has gathered to such an extent that it is difficult to see her plainly through the mass of it. Much has been cleared away; much remains. Mrs Oliphant's dreadful theories are still on record. The excellence of Madame Duclaux's monograph perpetuates her one serious error. Mr Swinburne's *Note* immortalises his. M. Héger was dug up again the other day.

It may be said that I have been calling up ghosts for the mere fun of laying them; and there might be something in it, but that really these ghosts still walk. At any rate many people believe in them, even at this time of day. M. Dimnet believes firmly that poor Mrs Robinson was in love with Branwell Brontë. Some of us still think that Charlotte was in love with M. Héger. They cannot give him up any more than M. Dimnet can give up Mrs Robinson.

Such things would be utterly unimportant but that they tend to obscure the essential quality and greatness of Charlotte Brontë's genius. Because of them she has passed for a woman of one experience and of one book. There is still room for a clean sweep of the rubbish that has been shot here.

In all this, controversy was unavoidable, much as I dislike its ungracious and ungraceful air. If I have been inclined to undervalue certain things – 'the sojourn in Brussels,' for instance – which others have considered of the first importance, it is because I believe that it is always the inner life that counts, and that with the Brontës it supremely counted. (Sinclair 1912: 14–15)

The 'ghosts' with which she had to deal were the spectres of stories about the Brontës' personal lives. When in 1913 four letters from Charlotte Brontë to Constantin Héger were published, Sinclair was incensed: 'we have no business to read what she says', she wrote in an essay in *The Dial* (Sinclair 1913: 344). 'Her case raises a large question of literary ethics, of the public's "right to know", of the biographer's right to publish what was never meant for publication,' she declared. Confronted with this indiscretion, she warned, 'decent average people' would feel 'nothing but the sickness of disgust' (Sinclair 1913: 344, 345). Sinclair also castigated journalists who attempted to publish personal information about her based on informal conversations, writing to Witter Bynner in 1905 after reading a draft of an article he was planning: 'You admit that you have repeated some things told you in confidence! I assure you that if you had intended deliberately to hurt me you cd. not have succeeded better' (Sinclair 1905). The article was never published. She continued to manage her reputation with ruthless efficiency, maintaining a careful reserve in all her published interviews and going through her private papers with a pair of scissors to make sure nothing she wanted to hide would be revealed after her death.

It was not actually the revelation of intimate information or feelings that disgusted her. In the *Dial* essay, she defends – or at least excuses –

the publication of love letters between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, even though 'publication of even this unique correspondence was regarded by many scrupulous people as more or less an outrage against perfect decency'. However, 'You will not find in them one word which either Robert Browning or his wife could have wished not to have written.' They are 'the expression of a unique and perfect passion', and when he published them, their son was 'in no sense' 'dishonoring his father and mother' (Sinclair 1913: 344).

But Charlotte Brontë's letters to Héger tell a very different story, and this, I think, is key to understanding Sinclair's horror of publicity and her fear of the past. Sinclair notes that what is revealed in Brontë's letters is not her love, but her anguish at the fact that her feelings were not returned. 'They are not the expression of a perfect love, acknowledged and crowned. They are the pitiful, almost abject cry of a passion – secret, unacknowledged, incomplete, such passion, as, with all its innocence, abhors publicity' (Sinclair 1913: 344). The problem for May Sinclair is not the exposure of the intimate language of love, but the exposure of the language of pain – and perhaps especially the language of rejection. In her fiction, when the past does erupt into the present – as it does, by definition, in her ghost stories – it frequently reveals the ways in which the living have damaged the dead, as if past wounds cannot be laid to rest. The supernatural tales depict a nightmare world in which the pain of loss persists unaffected by the passage of time. The uncanny tales are about people who cannot forget; and – as I shall argue later – the only experience Sinclair could imagine that would erase the past and the personal absolutely was the experience of a mystical ecstasy that abandoned time, need and desire absolutely.

Of the seven 'uncanny' stories in the volume Sinclair published in 1923, four are centrally concerned with the pain of rejection. In 'The Token', Cicely, the sister of the narrator, returns as a ghost after her death in the hope that the husband she adores will finally admit that he loves her, reappearing with 'a look of supplication, such supplication as I had seen on my sister's face in her lifetime, when she could do nothing with him and implored me to intercede' (Sinclair 2006: 53). Rosamond, in 'The Nature of the Evidence', repeatedly thwarts her husband's sexual union with his new wife and finally seduces him into sex with her own ghost, which peculiar form of infidelity understandably enough destroys his second marriage. The ghost's intervention reduces the beautiful, though lascivious, second wife to writhing on the floor and pleading: 'Oh, don't, don't push me away!' (Sinclair 2006: 121). In 'The Victim', Steven Acroyd kills the employer who subsequently haunts him, because he believes he dissuaded the woman he loves from marrying him. In 'If

the Dead Knew' (and of course they always do), Wilfrid Hollyer causes his mother's death by wishing for it so that he can get married, and is then haunted by the ghost of the mother, who seems to have overheard him complaining about her overbearing ways to his new wife. 'The Intercessor', published in the *English Review* in 1911 and included in the 2006 reissue of *Uncanny Stories*, similarly contains the ghost of a child who returns because her mother has rejected her.

In almost all the supernatural stories, ghosts return at moments of trauma (often either sexual or oedipal) to remind the living of an anguish that refuses to remain in the past and threatens to overwhelm the present. These dead cannot be forgotten, however much the living might wish to do so. After his mother's death, Wilfrid Hollyer 'felt so safe. His mother couldn't hear him' (Sinclair 2006: 134). But of course, unforgotten, she can. The supernatural stories – for all their careful resolutions (Hollyer's ghostly mother appeased by his longing for her, Cicely in 'The Token' finally convinced that her husband loved her all along, Rosamond in 'The Nature of the Evidence' sated by her posthumous sex act, and so on) – paint a dark picture of a world in which pain can spill through the boundaries of space and time. This is the nightmarish side of a world in which time has no sequence, and the past returns to hurt us.

In some of these ghosts, the physical form of their living original is almost obliterated by the material shape of their suffering. The ghost of Effy in 'The Intercessor' looks barely human: 'its face was so small, so shrunken and so bleached, that at first its actual features were indistinct to him. What *was* distinct, was the look it had; a look not to be imagined or defined, and thinkable only as a cry, an agony, made visible' (Sinclair 2006: 188). Similarly, the ghost of Wilfrid Hollyer's rejected mother in 'If the Dead Knew' is only just recognisable:

Its face was an insubstantial framework for its mouth and eyes, and for the tears that fell in two shining tracks between. It was less a form than a visible emotion, an anguish. [...] No fleshly eyes could have expressed such an intensity of suffering, of unfathomable grief. He thought: the pain of a discarnate spirit might be infinitely sharper than any earthly pain. It might be inexhaustible. (Sinclair 2006: 137–8)

In a brilliant reading, Luke Thurston suggests that 'The Intercessor' reworks Freud in exploring traumas that engage with something outside and beyond signification and subjectivity: 'What is thus indicated, what lies at the ruined site beyond memory, can be neither re-presented or forgotten: it thus has an *incessant* status, returning in an endless loop at odds with the logic of narrative closure that governs the textual mesh around it' (Thurston 2012: 123). At their most poignant and intense,

then, Sinclair's ghosts are phantasms not of the living people whose survivors they are, but of a pain that overwhelms the constraints of time. What lives on is not the person, but their anguish. The living may have forgotten – though at least in 'The Intercessor', they too are haunted by memories – but the agony of the dead persists and seeks out the living for some kind of redemption or resolution.

There are other forms of obsession in these stories as well. In 'Where Their Fire Is Not Quenched', the future traps Harriott Leigh even more surely than the past: what she became during her life folds back on itself and projects the past into the future apparently without any end. After her death, Harriott cannot escape a lover she despised, Oscar Wade, who has predeceased her. Everywhere she goes leads back to significant places from her past, and in each of those places, Oscar is waiting for her. 'The strange quality of her state was this, that it had no time. [...] So now she thought: If I could only go back and get to the place where it hadn't happened' (Sinclair 2006: 39). But because there is no time, there is no place 'where it hadn't happened'. Oscar explains to Harriott: "You think the past affects the future. Has it never struck you that the future may affect the past? In your innocence there was the beginning of your sin. You *were* what you *were to be*" (Sinclair 2006: 44). When Harriott asks him how long their state of enforced togetherness will last, Oscar cannot tell her. "I don't know whether *this* is one moment of eternity, or the eternity of one moment" (Sinclair 2006: 44). Paul March-Russell reads this story as a comment on female sexual hypocrisy: 'Harriott is fated to spend the rest of eternity with Oscar not only because she has denied him [to her priest on her deathbed], but because she has also repressed what he represents: sexual desire rather than romantic love' (March-Russell 2006: 17). I read the story in a slightly different way – even if there is a trace of Sinclair's 'medicinal morality' in the treatment of Harriott's tawdry desire (Woolf 1976: 390). Harriott's fantasy of an escape from her own history – and the nightmare recognition that such a possibility may not exist – is echoed in numerous other Sinclair texts. A place where there is no time might seem at first to offer an obvious solution to the problem of individual history, but in this story, the timelessness of the realm beyond death traps Harriott in a past that has lost its internal boundaries. If the future shapes the past, the past lies partly in the future and is continually re-encountered. There is no possibility of escape, because there is nowhere where the past is not. The only thing now that can be forgotten is the structure of time itself: Harriott 'remembered dimly that there had once been a thing called time, but she had forgotten altogether what it was like' (Sinclair 2006: 39).

As some Sinclair critics have noted, the strange temporality of the

posthumous world of 'Where Their Fire Is Not Quenched' – in which past, present and future are all blended together – is highly reminiscent of early psychoanalytic descriptions of the unconscious. May Sinclair's interest in imagining worlds in which time was disrupted was clearly connected at once to her work as an idealist philosopher (Kant even appears in 'The Finding of the Absolute' [Sinclair 2006: 169–74]); to her early interest in psychoanalytic theory and practice; to her unorthodox spirituality; and to her mysticism (see Battersby 2002: 117; Finn 2007: 198). Sinclair attempted to develop a language and a philosophy that synthesised all these different traditions and disciplines. In *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), in a passage on the unconscious, Sinclair notes that what we have forgotten is never really lost: 'if we are to keep the image of consciousness as a "stream" we had better say that [our memories] sink to the bottom and stay there until some eddy in the deep stirs them up again' (Sinclair 1917: 291). Like ghosts, forgotten memories wait somewhere in a place that is neither the past nor the present, until they can find a way in. Mystic experience too is linked in *A Defence of Idealism* to the unconscious. Sinclair explicitly links mysticism to a 'state of dissociation' (Sinclair 1917: 291), the same word she uses to describe the state which underlies 'all mental maladies' (Sinclair 1917: 290). Mystical experience, she notes, is 'a very dangerous state' (Sinclair 1917: 291). When a mystic enters a state of mystical ecstasy, she or he enters the same psychic space – 'the country of abnormal consciousness' – as she or he would enter if she were developing a neurosis or a psychosis: 'The country of abnormal consciousness stretches forwards as well as backwards, and belongs every bit as much to our future as to our past' (Sinclair 1917: 292). In mystical states or while dreaming, the psyche experiences the multiple times of 'abnormal consciousness', that realm in our psyche which is inhabited by the things we have forgotten or which have yet to come about.

In his abnormal state the mystic has before him the entire range of the 'Unconscious' and 'Subconscious': [...] his psyche hovers between its old forgotten playground of the past and its unknown playground of the future. It may be the prey and the victim of powers, of instincts, and of memories, which once served its development, and which have dropped from it by disuse; or it may be the experimenter with undeveloped powers of which it is by no means the master. (Sinclair 1917: 292–3)

In mystical states, the soul transcends itself, inhabiting its own future as well as its own present. The past is the enemy of this partial emancipation. 'Normal consciousness', if it is to advance at all, must temporarily break with 'the past that it suppresses but is powerless to destroy'

(Sinclair 1917: 292). But it is all too easy for the psyche in a state of mystical self-transcendence to go back 'down that well-trodden path by which it came. It can go a short way, or even a fairly long way and yet return. But if it goes *too* far it is lost; it is hopelessly estranged from itself and from the life of the normal living; it is (not to mince matters) mad' (Sinclair 1917: 293). In order for the psyche in a state of dissociation – whether mystical or neurotic – to remain sane, it must move forward into the undeveloped future and avoid being pulled back into the past, which it can temporarily forget, but never erase. This realm in which the future and past are both equally present is linked in Sinclair's philosophy to both the Freudian unconscious and the mystical experiences about which she wrote so often and so powerfully.

But for Sinclair, mysticism, unlike madness, could take the self out of the body and thus out of past traumas and into the future. Sinclair had abandoned her faith in God while still in her teens, but she continued to believe in the possibility of transcendence and to invoke religious language whenever she wrote about mystical experience. If, she wrote, 'everyday, present consciousness' 'is to advance at all beyond its normal state, it can only do so by a process of detachment or dissociation; by that letting go and forgetting of the actual, by that renunciation and self-surrender, that dying to live which is the secret of the mystic life' (Sinclair 1917: 292). As the psyche grows, the 'Will-to-live, the Desire to have life' 'grows with it, [. . .] into a consuming passion; it passes beyond physical bounds; and the Love of Life becomes the Love of God' (Sinclair 1917: 274). Spalding in 'The Finding of the Absolute' is ecstatic as he contemplates the world through the prism of 'cubic time':

The whole universe stood up on end round him, doubling all its future back upon all its past. [. . .] He saw the vast planes of time intersecting each other, like the planes of a sphere [. . .] He passed from God's immanent to his transcendent life, into the Absolute. For one moment he thought that this was death; the next his whole being swelled and went on swelling in an unspeakable, an unthinkable bliss. (Sinclair 2006: 175–6)

In 'cubic time', his wife's adultery is forgotten: 'He had now no memory of [her] adultery or of his own' (Sinclair 2006: 176). Mary Olivier too learns to forget the pain of remorse and regret by surrendering 'all the things that entangle and confuse [the will]': 'When you lay still with your eyes shut and made the darkness come on, wave after wave, blotting out your body and the world, blotting out everything but your self and your will, that was a dying to live; a real dying, a real life' (Sinclair 1980a: 377). Real dying – mystical dying – involves forgetting the self and the world; false dying – like that which creates ghosts – traps the

psyche in its own pain and forces it to continually re-experience the suffering of its life.

There is a danger, of course, in 'real dying'. The process of self-erasure, with its promise of emancipation from the troubles of the psyche and of the world, also threatens to destroy the self completely. A number of critics have noted that there is something ambiguous and poignant about the ending of *Mary Olivier*. Mary seems to celebrate having lost everything: 'For twenty-three years something had come between her and reality. She could see what it was now. She had gone through life wanting things, wanting people, clinging to the thought of them, not able to keep off them and let them go' (Sinclair 1980a: 378). Losing everything allows her to see reality – 'this ultimate passion' (379) – though she allows herself to doubt: 'Supposing there's nothing in it, nothing at all? That's the risk you take' (Sinclair 1980a: 379). Christine Battersby describes the end of the novel as 'an open-ended conclusion – one that raises as a possibility the *dangers* of perverting Spinozism into a philosophy of renunciation, as opposed to a philosophy of affirmation' (Battersby 2002: 119); Howard Finn notes that the epiphany at the end is 'a "letting-go" of worldly happiness that can be read as a displaced form of letting go of worldly trauma, one denial substituting itself for another, and a stoical resignation is played out as the precarious ecstasy of self-realization' (Finn 2007: 198); Penny Brown worries that Mary's 'inner freedom [. . .] founded on solitude, withdrawal, passivity and self-denial' is 'an intensification, if anything, of the state which an unquestioning acceptance of the traditional female role would have produced' (Brown 1992: 35). Faye Pickrem, in an insightful reading, argues that the mystical 'sublimation' described so painstakingly in Sinclair's novels allows her characters to evade carnality in what Pickrem suggests is a form of erotic displacement, a 'visceral response to an anxiety regarding desire': 'Instead of sexual consummation, an erotics of renunciation is instituted and reified, through which carnal desire is eliminated from the body and re-cathected onto a metonym of desire: nature, immanence, the Absolute' (Pickrem 2015: 5, 11). Perhaps escaping pain by escaping the world is simply another tragic form of self-suppression, as if obsession with the past can be countered only by denying both the body and the self with which it is identified.

A similar sad fate might have awaited May Sinclair herself, as she struggled to be both remembered and forgotten by the readers of the future of whom she was at times so mistrustful. As she carefully covered her traces, she ran the risk of making it impossible for us to remember her, except through the texts she published. And this of course is what she wanted. But – and perhaps this is a sad fact – it is much more difficult

to establish a reputation for a writer that is based on their works alone. There are countless authors whom May Sinclair revered who have sunk almost without a trace, except for the published texts they left behind: Beatrice Harraden, Evelyn Sharp and Gwendoline Keats, to name just a few. As Claire Drewery has noted: 'The potential for articulating a literary "voice" and surviving within the canon is inextricably posited against death's shadowy "other": silence, marginalization and oblivion' (Drewery 2011: 65). The implication is that survival is always haunted by its opposite. In the Freudian psyche, forgetting and remembering are similarly intertwined: memories move traumatically between the unconscious and the conscious, so that remembering something – just like forgetting it – is always tenuous and contingent. Even the idea of a timeless and redemptive mysticism is inextricable from the idea of a past that can never be escaped or erased. As Howard Finn notes (above), at the end of *Mary Olivier*, pain is avoided, but so is joy. We are reminded of Harriett Frean dismissing her maid because it is agony for her to watch the tenderness with which Maggie breastfeeds her baby (Sinclair 1980b: 137). If there is no time, there is no past to remember, but there is also no future to bring redemption and resolution. Sinclair's vision of an ecstatic, mystic timelessness is born out of pessimism about the possibilities of recovery within time. She rejects the idea that one might move forward into a new world in which the past can be remembered in a way that no longer hurts, but heals.

So what is the role of literary criticism in bridging the gap between authors of the past and the present – in historical 'recovery'? It is readers, of course, who are primarily responsible for restoring forgotten texts to consciousness, but critics – and publishers – are readers too. In more than one of Sinclair's ghost stories, there is an 'intercessor' who stands between the world of the dead and the world of the living, and allows the dead in: 'The Intercessor', for example, or 'The Token'. In 'The Intercessor', Garvin sees the ghost of Effy when no-one else can, because he is not afraid of her. Falshaw tells Garvin: 'they doan't coom to those that are afeard of 'em' (Sinclair 2006: 196), and even when Effy climbs into bed with him and presses her little body against his, Garvin can still 'swear to his own state of mind – he was *not* afraid' (Sinclair 2006: 189). Instead, he feels protective of the child, noticing that it is 'responsive to his pity and accessible to his succour' (Sinclair 2006: 191). As the title makes clear, Garvin intercedes between Effy and the Falshaws: Effy 'could only get at her mother through Garvin, who had no fear' (Sinclair 2006: 210). Garvin's conversations with Mrs Falshaw, and his presence by the bed in which Mrs Falshaw is cradling her stillborn child, make possible Mrs Falshaw's final acceptance of Effy: 'Her arms pressed

the impalpable creature, as it were flesh to flesh; and Garvin knew that Effy's passion was appeased' (Sinclair 2006: 216). In 'The Token', the narrator is the only character who can see Cicely's ghost, and the ghost turns on her 'a look of supplication' (Sinclair 2006: 53). The narrator describes the ghost to its husband, and eventually makes possible the redemptive embrace between a groaning Donald and the ghost, which collapses in a 'flicker of light' (Sinclair 2006: 56). Both intercessors help the dead extract expressions of love from the living, and Effy's ghost is replaced by a little shrine in her memory: 'an enlarged photograph' above 'a shelf with her things – a cup she used to drink out of – some tiny animals – a doll' (Sinclair 2006: 216). The child who has been ruthlessly rejected and suppressed is finally brought out of the unconscious into the world of conscious remembrance.

It is too fanciful to say that critics of May Sinclair are intercessors like Garvin or Cicely's sister-in-law, healing the wounds of the dead and the forgotten. Indeed, as we saw, May Sinclair was very suspicious of critics, even though she herself was one of our number. But it is also clearly the case that editing and publishing out-of-print texts, writing books, publishing articles and organising conferences are ways of protecting someone's reputation from oblivion – ways of mediating between the past and the present, between the living and the dead. As May Sinclair did for the Brontës, it is our responsibility and privilege communally to shape the reputations of the writers on whom we work, and to release them into a future in which we do not know what they will become. The dead can have their own kind of timelessness, if only we living are willing to embrace them.

Notes

1. See, for example, Boll 1970a, 1970b; Gillespie 1978; Kaplan 1971; Neff 1980; Padmanabhan 1982; Robb 1973.
2. See, for example, Kemp 1990; Phillips 1996; Stark 1992.
3. See, for example, Battersby 2002; Dellamora 2006; Dowson 2002; Drewery 2011; Forster 2008; Johnson 2004, 2006; Miracky 2003; Pease 2012; Pykett 2000; Seed 2001; Thurston 2012; Wallace 2000, 2004; Cheryl Wilson 2003; Leigh Wilson 2003.

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