

The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight

Exploring the eerie, liminality, deep time and duration in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1380)

RSSC Conference Presentation
2021 edition: Research in a
Changing World | 23 June 2021

By Michael Eden
Department: Art and Design



Fig 1: *Head of the Green Knight* (2020) pre firing, grey clay. Michael Eden.

The High Wasteland Scar, Form & Monstrosity in the English Landscape

- Overview of Research

This project is concerned with the relationship between landscape, subjectivity and monstrosity and centres on the contrast between two distinct spaces;

*The controlled and constructed space of hierarchical and normative society and the landscape mode associated with it, the pastoral mode contrasted with the liminal temporal space of nature.

- How does the Green Knight and the green chapel fit it?

The Green Knight is viewed as an agent of repressed nature returning to confront the court of Arthur (a symbol in my practice of hierarchical societal ordering). Gawain is considered as the subject who is changed by the encounter. Thus, repressed nature and its manifestations in representation (art, poetry and so on) is seen as a means of escape from the normative pressure of hierarchal society and its oppressive subject positioning.

Deep Time and Duration in the Green Chapel

Deep time refers to the reality of 'abyssal eons' (128) of change and development evident in the land and its topology, that which is so great as to undermine and affect one's sense of self (McPhee, 1981:20:104:127:128).

Undermines egocentric conceptions of self.

It is as an agent of 'deep time' and 'duration' that I understand the Green Knight and its function in relation to the subject (by proxy) Gawain. This being, to give the subject a condition in the present out of the liner clockwork time of oppressive normative society.

Duration:- 'What is duration within us? qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number' (Bergson, 2012:1).

Encourages an experiential, embodied relation to time and space in the contingent moment.

Liminality

Van Gennep (1960) developed the idea of a rite of passage in 1909 whereby a subject moves from one significant identity state, position or status to another; typically a version of the transition of childhood to adulthood or initiation into a higher status.

Van Gennep explains this is a process in three stages: first separation 'from a previous world', secondly liminality 'the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites' and finally aggregation or 'ceremonies of incorporation into the new world' (Van Gennep, 1960:21).

Eeriness

The 'eerie' as defined by Fisher (2016) is a way of accounting for the affect on the subject of being in space defined by deep time, liminality and duration.

The unsettling feeling that results from gaining a condition in the present.

'Although the eerie is not an English phenomenon the landscape of England is a potent conduit for it because of its many layers of human history and the violent struggles of ownership and access' (Abberley, 2018).

Definitions

The Eerie

'The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is where there is nothing present when there should be something. We can grasp these two modes quickly by means of examples. The notion of an "eerie cry" — often cited in dictionary definitions of the eerie — is an example of the first mode of the eerie (the failure of absence) (Fisher, 2016:27)

'the outside designates, at one level, a radically depastoralised nature, and, at the outer limits, a different, heightened encounter with the Real' (Fisher, 2016:34)

'points to the eerie power of landscape, reminding us of the ways in which physical spaces condition perception, and of the ways in which particular terrains are stained by traumatic events' (Fisher, 2016:40)



Fig 2: Lud's Church (2016).

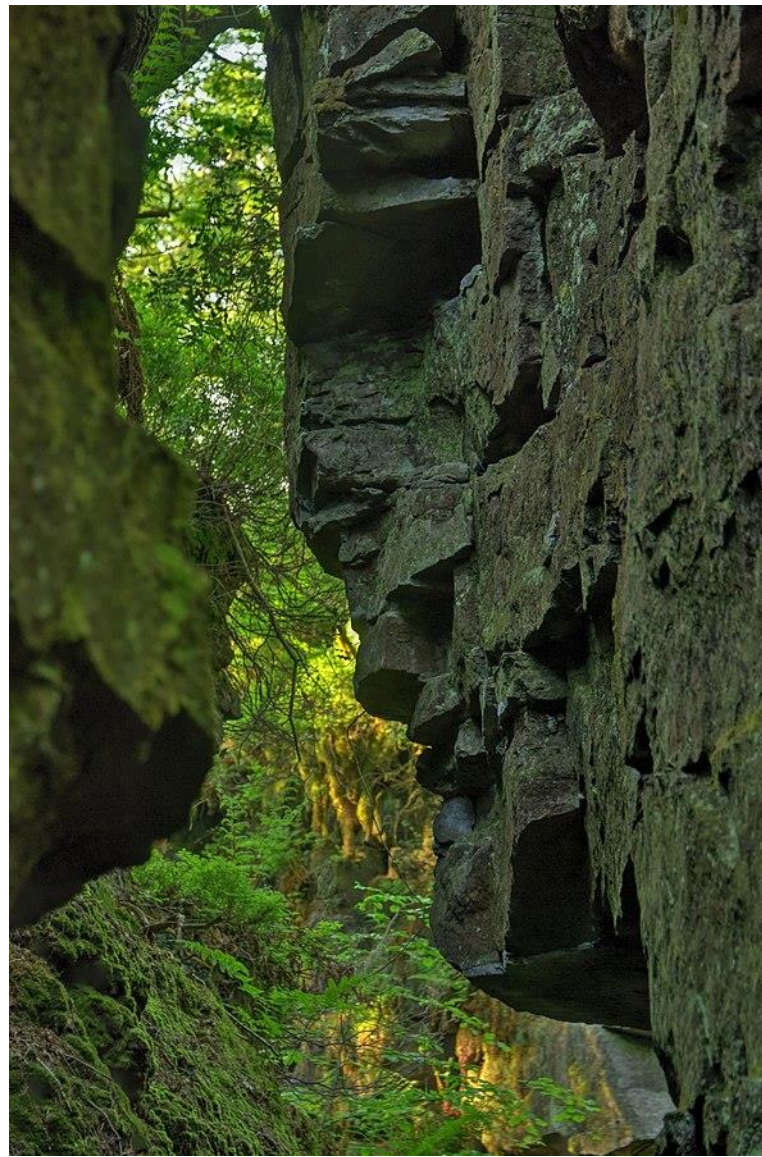


Fig 3: *Green Knight*, Lud's Church (2016).

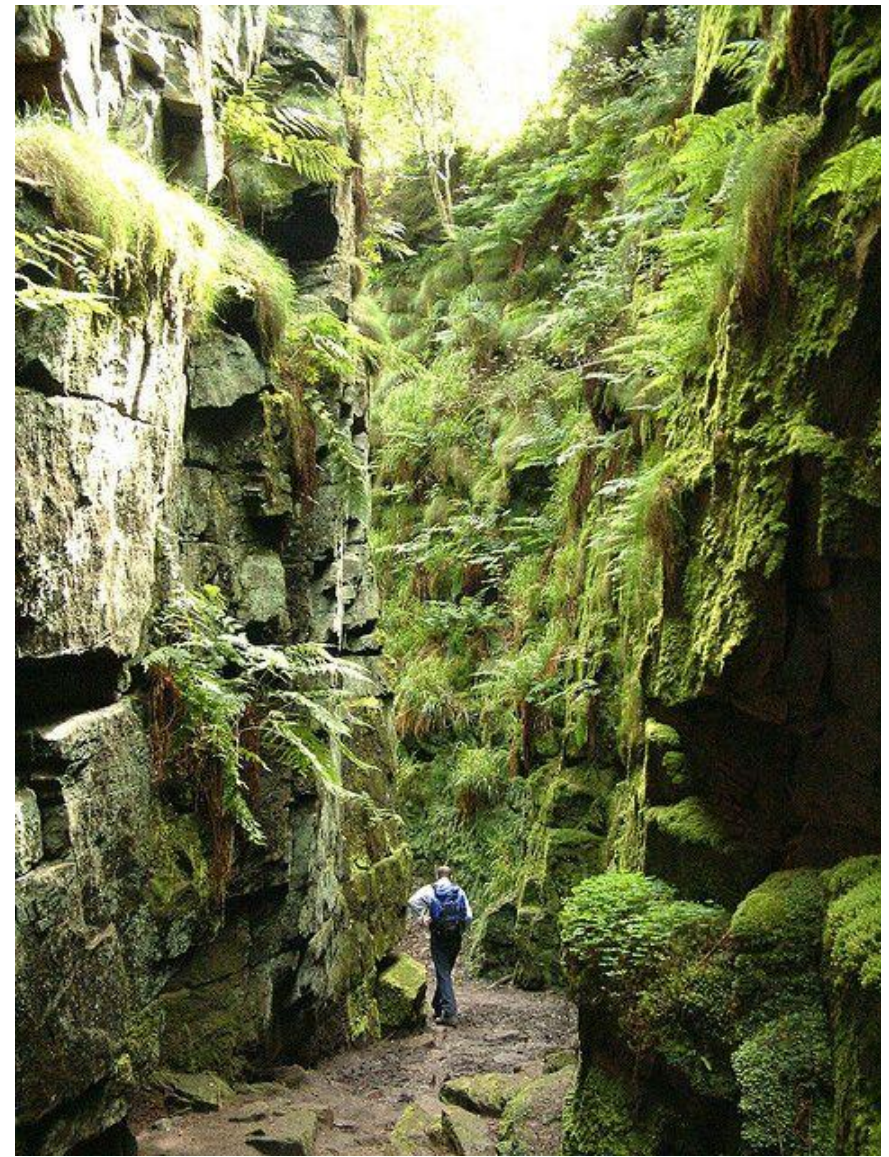


Fig 4: *Luds Church*, The Roaches Peak District, Staffordshire, England (2002).



Fig 5: *The mysterious cave above Wetton Mill - the real Green Chapel?* (2017).



Fig 6: *Wetton Mill Rock Shelter* (2004).



Fig 7: 2 - Deepdale (King Sterndale) - Thirst House cave (1997).



Fig 8: *Thirst Hole* (2009).



Fig 9: *View of Thor's cave entrance from the valley (2011).*



Fig 10: *Temporal Landscape I* (2020) oil on canvas 2.5m x 4m by Michael Eden.



Definitions

‘neophyte’ (initiate) according to Van Gennep (1960) one undergoing a rites of passage or threshold experience between: distinct phases, or status positions for example.

Automata time

‘institutional automata...lacking a condition in the present because their members project their will into the future according to the rules that were established in the past’ (Quinn, 2017:43)

Fig 11: *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* (2021) oil on canvas 2m x 2m by Michael Eden.

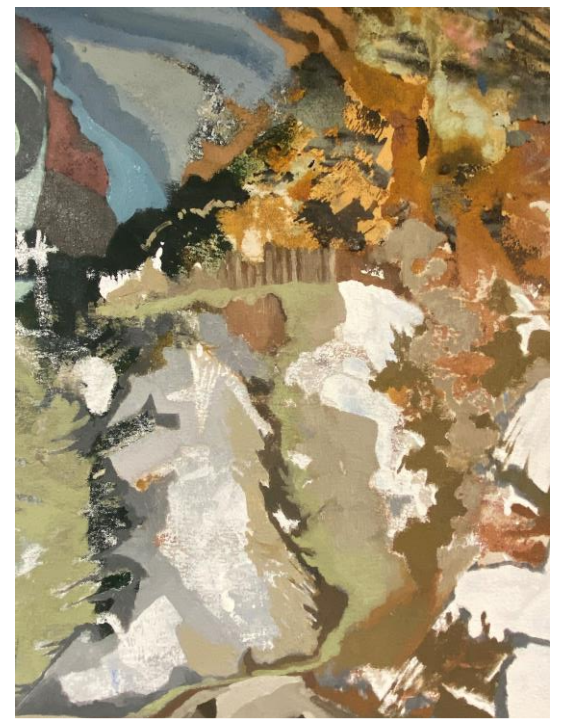
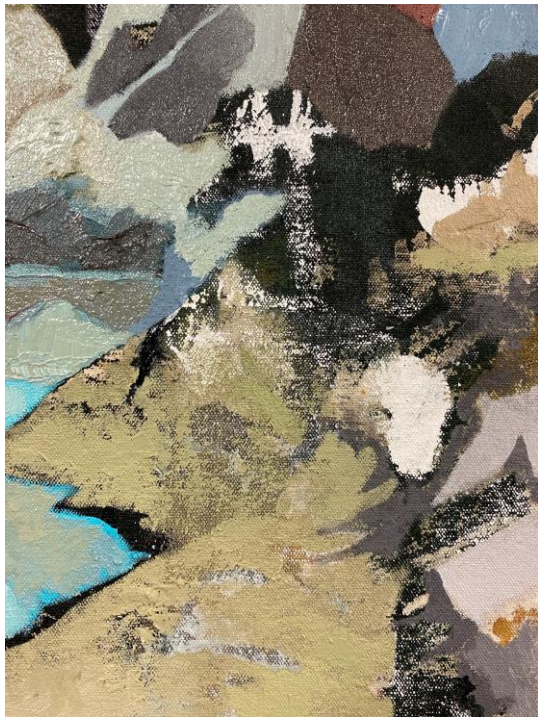


Fig 12: Details of, *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* (2021) by Michael Eden. Natural features include (left to right: hills, mud banks, woodland and mountains).

Observing that the poem shifts between high detail and schematic description the landscape space for, *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain* was made at the beginning of the picture by pouring paint onto the canvas closing and opening it like a large Rorschach test and then working over the resultant stain to form mountains, rivers and trees while maintaining something of the chance occurrence and randomness of the initial gesture.



Fig 13: Studio shot of a work in progress, *The Green Chapel* (2021) oil on canvas 2m x 2m by Michael Eden.

Conflation, Figure and Space:
Representing the Green Knight

Regarding Rodin's humanism,

'we discover a sympathy for human frailty, aspirations, fears, conflicts, joys, sorrows. Rodin's lifelong project, The Gates of Hell...is a profound expression of eternal tragedy' (Elsen, 1958:250).

'Rodin was superior in the interpretation of physical beauty and of psychic unrest' (Goris, 1957:11).



Fig 14: *Head of Saint John the Baptist* (1887). Marble sculpture by Auguste Rodin.

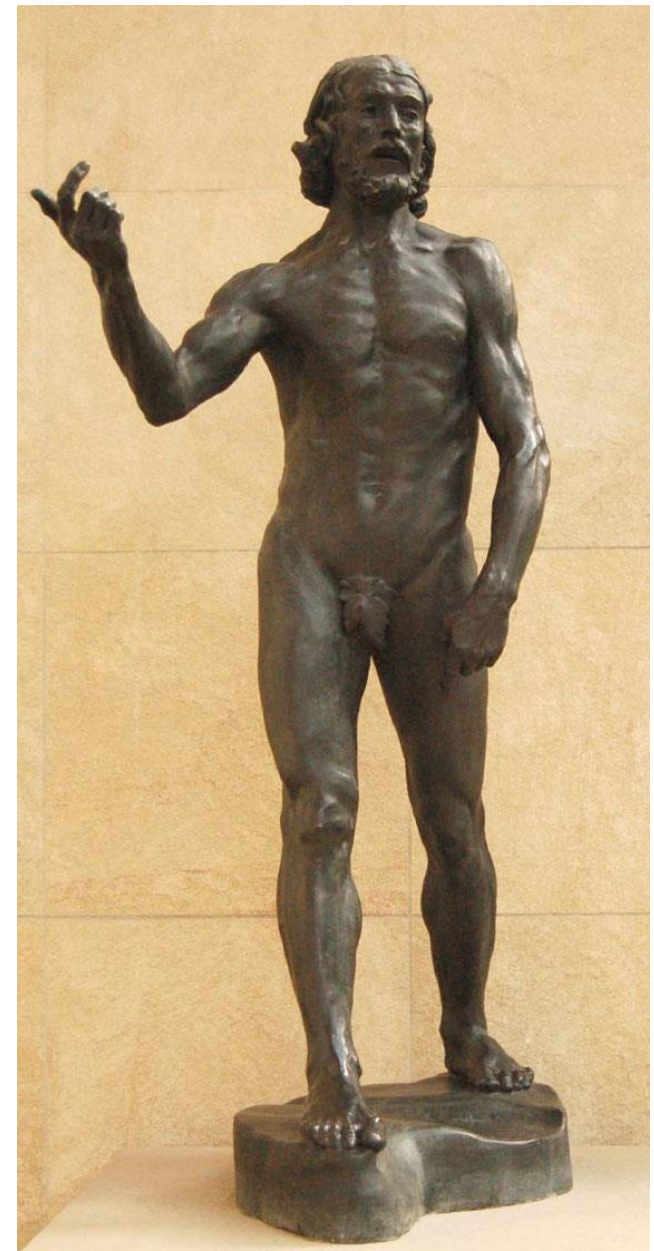


Fig 15: *Saint John the Baptist (preaching)* (1877). Bronze sculpture, by Auguste Rodin.



Left: Held in the Victoria and Albert Museum London. Plaster cast, painted plaster, of St John the Baptist, after the bronze original in the Cathedral of Siena, by Donatello, probably Siena, 1457, cast, probably Germany (Berlin), ca. 1888.

Right: Held in the Pushkin Museum Moscow.



Fig 17: *S. John by Donatello* (1457, Siena, casting in Pushkin museum).

Fig 16: *St John the Baptist* (1457 sculpted, ca. 1888 cast). Plaster cast. Donetello.



Fig 18: *Caractacus at the Tribunal of Claudius at Rome* (1792). Etching by Andrew Birrell.



Fig 19: *Detail of Caradoc* (Romanization:- Caractacus).

In both the example of Caradoc and Saint John the Baptist, an outsider (and individual) challenges the authority of a supposedly superior authority; the former the court of the Roman Emperor Claudius and the later the court of Herod Antipas (King Herod).

Process: humanist approach based on the methods of Rodin.

Regarding Rodin's humanism see Elsen (1958:250) and Goris, M. (1957:11).

Rodin's humanistic aesthetic in sculpture emphasizing form offered a contrast to construction methods which emphasize surface. The contrast between surface and form has become a key contrast in 3d works.



Fig 20a: Left, *Green Knight Sculpture before firing* (2020) by Michael Eden.



Fig 20b: Right, *Tyro Knight* (2020) by Michael Eden.



Fig 21: *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight* (2020) fired ceramic sculpture by Michael Eden.

*Accident (breaking during firing process) and the appropriation of the chance occurrence.

* The Blurring of the spatial and figurative, between the Green Knight and the green chapel.

The trace of the break seemed to record contingent unpredictable time into the sculpture while the cavity made reference to the chapel entrance.

The damage to the sculpture from the firing process in this case has improved the artwork by marking it with the scar of an unmanaged chance occurrence and creating by chance a reference to the fissure of the green chapel in the representation of the severed head of the Green Knight.



Fig 22: *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight* (2020) fired ceramic sculpture by Michael Eden.



Fig 23: *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight* (2020) fired ceramic sculpture and red silk by Michael Eden.

Thank you for listening

For works in progress and

<https://www.instagram.com/michaeleden7675/>

Email Contact

m.h.eden@fashion.arts.ac.uk

ME623@live.mdx.ac.uk



Fig 24: Various sculptures, studio shot (2021).

References

Abberley, W. (2018) Into the Eerie, A Somethin' Else production for Radio 3 accessed at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002zmr> (accessed on 8/03/2019)

Armitage, S. (2007) *Sir Gawain and the green knight*. Faber and Faber.

Bergson, H. (1903) *An Introduction to Metaphysics, translated by T. E. Hulme*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912.

Bergson, H. (1911) *Matter and Memory*. Authorised Translation by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, London: George Allen and Unwin.

Bergson, H. (2008) *Time and Free Will*. Cosimo Inc.

Bergson, H. (2012) *Creative Mind*. New York: Dover Publications.

Besserman, L. (1986) The Idea of the Green Knight. *ELH, Vol. 53, No. 2. (Summer, 1986), pp. 219-239*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Cohen, J. J. (2019). 1. The Love of Life: Reading Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Close to Home. In *Premodern Ecologies in the Modern Literary Imagination*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Available From: University of Toronto Press <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487519520-005> [Accessed 19 September 2020]

Clark, S., & Wasserman, J. (1986). The Passing of the Seasons and the Apocalyptic in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight". *South Central Review*, 3(1), 5-22. doi:10.2307/3189122

Elsen, A. (1958). The Humanism of Rodin and Lipchitz. *College Art Journal*, 17(3), 247-265. doi:10.2307/773991

Fisher, M. (2016) *The Weird and the Eerie*, London, Repeater Books.

Gennep, A., (1960). *The Rites Of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goris, M. (1957) *Modern Sculpture in Belgium*, New York, Belgian Government Information Center.

Halverson, J. (1969). Template Criticism: "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight". *Modern Philology*, 67(2), 133-139. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/436002>

Hill, O.G. (2009). *Looking Westward, Poetry, Landscape, and Politics in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Keetley, D. and Tenga, A. (2016). *Plant Horror*. Palgrave Macmillan.

References

Krappe, A. (1938). Who Was the Green Knight? *Speculum*, 13(2), 206-215. doi:10.2307/2848404

McPhee, J. (1981) *Basin and Range*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Mittman, A. and Hensel, M. (2018). *Primary Sources on Monsters: Demonstrate. 2nd ed.* Arc Humanities Press.

Quinn, Malcolm (2017) The Plot Against the Future. In: *Memories of the Future: On Countervision. Cultural Memories* (6). Peter Lang, Bern, pp. 33-48. ISBN 978-3-0343-1935-5

Smith, M., 2017. In search of the Green Chapel in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight | Unbound. [online] Unbound. Available at: <<https://unbound.com/books/sir-gawain/updates/in-search-of-the-green-chapel-in-sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight>> [Accessed 29 March 2021].

Timberlake, J., 2018. *Landscape and the science fiction imaginary*. Bristol: Intellect.

Turner, V., (1969). *Liminality And Communitas*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

Victoria and Albert Museum. (2021a). V&A · Auguste Rodin: production techniques. [online] Available at: <<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/rodin-production-techniques>> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Victoria and Albert Museum. (2021b). St John the Baptist | V&A Explore The Collections. [online] Victoria and Albert Museum: Explore the Collections. Available at: <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O40947/st-john-the-baptist-plaster-cast/>> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Eden, M. (2020). *Head of the Green Knight, pre firing, grey clay*. Own work.

Figure 2: Schwerdfeger, A., (2016). Lud's Church. [image] Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lud%27s_Church_2016-06-05.jpg> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 3: Schwerdfeger, A., (2016). *Green Knight, Lud's Church*. [image] Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Green_Knight,_Lud%27s_Church_2016-06-05.jpg> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 4: Green, S., (2002). *Luds Church, The Roaches Peak District, Staffordshire, England*. [image] Available at: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/topdogdstew/320660951/>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 5: Smith, M., (2017). *The mysterious cave above Wetton Mill - the real Green Chapel?*. [image] Available at: <<https://unbound.com/books/sir-gawain/updates/in-search-of-the-green-chapel-in-sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 6: Sharrock, A., (2004). *Wetton Mill Rock Shelter*. [image] Available at: <<https://m.megalithic.co.uk/modules.php?op=modload&name=a312&file=index&do=showpic&pid=9327>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 7: Cressbrook Multimedia, (1997). 2 - *Deepdale (King Sterndale) - Thirst House cave*. [image] Available at: <<http://www.peakdistrictinformation.com/towns/villages.php?placename=Buxton&topX=4075&topY=3755&bottomX=4040&bottomY=3705>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 8: Rhiannon, (2009). *Thirst Hole*. [image] Available at: <https://www.themodernantiquarian.com/site/5192/thirst_house.html> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 9: Kelsal, I., (2011). *View of Thor's cave entrance from the valley*. [image] Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thor's_Cave#/media/File:Thors_cave_view.jpg> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 10: Eden, M. (2020) *Temporal Landscape I*. Own work.

Figure 11: Eden, M. (2021) *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain*. Own work.

Figure 12: Eden, M. (2021) Details of, *The Slime of Life Clings to Sir Gawain*. Own work.

Figure 13: Eden M. (2021) Studio shot of a work in progress, *The Green Chapel* (2021). Own work.

Figure 14: Astor, M., (2007). *Aguste Rodin. The Severed Head of Saint John the Baptist, ca 1887*. [image] Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aguste_Rodin._The_Severed_Head_of_Saint_John_the_Baptist,_ca_1887.jpg> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 15: Maarten, (2007). *St John the Baptist Preaching, Auguste Rodin*. [image] Available at: <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St-John-the-Baptist-Preaching.jpg>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 16: Victoria and Albert Museum, (2000). *St John the Baptist Plaster Cast, 1457 (sculpted by Donatello), ca. 1888 (cast)*. [image] Available at: <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O40947/st-john-the-baptist-plaster-cast/>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 17: Shakko, (2010). *S. John by Donatello (1457, Siena, casting in Pushkin museum)*. [image] Available at: <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S._John_by_Donatello_\(1457,_Siena,_casting_in_Pushkin_museum\)_by_shakko_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S._John_by_Donatello_(1457,_Siena,_casting_in_Pushkin_museum)_by_shakko_02.jpg)> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 18: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, (2021). *Caractacus at the Tribunal of Claudius at Rome Engraving by Andrew Birrell of a painting by Henry Fuseli Original is a D size print.*. [image] Available at: <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caractacus-Claudius-Birrell-Fuseli.jpeg>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 19: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, (2021). [Detail] *Caractacus at the Tribunal of Claudius at Rome Engraving by Andrew Birrell of a painting by Henry Fuseli Original is a D size print.*. [image] Available at: <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caractacus-Claudius-Birrell-Fuseli.jpeg>> [Accessed 4 April 2021].

Figure 20a: Eden, M. (2020). *Green Knight Sculpture before firing*. Own work.

Figure 20b: Eden, M. (2020). *Tyro Knight*. Own work.

Figure 21: Eden, M. (2020). *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight*. Own work.

Figure 22: Eden, M. (2020). *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight*. Own work.

Figure 23: Eden, M. (2020) *The Reproachful Head of the Green Knight, fired ceramic sculpture and red silk*. Own work.

Figure 24: Eden, M. (2021) *Various sculptures, studio shot (2021)*. Own work.